

Judah HaLevi

Judah Halevi is one of my all-time favorite Jews. Born in Toledo, Spain in 1075, he had a traditional Torah and Talmudic education. He was also well versed in poetry, Arabic literature, the sciences, and philosophy. He was a physician of renown and active in Jewish communal affairs. He was humane, urbane, and one of the greatest Jewish poets since King David. His poetry has influenced our liturgy, our festive tables, and our loves, whether romantic, for the Land of Israel, or for our heritage.

Writing in Spain he declared, "My heart is in the east, while I am at the very end of the West." Other poems about Israel and Jerusalem included such lines as:

*O city of the world, most chastely fair
In the far West, behold I sigh for you Jerusalem
If only I had eagle's wings, I would fly to you
And with my falling tears wet your earth.*

Towards the end of his life, he made the arduous and dangerous journey across the Mediterranean to Jerusalem. As he approached Jerusalem he sang the song he composed that is now popular in our times: *Zion, Zion, Zion, Halo Tishali, Lishlom Asirayih* (Zion, Zion, Zion, you will surely look to the peace of your captives). At that moment, so the legend goes, he was attacked by an Arab horseman and killed.

In the century before Halevi, another very important, multitalented Spanish Jew, Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, was the foreign secretary of the Caliph of Cordova. He had a correspondence with Joseph Khagan, the king of the Khazars. It is the only record we have of a people who had converted to Judaism and for a few hundred years thrived in the Caucasus, until they were destroyed by the Kiev Rus. The king had asked for help. We do not know how the Caliph responded.

Halevi wrote an important book of Jewish philosophy called *The Kuzari*, based on this correspondence. It imagines the King of the Khazars trying to decide what religion or philosophy to choose. He calls in a philosopher, a representative of Christianity, and doctors of Islam. He dismisses their arguments individually. The philosopher is too rational and has no room for spirituality. The Christian and Muslims both claimed that they based themselves on the Jewish scriptures for validity. For this reason, the king decides he had better invite a rabbi.

The book is, in effect, a justification and explanation of Judaism in response to the challenges that both competing religions presented to Judaism at Halevi's time. Both Halevi and Maimonides were influenced by Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato. But whereas Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, pursues a completely rational approach, Halevi

allows the poetic and the non-rational to play a greater role in his arguments. Very few of us would find their system of thought compelling nowadays. Nevertheless, there are occasional parts of each which do resonate, even after such a long time and the many developments in philosophical thought since their days.

The one issue of Halevi that has endured concerns the Sinai Revelation. His argument is particularly beloved by Jewish evangelical movements, the Baal Teshuva industry. Both Christianity and Islam were based on private revelations between God and the founders of those religions, whereas the Sinai revelation took place in the presence of 600,000 Israelite men, plus women and children.

Whereas both Christianity and Islam developed as systems that were controlled by priests and imams, and the mass of the ordinary followers were expected to do as they were told, Judaism empowered everyone to make direct contact with the Almighty. The Sinai Covenant was made with every single individual and reiterated on the Plains of Moab. This emphasis on individuality has been both a blessing and a curse.

This might have been the theory. But the fact is that we have turned into a religion in which rabbis dominate and exercise an authority that is not very different than other religions in practice. Instead of just being fountains of wisdom, knowledge, and spiritual advice, they have become intermediaries, thinking that they understand what the Almighty wants better than anyone else. Which has been proven wrong often enough to make one wonder.

The Halevi idea about revelation, attractive as it may be in theory, is founded on two fallacies. He says that whereas a revelation to a single person in private can be falsified, misunderstood, or simply invented, there is no way that a revelation experienced, beheld by 600,000 adults could be invented. No generation would have accepted having a tradition foisted on them if it had not been passed down on the basis of a shared experience at the time.

First of all, the Bible itself gives an example of a book of the Torah that was discovered in the Temple at the time of king Josiah (ruled 640–609 BCE) some 600 years after Moses at least. It had been forgotten and with it several commandments the Israelites should have kept but did not. Whether this was hidden from priests only or from the masses only, it shows that it was possible for events in the past to be either forgotten or “created” at a later moment in time.

Anyway, we have seen so many times that there is such a thing as mass hysteria (religious and secular) in which large numbers of people are capable of being misled and deluded. Even to have been convinced of seeing things highly unlikely, if not impossible. The Torah itself says that the people were so frightened that they begged Moses to act as an intermediary. They were too scared to hear the words from God directly (Exodus 19:16).

The fact that Torah says something happened is no objective, empirical proof that it did. I may accept it as a truth for me. But that does not make it a

truth for everyone else. Besides, it is like the argument for Israel's right of existence today based on a text of a biblical promise. Go tell that to a Muslim. And there is so much Midrashic commentary and varied opinions amongst our commentators that it is impossible to know with certainty what was meant by many of the narrative words of the Torah. Or how and what was said in a language that people might find palatable or coherent. Hence the Talmud says (Berachot 31b, etc.) that "the Torah speaks in a language that humans would understand."

Naturally, none of this means that what the Torah said did not happen. Quite the contrary. But it does mean that the arguments offered as proofs are not actually proofs. A skeptic, cynic, or nonbeliever might find them unpersuasive. My argument against Ba'al Teshuvah groups that set out to bring people closer or back to Judaism is that they often use arguments that they think are persuasive but to the objective, rational mind are not, and argue deceitfully, whether intentionally or not, that they are rational.

We do not believe that the end justifies the means. If the means are dishonest they taint the end. We do believe in doing things for the wrong reason in the hope that eventually one will do them for the right reason. But that is not being dishonest. Being deceitful, even in the pursuit of a good end, is not the way we should go. It is morally corrupt if done knowingly.

I love Judah Halevi. He is one of my most important Jewish inspirations and influences. But that does not mean that every one of his arguments is persuasive or logically coherent.

I was thinking about this during Shavuot when we commemorated giving the Torah on Sinai. It was the Torah we received. Not the spurious arguments, such as computer proofs or simplistic theologies that are not objective. These, instead of reinforcing, ultimately may lead to a sense of intellectual alienation. Actions and morality do not always need proofs. Emunah, sometimes translated as "belief", literally means commitment. Commitment does not necessarily require proof. I have come up against resistance when I raise this issue of arguments that sound good but do stand scrutiny. I want to avoid anything that might undermine faith or lead potential returnees to feel misled. The faith, the beliefs, are valid. Many of the arguments for them are not.