THE SELECTED POEMS OF
Yehuda Halevi
TRANSLATED & ANNOTATED BY
Hillel Halkin
Foreword by Jonathan Rosen

Introduction by Hillel Halkin

The Poet Thanks an Admirer for a Jug of Wine

To Yechezkel ibn-Yaakov

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YEHUDA HALEVI, who lived more than 900 years ago, was arguably the greatest poet Judaism has produced, and one of the world’s great poets. Nextbook Press is pleased to make available this collection of 35 poems by Halevi in their original Hebrew, alongside masterful translations by renowned essayist, critic, and translator Hillel Halkin. Each poem has been annotated by Halkin to offer brief commentary and context for a poet who could be intensely erotic, confessional, spiritual, and liturgical, often at the same time.

This collection of poems is a companion volume to Yehuda Halevi, the magisterial biography written by Halkin and published by Nextbook/Schocken Books in 2010. In that book, Halkin tells one of the greatest romantic stories in all of Jewish history. Halevi was born in Spain at the height of its Golden Age, but though he was celebrated as a master of the poetic forms of this most poetic era, enjoying wealth and fame as a poet, physician, and sage, in 1140, then in his late sixties, he turned his back on Spain and sailed for Crusader-ruled Palestine.

For hundreds of years, legend had it that Halevi was killed by a Muslim horseman at the gates of Jerusalem. Although even today it is not clear how much truth there is in this, modern scholarship has revealed that he did die in the land of Israel within several months of arriving there. Halkin traces the overlapping strands of myth and history, the secular and the sacred, the rootedness of Spain and the unquenchable longing for the land of Israel that Halevi braided into his poetry, and that Judaism braided into its legend of the poet. We hope readers of this volume will want to turn to Halkin’s Yehuda Halevi for a full portrait of the man and his world and its meaning. But we are extremely pleased to give readers a chance to encounter Halevi purely as a poet, both in the original Hebrew and in the English of a master translator.
Introduction

Hillel Halkin
Translator & Annotator

The English Translations of the 35 poems posted below all appear as part of my biography of Yehuda Halevi published by Schocken Books and Nextbook in 2010. In preparing the book for publication, I had wanted to include the original poems in an appendix, so that readers with some knowledge of Hebrew could read them with the help of the English and have a better idea of both what Yehuda Halevi and I had done. Unfortunately, this proved impractical. I am therefore grateful to Nextbook for making possible the Internet version of this book which could not be done in print.

A few, brief words on technical matters for those who are interested:

Translating Hispano-Hebrew poetry into English is in some respects a more difficult task than translating French, German, or Russian poetry. This is because, of its two main formal characteristics, Arabic-style mono-rhyme and Arabic-style quantitative meter, the first is rarely reproducible in English and the second never is.

Mono-rhyme—the repetition of a single rhyming syllable throughout a poem, no matter how long it is—is impossible in Hebrew and Arabic because both languages have numerous stressed grammatical suffixes that can be rhymed line after line. An example of this is Poem 10, “A Lament For Moshe ibn Ezra,” in which the last word of every one of the poem’s 34 Hebrew lines has the masculine plural ending –im. (A line in most Hispano-Hebrew poems was a distich numbering between 20 and 30 syllables and divided into two equal hemistichs. Because the Hebrew texts in this selection were taken from different anthologies, some poems appear with longer, distich-length lines and some with the shorter, hemistich-length ones into which their editors divided them.)

In English, on the other hand, grammatical suffixes like –s, –ing, and –ed are unstressed and do not rhyme.

To be sure, Arabic-style mono-rhyming in Hebrew is not so easy, either, since the initial consonant of the rhyming syllable must repeat itself, too; thus, in “A Lament For Moshe ibn Ezra,” each line ends in –im and Halevi had to restrict himself to plurals of nouns, verbs, and adjectives having the final Hebrew letter mem. Yet Hebrew has large inventories of such words, whereas a mono-rhymed 34-line poem in English is all but unimaginable.

Although such a rhyme scheme in a Hispano-Hebrew poem, especially a long one, may seem monotonous to our ears, its purpose is not the same as that of European rhyme. Rather than create a varied pattern of sameness—within-difference that links certain lines while separating them from others (as in a sonnet, for instance), it functions like a repetitive drum beat or plucked chord, regularly marking the point where one musical phrase ends and the next begins. Nor is the English translator completely helpless in the face of it. He can rhyme in some places and not others, or resort to long strings of slant-rhymes or unstressed English suffixes that do not rhyme. In different translations, I have tried all of these methods.

As for Arabic quantitative meter, it depends on a regular alternation of long and short syllables, the distinction between which is intrinsic to Arabic phonetics and grammar. In point of fact, not only English, but Hebrew as well, recognizes no such distinction. Yet in Hispano-Hebrew poetry, starting with the mid-10th century, vowels came to be arbitrarily defined as long or short to adapt them to the Arabic system. The shwa, hataf patach, hataf katan, and hataf segol, and sometimes the conjunctive shwaqal, were treated as short; all other vowels, as long. Apart from liturgical verse, most Hispano-Hebrew poems of Halevi’s age were composed according to this system, which no English translation can convey.

Here, however, the English translator is not without recourse. Since, for grammatical reasons, Hispano-Hebrew’s “short” syllables are all unstressed, Arabic-style quantitative meter in Hebrew tends to result in regular patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables like those found in English poetry, so that a line of Yehuda Halevi’s read aloud is not very different in its metrical effect from, say, a line of John Donne.

In translating Halevi’s poetry, therefore, I have generally fallen back on the common metrical patterns like a repetitive drum beat or plucked chord, regularly marking the point where one musical phrase ends and the next begins. Nor is the English translator completely helpless in the face of it. He can rhyme in some places and not others, or resort to long strings of slant-rhymes or unstressed English suffixes that do not rhyme. In different translations, I have tried all of these methods.

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The Poet Thanks an Admirer for a Jug of Wine

I shall sing your praise all my days
For the nectar you sent for my lips.
Brother Jug joins in my lays,
And from him I won’t cease my sips

even though all my friends say, “Come, come!
How much longer will you play the rake?”
“What?” I’ll reply. “I have Gilead’s balm
And shan’t drink to cure every ache?
“I’m too young to put down the cup
I’ve only begun to pick up. To and for
What end should I stop
When my years are not yet two and four?”

Although not necessarily the earliest poem of Halevi’s to have come down to us, this is the earliest that is datable, written, as its last, punning stanza informs us, when the poet was not yet 24. (In Hebrew, the pun is on the word kad, “jug,” whose two letters kaf and dalet have the numerical value of 20 and four.) This does not, of course, mean that he was 23, as he could have been quite a few years younger. In any event, he was sitting, so it would seem, in a tavern with friends when an admirer sent over a jug of wine, to which he replied with some improvised verse.

“The Poet Thanks an Admirer” is written in five mono-rhymed distichs, each composed of two 11-syllable hemistichs. Its meter, known in Hebrew as the m’rubeh, is short-long-long-long, short-long-long-long, short-long-long-long. As was customary in mono-rhymed poems, the rhyming syllable is introduced by the internal rhyme of y’motai and s’fatai in the first distich. The poem’s 10 hemistichs have been rearranged in my translation as the 12 lines of three predominantly anapestic, ABAB-rhymed English quatrains.
As an aspiring young poet, Yehuda Halevi left the Christian north of Spain in which he was born for the Muslim south, with its more lively and sophisticated literary culture. There, in Andalusia, the great Hispano-Hebrew poet and critic Moshe ibn Ezra (1055–1135) was his first and most important literary patron. Ibn Ezra belonged to a wealthy and prominent family in Granada, but following the Almoravid conquest of that city in 1090, which took place when Halevi was in his teens, he was driven into exile in northern Spain. In this poem of farewell, Halevi calls him “Beacon of the West” because Andalusia was at the western end of the medieval Muslim world. To reach Christian territory, Ibn Ezra would have had to cross its high mountains to the Castilian plateau. These are refigured in the poem as Mount Hermon, the Land of Israel’s tallest peak, and lowly Mount Gilboa, cursed with barrenness by the biblical David, the two symbolizing the more cultivated Spanish south and the less lettered north.

Like “The Poet Thanks an Admiring,” “To Moshe ibn Ezra” consists of five distichs, which have the mono-rhyme of –o’a. Its meter, known as the shalem, is long-long-short-long, long-long-short-long, long-long-long. The m’rubeh and the shalem were the two meters most favored by Halevi, who wrote a high percentage of his poems in them. The meter of the translation is that old English mainstay, iambic pentameter, and I have used similarly ending half-rhymes (“rest,” “last,” “crossed,” “against,” “West,” “cast”) in six of the translation’s ten lines.

**To Moshe ibn Ezra, On His Leaving Andalusia**

Where, now that you are gone, will I find rest?  
When you departed, with you went all hearts,  
And had they not believed you would return,  
The day you left them would have been their last.  
Be my witnesses, wild mountains that you crossed,  
That heaven’s rains are scant when set against  
My wealth of tears. Beacon of the West,  
Be again our seal and coat-of-arms!  
What will you do, O peerless tongue, among the dumb,  
Like Hermon’s dew on bare Gilboa cast?
Come, then, let us picnic on her greenwood
With the passionate daughters of the vine!
(Chilly to the touch, they’re inner fire,
Hot with sunshine hoarded in a pot)
And poured from there into the finest crystal.)

And may their sons and son’s sons have more sons
When you are surrounded by such honors?
Drinking deeply from discernment’s sources,
And your wisdom rallies their joint forces;
And your wisdom rallies their joint forces;
When your wisdom rallies their joint forces;
And your wisdom rallies their joint forces;
When your wisdom rallies their joint forces;
On whom God’s grace rains down its benisons!

The spirit of your generosity,
White-trimmed with gold embroidery,
Yet every day
She wears a different pattern of wild flowers:
Now pink, now turquoise, now a pearly pale,
Rejoicing with the vine’s juice and the jays
White-trimmed with gold embroidery,
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In addition to the financial support of patrons, the young Halevi made a living by writing verse to order for occasions like weddings and funerals. Only three distichs long, this little poem was composed for the tombstone of an unknown “grandee.” Its lovely music depends equally on its mono-rhyme of –kham and its repetition of key words (e.g., hafakham, r'gavim, b'tokham) at the end and beginning of consecutive lines, causing it to double back on itself each time that it also moves forward.

Does the tear know whose cheek it runs down,  
Or the heart by whom it is turned?  
It turns to its light that is now in the ground,  
And the ground knows not who has returned.  
Returned is a grandee of our town,  
A man who feared God and was upright and learned.
The identity of the couple whose wedding Halevi celebrated in this poem is also unknown. Moving from initial humor to ultimate gravity, his poem was undoubtedly meant to be read aloud to the wedding guests. For all its light touch, its final declaration that every groom and bride are an Adam and Eve illuminating, however briefly, a fallen world with new hope is a solemn one.

I have translated the poem's six distichs as English couplets, each with its own rhyme.

Leave what was and what will be.
Stick to what you plainly see!

Every lad must hunt his lion,
And each lass should keep her eye on
Her young man: One look can bag him,
And a single word may snag him.

Yet when to a gem a gem engaged is,
God joins them in a rock of ages
Whose bright rays light up the dark
And of this waste make Eden’s park.

By two such souls we now stand blessed
As though by Levite and by Priest.
The subject of this bantering epigram may have been a real woman with whom the young Halevi conducted a disappointing flirtation or simply a pretext for a display of wit. "Ofra," in any case, would certainly not have been the young lady’s real name. The word means "doe" in Hebrew, and stags and does were conventional metaphors for male and female lovers in the Arabic and Hebrew poetry of the age.

Ofra does her laundry in my tears
And dries it in the sunshine she gives off.
She doesn’t have to take it to the trough,
Or wait to hang it till the weather clears.
In their fusing together of the physical and the spiritual, their love of fanciful conceits, and the playful intricacy of their language, the great Hispano-Hebrew poets of the 11th and 12th centuries have been compared to the Metaphysical poets of 17th-century England, and my rendition of this four-distich poem of Halevi’s may make some readers think of Robert Herrick or Andrew Marvell. Yet the poem, with its metaphor of sexual warfare, is equally typical of its place and time. Like “Ofra,” it was most probably written by Halevi when he was in his twenties, prior to the poignant love affair described in “Why, My Darling, Have You Barred All News?”

Over this fallen soldier fight your war,
Then make him burn still more as you withdraw.
You have stopped loving me, so cast your spear
And let it strike a heart that doesn’t care.

And yet, my sweet, I deem it not seemly
That I should languish in captivity.
Reverse your chariot and with one kiss
Convert my sickbed to a bed of bliss!
Why, my darling, have you barred all doors!  
For I cannot hear your voice, and I am battered by your icy floes,

And I am parted beneath your steps, my vaporous sighs are stoked by passion’s flames,

As your beauty’s veil, which clothes your eyes, and your harvest is bowed down to by their sheaves,

And your lips and cheeks. Don’t say their crimson lies!

Your girdled waist, the red thread of those lips

Your girdled waist, the red thread of those lips

Your beauty’s veil, which clothes your eyes, and your harvest is bowed down to by their sheaves.

As I listen, deep within me, for your footsteps,

And your harvest is bowed down to by their sheaves.

And you might have lingered till my gaze had left your face,

As I wear you on mine! May both my hands

And you might have lingered till my gaze had left your face,

As I wear you on mine! May both my hands

And I am battered by your icy floes,

As I wear you on mine! May both my hands

And your beauty’s veil, which clothes your eyes, and your harvest is bowed down to by their sheaves.

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And you might have lingered till my gaze had left your face,
Moshe ibn Ezra had three brothers, Yehuda, Yitzhak, and Yosef. For a while in the early 12th century, all four lived in Toledo, the capital of Christian Castile, as did Halevi, who was practicing medicine there. Yehuda was the first of the Ibn Ezras to die, and this elegy that Halevi wrote for him begins with a pun, since hevel, the biblical word for “vanity,” is also the Hebrew name of the biblical Abel. (Literally, the poem’s first Hebrew distich reads, “Because it sees that man is hevel/Time turns on him and becomes Cain.”) The next-to-last line is a barb aimed at Yosef, an official in the Castilian administration. Apparently having gone to see him on some matter following Yehuda’s death, Halevi was told that he was too busy to receive him.

Because it sees man is but a vain thing, 
Time turns on him. Like Abel killed by Cain, 
It lays the splendidest of our sons low 
And slays the darlings of our fancy. 
Souring our wine until our tears taste sweet, 
It has breached the Ibn Ezra’s foursquare lines. 
For two of them, now far away, I pine, 
And for the days in which they won the palm; 
While asking for Yosef I’m told to wait, 
And for Yehuda, “He is gone.”

On the Death of Yehuda ibn Ezra
Moshe ibn Ezra, born in Toledo, under adverse circumstances, for a life of unhappy wandering in northern Spain. It has been conjectured on the basis of a poem of his that he departed due to a family rift caused by his fall into debt with his brother Yehiel (ibn Yehiel's daughter). Although Yehiel himself continued to live in Toledo for many more years, it was a city whose atmosphere and inhabitants offended him. His thought of it as a permanent home and, prior to developing a definitive intention to settle in the Land of Israel, dreamed of returning to Andalusia. This theory thwarted word addressed by him in 1891 to the poet is then a lessor for the transience of both his lives. The poet's saying of "Shameful covenants for their own reasons" is apparently a reference to the composition of the Kuzari, Halevi's great confessional defense of Judaism, which he began to work on in his Toledo years. I have not sought to reproduce this poet's microannulment of -m in many cities; if I had used a longer English line in translating it I did with the same seriousness: "Why, my darling, have you barred all news?" I have not sought to reproduce this poet's microannulment of -m in many cities; if I had used a longer English line in translating it I did with the same seriousness: "Why, my darling, have you barred all news?"

The Kuzari, with the same meter in "Why, My Darling, Have You Barred All News?", having itself been composed, and so black is the sight of the man who is vexed that darkness is all, as if our eyes are clouded and wet because Moshe is gone.

The wagons of wandering's road, and my soul was unpracticed at parting, and our days were unfractured and whole. Time bore us separately, but Love, which bore us twins, Raised us in her spiced garden and sucked us with guzzled wines.

When I think of you, many mountains away (why, just yesterday) You were my pleasure's peak!), the blood leaves my cheeks and all things run their course and each cause has its cause? And the day cursed as paltry by one man, others praise for damn the fools who are so wise in their own eyes That their own lies they dem the dogmas of true faith, And my faith sovereign? They sew and reap empty crops and call it grain;

With the exteriors of fashion they cover up the gems within. But I will mine truth's storehouses for its rarest stones And rest not till their shelves bow down to mine. "What? Can't I feed my pearls before the swine!" I'll say when they come knocking. "Why on seedless soil Let fall my rain?" No, all I need from this poor age is what my soul Needs from my body: A place to live in while it lasts, And to abandon when it torments and weeples.

The source of all wisdom, his words were pure nuggets of gold! Our friendship is old; it goes back to when no one harnessed or rode Our soul. The wagons of wandering's road, and my soul was unpracticed at parting, and our days were unfractured and whole. Time bore us separately, but Love, which bore us twins, Raised us in her spiced garden and sucked us with guzzled wines.

When I think of you, many mountains away (why, just yesterday) You were my pleasure's peak!), the blood leaves my cheeks and all things run their course and each cause has its cause? And the day cursed as paltry by one man, others praise for damn the fools who are so wise in their own eyes That their own lies they dem the dogmas of true faith, And my faith sovereign? They sew and reap empty crops and call it grain;

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The Wagons of Wandering’s Road, and My Soul Was Unpracticed at Parting, and Our Days Were Unfractured and Whole. Time bore us separately, but Love, which bore us twins, Raised us in her spiced garden and sucked us with guzzled wines. When I think of you, many mountains away (why, just yesterday) You were my pleasure’s peak!), the blood leaves my cheeks for the tears running down them. I think—and remember the days That once were. Were we dreaming? What a truant time is! It has taken you from me and given me strife-stricken friends Who pretend to be friends. The more their manners Stink like garlic, the more I miss the manna of your speech. Damn the fools who are so wise in their own eyes That their own lies they deny the dogmas of true faith, And my faith sovereign? They sew and reap empty crops and call it grain;

With the exteriors of fashion they cover up the gems within. But I will mine truth's storehouses for its rarest stones And rest not till their shelves bow down to mine. "What? Can't I feed my pearls before the swine!" I'll say when they come knocking. "Why on seedless soil Let fall my rain?" No, all I need from this poor age is what my soul Needs from my body: A place to live in while it lasts, And to abandon when it torments and weeples.

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With the exteriors of fashion they cover up the gems within. But I will mine truth's storehouses for its rarest stones And rest not till their shelves bow down to mine. "What? Can’t I feed my pearls before the swine!” I’ll say when they come knocking. “Why on seedless soil Let fall my rain?” No, all I need from this poor age is what my soul Needs from my body: A place to live in while it lasts, And to abandon when it torments and weeples.
On the Death of a Daughter

My child!

Had you forgotten the way
To your own home
That your pallbearers strayed
To the underworld through, leaving me with
(Since you are not there)
To ask how you are
A grave’s clods to kiss
And your memory?
Ah, death has come between you and me.

O daughter torn
From her mother’s rooms!
What life have I left when,
Shaped from my soul,
She makes your tears flow
Like a spring from split stone?
How can she be so changed,
Once white as the moon,
That she now wears the earth
As her bridal gown,
In soot and the sweets
Of her wedding feast?
Ritter is my own misery.
For death has come between you and me.

I ask how you are.
You were I to cry
Your ears are deaf
And when my turn came
And you are silenced utterly,
And cruelly lead me
And with dirt to wreathe me
And pierced her side,
From her heart.
A grave’s clods to kiss
Leaving me with
Bitter is my own misery,
Death scaled her walls,
And pierced her side,
And drove her pride
Into a dirge
For death has come between you and me.

When you did not do it willingly,
You have laid me low!
You should not have had me
With His own flock
From your abode,
And turned her joy
Into a dirge
The day it rippled
The vine she planted
From her heart.
That your pallbearers strayed
Under don’t canvas.
Yet in truth you did not do it willingly.
For death has come between you and me.

Ah, my child,
You have laid me low!
"O mother, O!
You should not have had me
If you meant to spurn me,
And with dirt to wreath me
And cruelly lead me
Under don’t canvas.
Yet in truth you did not do it willingly.
For death has come between you and me.

My child!

Hud al the way
To your own home
That your pallbearers strayed
To the underworld through, leaving me with
(Since you are not there)
To ask how you are
A grave’s clods to kiss
And your memory?
Ah, death has come between you and me.

O daughter torn
From her mother’s rooms!
What life have I left when,
Shaped from my soul,
She makes your tears flow
Like a spring from split stone?
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Yet in truth you did not do it willingly.
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My child!

Hud al the way
To your own home
That your pallbearers strayed
To the underworld through, leaving me with
(Since you are not there)
To ask how you are
A grave’s clods to kiss
And your memory?
Hispano-Hebrew poets sometimes signed their work by weaving their names into it. The initial letters of each stanza of this poem spell “Yehuda.” One of Halevi’s most anthologized poems, “Lord, Where Will I Find You?” deals with a central concern of his religious sensibility: the paradox of a transcendent and unknowable God who is nevertheless present in this world and “closer to man than his own skin and bone.” The “Creator of All” is the same God who was present in the Ark of the Covenant in the room of the Holy of Holies in the Temple. The poem is written in the form of what the Arabs called a muwashshah or “girdle” poem. The “girdles” or stanzas are preceded by a “necklace,” an introductory distich that introduces a rhyme (ne’elam/ olam) that runs through the second and fourth “girdles” and ends the last two lines of all four. As in “On the Death of a Daughter,” the poem eschews Arabic-style metrics for the older Hebrew system that counts only the stressed syllables in each line.

Lord, Where Will I Find You?

Lord, where will I find You?
Your place is remote and concealed.
And where will I not find You?
Your being fills the world.

Creator of All, You are in all that is small.
To the far You are near, to the near You are here.
An ark was Your home—so is heaven’s dome:
Its Hosts sing Your praises and You are host to their clan.
The spheres cannot hold You, but a room can.

Alone and unknown, above on Your throne,
You are closer to man than his own skin and bone.
His words proclaim that it was You who made him.
Who does not know You? Your yoke is his guide.
Who does not pray to You to provide?

I have longed for Your presence, I have called You in Your absence,
As I set out to greet You I have found You come to meet me:
In Your holiness I saw You, in the wonder of Your glory.
Yet who has not seen You, if ever he saw,
In skies that are silent, stars loud with awe?

Did You truly decide to reside in man’s midst?
O let him but trust in that, made out of dust,
Though You dwell in solitude, sacred and blessed!
The seraphs extol You from their supreme height:
They carry Your seat—and You, the world’s weight.

יה אָנָה אֶמְצָאֲ
יָהּ אָנָה אֶמְצָאֲ
יָהּ אָנָה אֶמְצָאֲ
יָהּ אָנָה אֶמְצָאֲ

יוֹשֵׁב תְּהִלּוֹתָם קָדוֹשׁ וְאַתָּה עוֹלָם.
גַּלְגַּל וָרָם, נִשָּׂא עֲלֵיהֶם עַל וּבְהִנָּשְׂאֲוָם אֲלֵיהֶם מִרוּחָם קָרוֹב אַתָּה יוֹצְרָם.
דַּלֶּל וֶלֶא שְׁיַאֲ,
וְנֶעְלָם נַעֲלֶה?
מְקוֹמְיָה אֶמְצָאֲ אָנָה יָהּ עוֹלָם.
מָלֵא כְּבוֹד אֶמְצָאֲ אָנָה יָהּ הֵקִים.
הֵקִים אַרְצָאֲ לָרְחוֹקִים לַקְּרוֹבִים, אַפְסֵי הַנִּמְצָא לָרְחוֹקִים לַקְּרוֹבִים, תִּתְהַלֵּל אֱלֹהִים אָנָה יָהּ.
שְׁחָקִים שְׁחָקִים, שְׁחָקִים שְׁחָקִים, שְׁחָקִים שְׁחָקִים, שְׁחָקִים שְׁחָקִים.
תִּתְהַלֵּל אֱלֹהִים אָנָה יָהּ.
שתתחלו נביאים, אַוִּים חֲזִיקָו.
כְּבָדְתָא עָלָיָה, יֵל כָּנָּשׁ רֶם.
אֵל חָכְרָאֲ, לָהוֹרָאֲ, מֵרָאתָּה יַמָּנָא.
כֹּל בִּלְתָא אֵין בָּהֶם כִּי יִרְאֲאָי מִי זֶה מִי כְּבָדְתָא עָלָיָה, יֵל כָּנָּשׁ רֶם.
כְּבָדְתָא עָלָיָה, יֵל כָּנָּשׁ רֶם.
כְּבָדְתָא עָלָיָה, יֵל כָּנָּשׁ רֶם.
כְּבָדְתָא עָלָיָה, יֵל כָּנָּשׁ רֶם.
כְּבָדְתָא עָלָיָה, יֵל כָּנָּשׁ רֶם.
In the year 1130, the Hebrew year 4890, Yehuda Halevi, then a man in his late fifties, had a dream in which he saw the Jewish people “raised high” and the downfall of the Arabs, symbolized by Ishma’el—Hagar’s son and the biblical Isaac’s half-brother, called a “wild ass of a man” by the Bible. The Aramaic lines in the poem, which are retained untranslated in my English, come from the Book of Daniel, whose arcane prophecies were traditionally mined by Jews for their messianic hints. Daniel’s pum memalel ravvan, “a high-and-mighty mouth,” was probably meant by Halevi to refer to the bombastic language of Muhammed in the Koran. H. asaf tina be-raglei farzela, “feet of iron mixed with clay,” is from the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a “great image” or idol, interpreted by Daniel to represent the four evil kingdoms of history. Avna di-mehat tsalesa, “the stone that smote the image,” signified for Halevi the smashing of the fourth, Islamic kingdom. I have sought to reproduce his pun on tatatz, “890” (the Hebrew letters taf, taf, and tsadi, 400+400+90), and tutatz, “will be smashed” with “will end in naught,” in which “naught” also refers to the zero in 4890.

Heart pounding, you wake. Is it as it seemed? What is this dream that you have dreamed?

Did its vision truly show Yourself raised high and your foe laid low?

Tell Hagar’s son, then: “Cease to scorn The son of Sarah, higher born, For in my dream you were undone. Has your doom so soon begun That in the year 4890 Your sway will end in naught also?

Proud tyrant! Assailant of Heaven! Are you not the one Called ‘wild ass of a man’ and pum memalel ravvan, The last to rise against God’s Law, Hasaf tina be-raglei farzela?

Suppose He has struck you down with avna di-mehat Tsalma, and paid you back for all that you begot!”
My soul!
Cross God’s threshold at dawn and breathe to Him sweet-incensed song.
How long will you follow Time’s follies and think that their witchcraft is truth,
Though days’ and nights’ revels and mornings slept softly away
Will soon leave you holding only the dead branch of a tree?
Shelter under the wing of your Lord and your King,
May his great name be praised by all that lives from His breath!

The preceding poems, with the exception of “Lord, Where Will I Find You?”,
would have been classified as shirey hol, “secular poems,” by the standards
of Hispano-Hebrew poetry, since none
was intended to form part of the
liturgy of a Jewish synagogue service.
This poem and the three following
ones would have been classified as
shirey kodesh or “sacred poems,” also
known as piyyutim, because their pur-
pose was liturgical. Each was meant to
be sung by the cantor or prayer leader
at a specific juncture—this “Nishmat”
before the prayer in the morning ser-
vice beginning, Nishmat kol hai teva-
rekh et shimkha adonai eloheynu. “The
breath of all that lives shall bless Your
name, O Lord our God.” The poem’s
last words, asher nishmat eloha hai be’apav,
would have led directly into
the Nishmat of the prayerbook. Prayer
is depicted here by Halevi as a kind of
divine circuitry in which God exhales
the breath of life into the early morn-
ing worshiper and then re-inhales his
own exhalation in the form of prayer.

The initial Hebrew letters of the
first five distichs of this poem spell
“Yehuda.”
A *barkhu* is a *piyyut* preceding the invocation *Barkhu et adonai ha-mevorakh*, “Bless ye the Lord who is blessed,” which follows the *Nishmat kol hai*. This one describes the poet waking from a “vision” or dream of God, which, although not described, was clearly an intense experience. A “soft” mystic who never aspired, as more radical mystics do, to a waking union with the Divinity, Halevi nevertheless regarded his religious dreams as revelatory moments in which God appeared to him.

Once again, the first letters of this poem’s five distichs spell the name of the poet.

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**My thoughts of You wake me at night and I muse on Your kindness to me.**

**Through it I fathom the soul You have lodged in me, which yet is beyond me.**

**I see and believe in You in my heart as though Sinai rose over me.**

**I have sought You in visions and in their clouds Your glory swept down on me.**

**And I think: My Lord who is blessed, let me rise at day’s dawning to bless You!**
A ge’ula, literally, a “redemption,” is a piyyut sung before the blessing Barukh ata adonai, ga’al yisra’el, “Blessed are you O Lord, who redeems Israel,” which comes in the section of the prayer between the barkhu and the Amidah. The theology of this ge’ula is conventional: inasmuch as God (characteristically described by Halevi as both near and far, “Ark-dwelling” and “looking down” from above) has not forgiven Israel for its sins, the chastisement of exile must be borne. Yet the final line hints at rebellion. One would have expected it to read, “Redeemer, look down on Your folk from Your place and redeem.” The unexpected “my” as though declares to God: “You say we are Your people—but you are in Your place and we are in ours, and from where we are, Your redemption is not discernible.”

The name Yehuda is woven into this piyyut, too.
An ahava was a piyyut prefaces to the blessing of Ohev amo yisra'el, “Who loves His people Israel,” which occurs in the service before the Shma Yisra'el. Like Halevi’s ge’ula, this ahava touches on God’s perceived abandonment of Israel, but from a different perspective. Here the stress is on His love. The “rare beauty” is the exiled Jewish people, while Edom is a rabbinic term for Christendom. Despite their degraded condition, this ahava affirms, the followers of Judaism can mock their Christian and Muslim rivals’ pretensions in the confidence that they alone are God’s true partner. No matter how long His quarrel with them lasts, He could no more lose His heart to the “low-born sows” (pra’im or “wild asses,” in Halevi’s Hebrew) who are vying with them than a king could choose a rude peasant girl over a princess.

The poem’s last two lines invoke the verse in the Songs of Songs, “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the flood drown it.” Such incorporation of biblical language for allusive purposes, known in Hebrew literary criticism as shibutz or “insetting,” was a common technique in the Hispano-Hebrew poetry of Halevi’s age.

A rare beauty far from her place of high birth:

Why does she laugh when her true love is wroth?

She laughs at the daughters of Edom and at

Arabia’s mignons and at the thought

That they covet her beau. Low-born sows!

Don’t they know that she lay in his arms as his doe?

Where are their Prophets? Where their Menoráh?

Where their Holy Ark and Shekhináh?

Don’t, my foes, don’t hope to quench love’s desire.

You will only be burned by love’s fire.
I. Waked By My Thoughts

A modified "girdle" poem (my translation retains its original rhyme scheme), "Waked By My Thoughts" compares God to a king in a cloud-moated castle to which the poet, likened to a slave, tearfully but boldly seeks admission. The tension climaxes in the fourth stanza, which starts with an appeal, borrowed from the imagery of romantic love, for dawn, the enemy of trysting lovers, to be delayed so that the petitioning slave can finish "pouring out" his "heart's blood," and ends with his gaining a seat at the king's nocturnal table.

The image of "the king at his feast" is taken from the Song of Songs. A second biblical inset is "If He finds me proud"—in the Hebrew, "If my heart is lifted up in His eyes." This comes from Ezekiel 28:2, which reads, "Son of man, say unto the prince of Tyre... because thine heart is lifted up ... thou hast said, I am a God ... yet thou art a man and not God." Although "Waked By My Thoughts" is one of the most mystical of Halevi's poems, he was nevertheless, by means of this inset, disassociating himself from the radical goal of becoming God through mystical union with Him.

While God is approachable when love overcomes fear, the nearer one draws to Him, the more conscious one is, for Halevi, of how far away He remains.

This poem is a signed one.

Waked by my thoughts and driven to profess
God's praise in song and plead my neediness,
I from my eyes brush midnight's sleepiness
To seek the pleasance of the Lord's palace.

Roused from drowsiness, I ask: Who stirred me?
The holy dweller in glory has spurred me.
He has taught me to listen; stood by me and beside me;
To my undying thankfulness, advised me.

*All souls are His, all forms bear His impress!*

A slave of slaves before the King of Kings!
With heavy hands and many tears he brings
His life and limbs as Your sworn underlings
To bless You and confess You in all things.
Forgive like so much sand his sinfulness!
Lord, You Are My Sole Desire

My young years thought of naught save themselves.
Will my world-sated soul save itself?
When will my Maker when all He has made
Makes me passion's captive and slave,
Or strive for the heights when at the day's end
Sister worm awaits my descent?
How, even, be glad in glad times,
When none know what the future will spell,
And the days underwrite my decay
With the nights, half of me to dispel
To the wind and half to the dust?
What of this world but Your will is my share,
And if You are not mine what is mine?
What more can I ask or declare?
Or do You will and die
That moment, I would seek it.
Placing in Your hands my spirit,
I would sleep—and sweet such sleep is.
Far from You, all life is dying;
Death is life with You beside me.

And yet I know not how to further
Most my faith or best to serve it.
Instruct me in Your ways, then, Lord,
And free my mind from folly's service.
Teach me while I have strength to suffer,
Nor despite my suffering
In the time still left before,
Myself a burden to myself,
My cankered bones fail to support me
And, my only choice submission,
I make the voyage to my fathers,
Stopping to rest at their last stop
Deep in the earth, I who once was
A sojourner upon its surface.

Lord, You are my sole desire,
Though I keep it my soul's secret.
Could I but do Your will and die
That moment, I would seek it.
Placing in Your hands my spirit,
I would sleep—and sweet such sleep is.
Far from You, all life is dying;
Death is life with You beside me.
In the Temple

Your dwellings, Lord, are places of love,
And Your nearness is clear as things seen,
not guessed of.
My dream took me to Your Temple’s mount to sing
In all its lovely worshiping and bring
My offerings with their libations.
Around me swirled thick smoke and ministrations,
Sweet to my ears, of Levites at their stations.
I woke, but when I did You still were there
For me to thank You as befits my prayer.
“My Heart in the East” is probably the best-known and most translated of all Halevi’s poems. In formal terms, it is easily described. Its three 28- or 29-syllable distichs have the meter, known as the mitpashetet, long-long-short-long, long-short-long, long-long-short-long, long-short-long. The poem has the mono-rhyme of -rav. It has one pun, a double play on hevel, “domain,” but also “rope,” and khevel, “chain,” and three phonetically linked pairs of words: mizrah, “East,” and ma’arav, West,” yeykal, “it would be little,” and yeykar, “it would be precious,” and tuv s’farad, “the goodness of Spain,” and d’vir neherav, “the Shrine [i.e., Temple] in ruins.”

All this is cut-and-dried. Yet, describing the conflict of a man who has decided to journey to Crusader-ruled Palestine and live there, yet who is frighteningly aware of the difficulties of doing so, “My Heart in the East” is a living poem. Indeed, it is a perfect one, a miniature marvel of balance in which opposites tug in different directions while remaining musically joined.

My heart in the East
But the rest of me far in the West—
How can I savor this life, even taste what I eat?
How, in the bonds of the Moor,
Zion chained to the Cross,
Can I do what I’ve vowed to and must?
Gladly I’d leave
All the best of grand Spain
For one glimpse of the ruined Shrine’s dust.
In this poem, the dust of Jerusalem’s ruins that the poet sought a mere glimpse of in “My Heart in the East” is imagined as a more intense sweetness, the taste of a lover’s kiss. Indeed, “To Jerusalem,” with its beauteous queen banished from her “cloister” of the Temple, has the motifs of a romantic love poem. Its pining lover; its beloved he has been torn from by a cruel fate; its hope for a blissful reunion with her—all are met with often in the medieval poetry of the troubadours and in romances like Tristan and Isolde. In many of Halevi’s “songs of Zion,” of which this is one of the most consummate, one finds, uniquely, the themes of romantic love fully integrated with the theme of Jewish exile and the yearning for an end to it.

O fair of view! World’s joy! Great monarch’s home!
For you, from earth’s far end, my spirit yearns.
Compassion stirs in me when my mind turns
To your lost cloister and its splendor’s doom.
Would that on an eagle’s wings I flew
To mix the water of my tears with your parched clay!
Always I think of you—and though your king’s away,
And snakes and scorpions scuttle where once grew
Your balm of Gilead, your stones and earth
Would taste when kissed like honey in my mouth.
Zion! Do you wonder how and where your captives are now, and if they think of you, the far-brocked remnants?

From north and south, east, and west, and all directions, near and far, they send their greetings.

As I send mine, captured by my longing
To weep like Hermon’s dew upon your mountains.

Mourning your loneliness, I am the wall of jackals;
Dreaming your return, the song of last springs.

My heart sings for Peniel, and for Bethel, and all those places

With traces of God’s presence, where your gates

Facing the portals of the highest heavens,

Of His own glory. Gladly I would choose

To pour my soul out where your chosen ones stand

In a downpour of God’s effluence.

You are the throne of the Lord, His royal house—

How then are slavish enervations in your lord’s houses?

If only I could wander past the way points

Where God appeared to your appointed and your axes.

And, dying to you with a bird’s wings, shake woeful head, remembering the throngs

Of your very air’s alive with souls;

Yes, even so, the graves of patriarchs.

Wondrous in Hebrew at your chosen tombs, I would cross Gilead, and Carmel’s woods,

And stop to marvel at your lofty peaks

Across the Jordan, on which, illuminated,

Lie buried the two greatest of your teachers.

Your priests?

If only I could wander past the way points

Where God appeared to your appointed and your axes.

And, dying to you with a bird’s wings, shake woeful head, remembering the throngs

Of your very air’s alive with souls;

Yes, even so, the graves of patriarchs.

Wondrous in Hebrew at your chosen tombs, I would cross Gilead, and Carmel’s woods,

And stop to marvel at your lofty peaks

Across the Jordan, on which, illuminated,

Lie buried the two greatest of your teachers.

Your priests?
A man in your fifties—and you still would be young. Soon you will have flown like a bird from a branch! Yet you think the service of God, and earn the service of man, And run after the many, and the One
From whom the multitudes of all things come,
Between which, surging with thanksgiving, lies a third, my heart.

Don’t pretend you have to seek to know His will,
While the sails flap and crack, and the deck creaks and groans,
Left its counsel for God’s, put the five senses aside,
His awesome world, restoring souls to bodies, life to dry bones.
While you shirk the service of God, and crave the service of men,
Are indistinguishable, two oceans cupped alike,
A ripple of snakes without even a whisper or hiss.

And make amends to your Maker before your last days rush away.
As of the Jordan’s in the days of Joshua.
At such times, when each man prays to what is holy to him,
His awesome world, restoring souls to bodies, life to dry bones.

Now, the waves subside; like flocks of sheep they graze upon the sea.
And of the high seas and Mediterranean travel was dangerous,
Don’t pretend you have to seek to know His will,
His awesome world, restoring souls to bodies, life to dry bones.
Driven by longing for the living God

There will I pour out my heart in water; and in my feast will I make my doom to drink in. Let the heavens and the earth and all the world see and be shamed. For to the Lord our God do I offer my vows, to hasten the payment of all his offerings, according to the mincing gait of the trees watered and watched, as they branched and did well; no time to think of the blossoms they bore, of Yehuda and Azarel, or of Yitzhak, so like a son, my sun-blessed crop, the years' rich yield.

Forgotten are my synagogue, the peace that was its study hall, my Sabbaths and their sweet delights, the splendor of my festivals: I've left them all. Let others have the idol's honors and be hailed— I've swapped my bedroom for dry brush, its safety for wild chaparral, the scents and subtle fragrances that cloyed my soul for thistles' smells, and put away the mincing gait of landlubbers to hoist my sail and cross the sea until I reach the land that is the Lord's footstool.

I am the Lord's and fear no ill as long as His own angels shall take up cudgels for me while I praise Him till my breath falls still.
To sisters, brothers, family, and friends:
Greetings from one,
a prisoner of hope sold to the sea,
his spirit hostage to the winds
that blow from west to east and back again!
Between him and death is nothing more
than a thin sliver of a board
(unless death already has occurred,
since he is buried in a wooden box
six feet under water without a coffin’s worth of space).
Seasick and scared of pirates, tempests, and Mohammedans,
he sits because there isn’t room to stand,
lies down and has no place to put his feet.
The captain is a brute, the crew are no-accounts,
yet they’re this kingdom’s king and counts
with whom no education counts if you can’t swim.
I’ll tell you, though, what makes them glum:
It’s when I smile because I know
that soon I’ll lay my soul in my Lord’s lap.
There, where once His ark and altar stood,
I’ll thank Him, requiter of men’s guilt with good,
with all the song and praise I can bestow.
Although Mediterranean sea captains in the Middle Ages generally sought to stay close to land, they sometimes strayed out of sight of it in good weather, as Halevi's ship is described in this poem as having done. I have partially reproduced the poem's monorhyme by slant-rhyming all 17 lines of my translation: “land,” “ground,” “man,” “remained,” “sand,” “mind,” etc. While these may not have the same effect as the single repeated –va of the Hebrew, they do give some idea of it.

At Sea

Has a new Flood drowned the land
And left no patch of dry ground,
Neither bird, beast, nor man?
Has nothing remained?
A strip of bare sand
Would be balm for the mind;
The dreariest plain,
A pleasure to scan.
But all that is seen
Is a ship and the span
Of the sea and the sky, and Leviathan
As he churns up the brine,
Which shakes its white mane,
Gripping the ship as the hand
Of a thief grips its find.
Let it foam! My heart bounds
As I near the Lord’s shrine.
Letters discovered in the Cairo Geniza in the 1950s tell us that Yehuda Halevi landed in Alexandria in early September, 1140 and remained there until mid-May, 1141. Although the length of his stay might seem to indicate a renewed uncertainty about continuing on to Palestine, the difficulties were in fact largely logistical. Yet Halevi was deeply impressed by the richness and lushness of Egypt and by its wealthy and sophisticated Jewish community. Moreover, he felt he was already treading on semi-sacred ground, since much of the biblical account of the Patriarchs, as well as the entire story of the exodus, takes place in Egypt. The biblical references in this poem are to the blood of the paschal sacrifice that the fleeing Israelites painted on their door jambs and to the columns of cloud and fire that led them through the desert to the Red Sea.

These great cities, these country villages,
Were of old lived in by Israel.
All honor then to Egypt!
Tread gingerly in streets
Through which God’s presence roamed,
Seeking His blood-pact on the doors.
Columns of fire, columns of cloud,
Seen by every eye!
The people of the Covenant carved out,
Its mighty cornerstones
Cut for the ages!
Halevi remained in Alexandria until mid-November 1140, staying at the home of the prominent, Jerusalem-born rabbinical judge Aharon el-Ammani before traveling up the Nile to Fustat or old Cairo. Watching the great river flow, he felt he was looking at the same water that Moses and Aaron had turned to blood with a wave of their staffs in the first of the Ten Plagues. Yet as he was to write elsewhere, whereas God’s presence in Egypt had been “like a traveler’s,/ Resting in the shade beneath a tree,/ In Zion, it’s at home and dwells/ Grandly, as all Scripture tells.” Egypt was once the site of sacred events. The Land of Israel—“a place more wondrous yet than this”—was sacred. Nothing he saw in Egypt could take its place.

From age to age Your wonders, God, are told
And not denied by father or by son.
This river Nile has always testified
To how its waters were turned into blood.
No hierophants performed the magic trick,
But only Your name and Moses and Aaron’s rod,
Transformed by You into a hissing snake.
Help then Your trusting servant to make haste
To a place more wondrous yet than this!
Let's have more lutes
For the lovely girls,
You sweet singers!
Give the instrumentalists their chance
To serenade the secrets sirens
Looking through the lattice!
Well-behaved they learned to be
From Laban's daughter at the well;
Is it their fault,
Unwitting archers that they are,
That their arrows have pierced hearts,
Though their bare arms
Never sought to lift a sword?
So languidly they move
That you would think
They could barely lift an eyebrow,
Much less bear
The armor of their ankle-bands and bracelets.
One look at the sun from them
And it would be sunburned!
"Let there be light," they say,
And it shines in their faces;
"Let it be dark"—
It's in their raven tresses.
Their tunics are bright
Like the splendors of friendship;
Their hair is as black
As the gloom of goodbyes.
They're so like stars
That I would be the sky
In which they orbited forever.
Full or delicate, kish, lithe, or lanky—
I could fall for them all
And for their perilous red mouths,
Each perfect with two rows of pearly crystal.
Be gentle if you catch them making eyes
(At me, I hope),
Gentle with their wiles,
For they are burdened by
Silver bells of apples and of pomegranates,
And roses sprinkled with rare essences.
And what about that stately one back there,
That you would think
Unwitting archers that they are,
Their hair is as black
Their tunics are bright
That their arrows have pierced hearts,
With their naked mouths,
That you would think
Their bare arms
Never sought to lift a sword?
So languidly they move
That you would think
They could barely lift an eyebrow,
Much less bear
The armor of their ankle-bands and bracelets.
One look at the sun from them
And it would be sunburned!
"Let there be light," they say,
And it shines in their faces;
"Let it be dark"—
It's in their raven tresses.
Their tunics are bright
Like the splendors of friendship;
Their hair is as black
As the gloom of goodbyes.
They're so like stars
That I would be the sky
In which they orbited forever.
Full or delicate, kish, lithe, or lanky—
I could fall for them all
And for their perilous red mouths,
Each perfect with two rows of pearly crystal.
Be gentle if you catch them making eyes
(At me, I hope),
Gentle with their wiles,
For they are burdened by
Silver bells of apples and of pomegranates,
And roses sprinkled with rare essences.
And what about that stately one back there,
Swaying like a palm tree in the breeze?
Just count the hearts they've stolen!
I ask you:
Will they pay for them,
Or is it retribution
For the curls on their soft cheeks
Our eyes have poached on?
During the winter of 1140–41, Halevi took a boat trip up the Nile, from where he wrote a letter to an acquaintance in Fustat that included these lines. Their mood is of a piece with the calm but joyous acceptance of old age’s still-enduring ability to respond to beauty that we find in “Let’s Have More Lutes For The Lovely Girls.” Not far from where the poet stood flowed the river. A bare-armed girl walked beside it. In the distance, where the watered valley yielded to the desert, were the cones of pyramids and the fronds of oases rising from the sands. A north wind bent the stalks of wheat low. An old man about to set out on his last journey, Halevi was filled with a great thankfulness for everything.

Has time cast off its grim old clothes
And dressed itself in its holiday best,
And the earth put on an embroidered vest
Festooned with patterns of checkered gold?
The vale of the Nile is a blazon of fields,
The land of Goshen an ocean of grain,
Palm islands etched against the sky,
The glint of far pyramids bright in the sun.

A girl by the banks of the river:
So like gazelles they are, but heavy-laden,
Heavy the bracelets on their arms,
The anklets circling their slim steps.
And the foolish heart forgets how old it is,
And remembers other boys and other girls,
Here, in this paradise of Egypt,
In these gardens, by the river, in these fields.
The yellow stalks are a rich brocade,
And when the sea breeze ripples through them,
They bow and pray in gratitude to God.
Shlomo ibn Gabbai was one of two young traveling companions who accompanied Yehuda Halevi from Spain to Egypt, where he remained devotedly by his side. The other was Halevi's son-in-law, Yitzhak ibn Ezra, who informed Halevi in Fustat that he did not intend to return to his family in Spain. For Halevi, who had to blame his voyage for his daughter's loss of her husband, this was a bitter blow.

Though humorous, Halevi's tribute to Shlomo ibn Gabbai is heartfelt. A literal translation of its final Hebrew distich would be: "They said: 'There is no manna in this world.' I answered: 'If there isn't, there is manna's brother.'"

"Manna's brother" is ahim man, a pun on the biblical name Ahiman in the Book of Numbers. When a play on words can't be gracefully conveyed in translation, the translator has to try something different in meaning but similar in spirit, which is what I sought to do here.

An ever-eastward wanderer,
Lone as a childless widower,
I’m asked, “How could you get along
Without the kindness of a helping hand?”
“My luck,” I say, “is that a righteous man
Feeds me manna every day
That tastes like sweets and choice viands.”
“Manna?” they say. “Don’t you anachronize?”
“Not,” I reply, “when it’s Ibn-Gabbai’s!”
Halevi boarded the ship that took him to the Land of Israel on May 7, 1141. Although he was wined and dined constantly during his months in Egypt, not a single one of his hosts volunteered to travel with him to Palestine, whose Crusader rulers had a reputation for viciousness and were greatly feared. Having already parted angrily from Yitzhak ibn Ezra in Fustat, he now said goodbye to Shlomo ibn Gabbai, describing it in one of the simplest and most moving poems he ever wrote.

לעֵת בָּרָד.

גַּחַל יְקוֹד כְּהִתְלַקַּח לְבָבִי הבָּרָד.
וְאָשֶׁר מָה, לְבָבִי, מֵרְאוֹת אֲיָאֵשׁ
שְׁעַל מִמְּקוֹמוֹ נָדָב. ואֲבָל מִסְּפָרַד!
יְדִידַי כָּל סוֹף וְזֶה וְרֵעַי—אֲחִי מֵרְאוֹת אֲיָאֵשׁ—וזה סְפוֹד בָּל יְדִי מַפִּרְד.

At such a time, my eyes can’t hold
The tears back any more.
They pour like hailstones,
Hot from a storm-wracked heart.
To part from Yitzhak was the easy part,
Even though the shock of it was rude.
But now that Shlomo is gone too,
I’m left in solitude
With no hope of seeing anyone again.
And that’s the last of all my friends from Spain!
On Parting from Aharon Al-Ammani

Be still, you booming surf, enough to let
A pupil go to kiss his master’s cheek.
(That’s Master Aaron, whose unflagging staff
The years have not made tremulous or weak.)
A teacher who never says, “The lesson’s done,”
A giver who never fears to give too much,
He makes me bless the east wind’s wings today
And curse tomorrow’s gusts out of the west.
How can a man who feels as though a scorpion
Has stung him leave Gilead’s balm behind?
How trade the shade of a grand, leafy tree
For winter’s ice and summer’s savagery,
The shelter of a masterly mansion
For the shriving of God’s rain and sun?
The wind, letters from the Cairo Geniza tell us, finally changed on May 14, the day on which Halevi’s ship sailed. Since May 14, 1141, was the first day of the holiday of Shavu’ot, on which writing was forbidden (sailing on the holiday, on the other hand, was permitted by rabbinic law), we know that this poem could not have been written, as it was long thought to have been, on that day. Rather, it must have been composed in similar circumstances en route to Egypt, in a North African port where, too, east winds had held up Halevi’s voyage. Yet there is nothing to keep us from imagining Halevi thinking of it as his ship raised its sails in Alexandria. Did his heart rebound as they went up, his doubts and fears drop away like the stage fright of an actor when the curtain rises? No more poems of his have survived to tell us. We know only, informed again by letters from the Geniza, that he died less than three months later, in July or early August, in the Land of Israel.

Spikenard-and-apple-tinged,
Winged from the west,
You, wind,
Come not from the Cavern of Winds,
But from the storerooms of a spice merchant:
Scented like incense,
Swift as a bird,
Bearing my freedom.

How you were longed for
By those who rode
The sea’s back this far
While they bestrode
The deck of a bark!

Stay not your hand from us now.
Fill our sails, long becalmed.
Stamp flat the depths.
Part the water in two.
Rest not till you reach the most sacred of mounts.
Rebuff the easterlies that stir the sea like a bubbling stew!

Now leashed, now loosed—
What could a Lord-lashed prisoner do
But trust in him,
Maker of mountains and winds,
To send you?
The Hebrew Types of Guillaume Le Bé

From 1559 through 1565, the punchcutter Guillaume Le Bé made a series of Hebrew types that he sold to the Antwerp printer Christophe Plantin, who would use them in the magnificent Polyglot Bible, regarded as one of the masterpieces of typographic art. Le Bé (1525–1598), who had learned his craft with the Paris printer Robert Estienne, had become a specialist in “oriental” languages, especially Hebrew. Settling in Venice by 1546, he produced types for some of the earliest printed editions of the Talmud and other Judaic works for the printers Marc’Antonio Giustiniani, Meir de Parenzo, and others. The types sold to Plantin are Le Bé’s most mature work and, as such, are among the finest of the Golden Age of Hebrew printing—bold, elegant, spirited, and easy to read.

The Hebrew types used here are digital versions of Le Bé’s types made by Matthew Carter and Scott-Martin Kosofsky. They are very close renderings of two sizes of the original types, the larger *gros double canon*, and the *texte*, both of which survive at the Plantin-Moretus Museum, in Antwerp. This is their début appearance. Historical type forms have not played a significant role in modern Hebrew typography, as they have in Latin types, but we hope this might inspire further interest. The other types used in this e-book are Garamond Small Text, by Robert Slimbach, and Trinité, by Bram de Does.