

## My Heart is in the East: Yehuda Halevi--A Medieval Jewish Poet Between Worlds

One of the greatest Medieval Spanish Jewish poets was Yehuda Halevi. He was born in Toledo, Spain in 1085 C.E. and died in Jerusalem after 1140. Although Yehuda chose medicine as his profession, he showed an early love and talent for poetry. He studied the Arabic and the Spanish poets of his time, yet he was inspired to write in the Hebrew language of the Bible.

During this time, Jews played a unique role in Moslem Spain moving between Jewish and Islamic cultures, spreading ideas which influenced the creation of new forms of philosophy, art and literature. Both Arabs and Jews were lovers of literature and collectors of books. Writing and reciting poetry was a highly developed art form in Spain; Jews and Moslems studied each other's verses and incorporated the others' vocabulary, rhythm and poetry styles into their own. Both Arabs and Jewish poets were entertainers who were invited to perform their new poems at private and public events. Evenings were spent listening to the works of the best poets, much like we go to the movies today.

Yehuda Halevi soon became one of the favorite poets of his people. One of his most famous and beloved poems, "My Heart is in the East" expressed his longing for Jerusalem, the ruined yet holy site of the Temple.

Later in his life Halevi moved to the Spanish city of Cordova which was a Muslim city at the time. Although he had an honored position as a physician, he did not feel at ease there. Over time, his yearning for the Holy Land grew deeper. After the death of his wife, the elderly Halevi decided to set out on a journey to Palestine. Leaving behind family and friends, they discouraged him from taking the long and dangerous journey. But there was only one image in his heart—Jerusalem. After a stormy passage he arrived in Alexandria, Egypt and then, despite pleadings of his friends not to continue, he started on the difficult land route once taken by the Israelite wanderers in the desert. It is related in stories about Halevi that as he came near Jerusalem, overpowered by the sight of the Holy City, he sang his most beautiful poem to Zion and died there shortly thereafter, never returning to Spain. Halevi remains one of the most celebrated poets of his time.

Sources: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9005-judah-ha-levi> and Jane S. Gerber, *The Jews of Spain, 1992*.

### My Heart is in the East

My heart is in the East  
But the rest of me is 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 and must?  
Gladly I'd leave  
All the best of grand Spain  
For one glimpse of the ruined shrines's dust.

Yehuda Halevi, Spain, written c. 1141



