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The Song of the Distant Dove: Judah Halevi's Pilgrimage
(review)

Tamar S. Drukker

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ben nidda (illegitimate offspring of a menstruating woman). The author's refreshing writing style is adept throughout. Noteworthy, the author's personal adherence to secular Judaism and left wing Zionism did not adversely affect his religio-center approach nor his selections of Jewish nationalism. Chilling lines that celebrate Zion and the Yishuv as a blood community, include Yakov Cahan's, "In blood and fire, Judah fell, in blood and fire, Judah shall rise again" (*Ha-Biryonom* 'Terrorists') and Uri Zvi Greenberg's avenging manifesto, *dam taḥat dam* (blood for blood) inscribed in his *Sefer Ha-Kitrig ve-ha-Emunah* (The book of accusation and faith).

In sum, this is a formidable, cross-cultural, and intricate study of the belief and practice of blood primarily in the faith and fate of the Jews; a book of exacting scholarship and an exhilarating read.

Zev Garber
Los Angeles Valley College
Valley Glen, CA 91401
zevgarber@juno.com

THE SONG OF THE DISTANT DOVE: JUDAH HALEVI'S PILGRIMAGE. By Raymond P. Scheindlin. Pp. xi + 310. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Cloth, \$35.00.

In the summer of 1140, Judah Halevi, physician, philosopher, religious thinker, and above all, a poet, sailed across the Mediterranean from Al-Andalus to Alexandria, and then onwards to the land of Israel, where he hoped to live and die in Jerusalem. This voyage was the fulfillment of a life-long yearning to reach Jerusalem and achieve religious and national unity. "My heart in the East, and I in the West," he laments in one of his famous poems (poem 15, p. 169), given a fresh new translation in Raymond Scheindlin's new study of Halevi's life and poetry.

This book is much more than a description of Halevi's travels, for Halevi's pilgrimage is unique, a personal and spiritual journey; a decision taken by an individual, advanced in age, to leave his life behind and move permanently to a distant and foreign land. This is not merely the fulfillment of the ancient Jewish aspiration to return to Zion, but a courageous personal choice to live closer to God. We know of no other contemporary who makes this journey without belonging to a religious community or hoping to join one in the land of Israel. In an attempt to explain and understand Halevi's decision to "leave behind / this Spain and all her luxuries" for "the Temple's rubble" (from the poem: "My Heart in the East", p. 169), Scheindlin traces Halevi's religious development and the national problem.

The first chapter focuses on Halevi's religious thought, as seen in his religious prose and poetry, and traces the influence of others such as Bahya Ibn Paquda, al-Ghazzali, and Ibn Gabirol on his thinking and writings. Scheindlin pauses to explain neo-Platonism and how it was possible for a Jew like Judah Halevi to apply it in his understanding of God and Jewish belief. The argument is peppered with examples from Halevi's poetry, in Hebrew and in Scheindlin's lively English translation, followed by close reading and analysis of poetic passages, and supported with learned and rich footnotes.

More of the poetry is found in part 3, entitled "The Pilgrim Speaks," where the bilingual presentation of the poems is embedded within the narrative of Halevi's life, thought, and religious aspiration. Scheindlin shows us how the idea of the pilgrimage, and the wish to move away from worldly temptations, can be found in poems that do not directly touch on the voyage or the longing to the Holy Land. At the same time, the philosophical and religious doctrines guiding Halevi can be traced in the more prosaic poems, those describing the sea voyage and its tribulations. Trust in the divine, the dangers of the voyage, and the national, religious, and personal significance of the final destination combine to give us Halevi's unique voice, as in this short poem:

I shout to God
when my heart turns to slush,
when my knees give way,
when my gut is tight with fear,
when oarsmen gape,
when rope-men lose their grip.
How else could I be?
Just look at me—
suspended—
on a boat, between the wave and water,
I whirl and wander like a drunk.
But what matter?
In a while
I will whirl
more drunk than now,
among your streets,
Jerusalem. (poem 27, p. 236)

Did Judah Halevi reach his destination? We do not know, and there is no new evidence in this book to tell us what happened after Halevi left Alexandria in the spring of 1141 and until his reported death a few months

later. This lack of information is frustrating and stands in contrast to the very well-documented sojourn of Halevi in Egypt en route to Jerusalem.

The middle section of this book, part 2: "The Pilgrimage" tells that story, based mostly on letters to and from Halevi, or by contemporaries who mention him, found among the fragments of the Cairo genizah collection. These are made available here for English readers for the first time and again are presented within a carefully constructed and argued narrative. Scheindlin is aware of the fact that his account of Halevi's journey, though grounded in fact, is only one possible construction, as his interpretation of his beliefs, feelings, and thoughts. (See for example the episode of Halevi's experience of the Jewish New Year in a synagogue in Alexandria, p. 103). And while some of this could well be fiction, the interpretation and the supporting material make the narrative into the most plausible and comprehensive story of Halevi's final year and his incredible pilgrimage.

Scheindlin opens the book with the declaration: "My theme is poetry" (p. vii) and the poems are at the heart of his study, his main source and the focus of his book. The translation captures much of the richness of Halevi's language and imagery and the notes explain many of the references and linguistic qualities that sometimes do not find their way into the English. Scheindlin's language is rich, direct, and accessible, whereas Halevi's Hebrew can at times be more obscure and would have been also to contemporary readers. While the poetry is at the heart of this book, it is not simply a new translation nor an anthology. Some of the poems appear only in English, others in fragmentary form, as they are used to illustrate the general argument. The index of poems at the end of the volume lists all poems by their first line in Hebrew, but without a page number that will allow for a quick search.

The Song of the Distant Dove does not resolve the mystery of Halevi's unique pilgrimage or his final months, but it links the poet's biography with his poems. Scheindlin's account of Halevi's life is convincing and beautifully written and the translation and interpretation of the poems are a valuable contribution to the appreciation of one of Hebrew's most talented and interesting poets of the Middle Ages.

Tamar S. Drukker
School of Oriental and African Studies
London, England
td4@soas.ac.uk