

Leader's Guide

Visual Imagery in Judah Halevi's Ode to Jerusalem

Introduction to Judah Halevi and Medieval Hebrew Poetry

Judah Halevi (circa 1075-1141), the Hebrew poet and philosopher, was born and educated in Muslim Spain in a period of great cultural efflorescence for both Jews and Muslims. His family was wealthy and educated, and as was typical for a young man born into this class, he received a comprehensive education in both Hebrew and Arabic that included the study of Arabic poetry. Jewish poets of Muslim Spain enthusiastically embraced this literary genre, and transformed Hebrew poetry from the religious style of *piyyut*, long associated with cultural developments in Palestine, Babylonia and Ashkenaz, to the more contemporary secular images of love, wine and war.

While Jewish poets continued to write religious poetry, they borrowed themes and images from secular poetry, with the only difference being the choice of their object of desire. Thus, for example, the Temple in Jerusalem, a longing for the messiah and for the lost Jerusalem were frequent subjects of poetic religious expression.

Toward the end of his life, Judah Halevi was determined to move to Eretz Israel, but it's uncertain whether he ever reached his destination. Of his hundreds of poems, the approximately 35 "Zionides" (poems of Zion) are the most famous.

Notes on illuminations

1. The initial line/s of Halevi's poem to which the images refer are included in *bold and italics*. The leader should be familiar with the specific allusions to the poem in advance. While we have provided the connections between image and text, you might find additional layers of meaning, as well.
2. A number of the symbols in these illuminations are artistic renderings of archaeological artifacts and are footnoted.
3. Halevi refers to himself as a dove. Look for Halevi, the dove in the illuminations.

Translation from *The Song of the Distant Dove: Judah Halevi's Pilgrimage*, Raymond S. Scheindlin (Oxford University Press, 2007) Permission to reprint translation by the author.

Illuminations are from the upcoming publication, *Toward the Mountain of Myrrh: Judah Halevi on the Land of Israel*, illuminations by Debra Band, translation by Raymond Scheindlin.

Debra Band's other illuminated works: *The Song of Songs: The Honeybee in the Garden*, JPS (2005), *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms*, JPS (2007)

Introduction to Halevi's Ode to Jerusalem

Addressing the woman, Jerusalem, of *Eikhab* in his *Ode to Jerusalem*, Halevi prods her to remember him, to remember her people, now scattered across the world, who grieve at her humiliation and long for the recovery of her past glory.

Jewish tradition includes the poem among the *kinot* following the chanting of *Eikhab* on the Ninth of Av. In recounting why he longs to “set the fragments of my broken heart among your jagged mountains,” Halevi reminisces about the Jewish people’s long relationship with the city, touching upon the sights, sounds, scents, and associations that the thought of Jerusalem sparks within him. The folk memory of the Jews’ millennia-old relationship with Jerusalem, with the land of Israel, is the theme of the ode.

Leader: [Ask for one or two volunteers to read the poem aloud before handing out the artwork. Ask everyone else to close their eyes and just listen to the words of the poem. Then distribute the illuminations.]

Leader: *Let us imagine ourselves as the poet, sitting at a table strewn with “souvenirs” representing Israel’s love affair with the land of Israel, stretching from King David’s conquest, through the period of the Crusades, to our own day of access to the holy sites. The paintings suggest that the poet sits and writes at a table surrounded by such memorabilia and images of Jerusalem representing the whole period of the Jews’ love for the city.*

For example, the damask pattern of the rumpled tablecloth reflects sprigs of caper-plant. This unusual plant has the ability to thrive and blossom despite drought and lack of soil, which reminded the rabbis of the Talmud of Israel’s ability to persevere through adversity, supported only by the unseen Divine. Scattered upon it are material memories of the Jews’ relationship with the beloved Holy City.

Illuminations 1-2

Leader: *Let’s look at the images in illuminations 1 and 2. What is their symbolic meaning?*

- **Feather** has a double meaning. It is tool of the poet, and as a dove’s feather it is a direct reference to Halevi, who compares himself to a dove. [Doves relate to sacrifices in the Temple, a symbol of gentility and obedience to God’s will. Later Christians reinterpreted this to mean peace.] Notice that the dove appears throughout all of the illuminations. Locate them as you discuss the images.
- **Shofar and thorny rose** recall the ram caught in the thorn-bush in the story *akedah*, held by Jewish tradition to have taken place on the granite outcropping now within the Mosque of Omar. Additionally, the shofar was sounded from the Temple walls at the commencement of festivals.
- **Oil lamp** preserved from the Byzantine era illuminates the scene. It is decorated with a **menorah**, **shofar** and **lulav** that recall the pilgrimage festivals celebrated at the Temple¹.
- **Broken menorah** (bottom of the first page of English text) is an incised drawing on

plaster, found among the Herodian (1st century BCE) ruins of Jerusalem².

- **Olive twig** refers to the oil pressed for lighting the menorah and anointing priests and kings.

- **Ivory plaque** opposite the shofar recalls the decorations of Solomon's Temple described in I Kings 6: 29-32, and dates from 9th-8th century BCE Samaria.³

- **Bulla** of jackal** (English side) Halevi compares himself to a jackal as he laments Jerusalem's humiliation, and then to a lyre (echoed by Naomi Shemer in "Jerusalem of Gold") as he dreams of the city's restoration to glory. (cf. Halevi poem: "*My voice is like a jackal's when I mourn your suffering...*")

- **Seal bulla** with image of lyre (Hebrew side) contrasts with the howl of the jackal. This is the seal of Ma'adana, probably a 7th century BCE princess of Judea⁴. Next to the seal is a bulla made by the seal of Berechiah, son of Neriah, the scribe in the employ of the late 7th BCE prophet Jeremiah, who predicted the conquest of Jerusalem by Babylonia and to whom the book of *Eikhab* is often attributed⁵. The seal contains Berechiah's name in paleo-Hebrew. [This is a direct physical link by archaeology to the real-life personality of Jeremiah.]

(* * bulla is an impression made by a seal; can be any shape)

Illustrations 3-4

Leader: *What images do we see in illuminations 3 and 4? What is the relationship of these images to Halevi's text?*

1. (English side) "**Photographs**" of sites revered by Jews throughout their exile (cf. Halevi's poem: "*I wish my soul could overflow...*")

Top to bottom:

- Jerusalem's Damascus Gate

- Jebel Harun, the highest mountain in the Edom Range near Petra, Mt. Hor where Aaron died, according to Josephus and Bedouin tradition (second from top)

- view of Israel seen from Har Nebo, otherwise known as Mt. Avarim (cited by Halevi) where Moses died (view of Israel across the Dead Sea from Moses' burial place)

- Rachel's Tomb (bottom), prior to its 19th and 20th century additions

2. **Jerusalem limestone oil lamp** (bottom, left) from the 1st century CE, perhaps contemporary with Herod's Temple

3. "**Photographs**" (Hebrew side) from top to bottom:

- Nebi Samwil outside of Jerusalem, traditionally considered the birthplace of the prophet Samuel

- Migdal David in Jerusalem
- Corinthian column from Roman-period Jerusalem
- View of the Dead Sea from Ein Gedi

4. **Ivory lions**, date from 9th-8th century Samaria, summon memories of the carved lions that adorned Solomon's throne.⁶ (cf. Halevi poem: "*What joy my soul would have if I could walk...*")

Illustrations 5-6

Leader: *What are the images in illustrations 5-6? What do they symbolize?*

- **Broken column** of Jerusalem limestone, (adapted from masonry found late 8th-7th century BCE Ramat Rahel)⁷, symbolizes destruction
- **Spilled wine cup**, modeled on pine-cone shaped glasses from 1st century CE Sidon,⁸ uncovered near Jerusalem symbolizes the poet's sadness, and also refers to the allegorical tale of Ohola and Oholiva, two sisters, both harlots, whose promiscuity and death in Ezekiel 23 are compared to Israel's sinfulness against God. (cf. text: "*Cup of sorrow, be gentle now!*")
- **Coins:** minted during the Bar Kochba revolt (132 CE) which was the last time that Jews controlled the land of Israel until the modern era. The images on the coins are the pomegranate that symbolizes the land and a Temple vessel that signifies the hope for the return to religious and political autonomy.

Illustration 7-8

Leader: *What images do you see in illustrations 7-8?* [These are more contemporary images of the Jewish relationship with Jerusalem and Israel, the realization of Halevi's dream that Jews can visit and live freely in their homeland.]

- Scene adapted from a 14th century **French manuscript** of crusader knights guarding the gates of Jerusalem from infidels, including Jews (cf. text: "*The crown of the ungodly kingdoms will tarnish, vanish...*" meaning that the conquest of Israel by outsiders is fleeting)
- Contrasts with the scene across to the left, adapted from the famous photograph of **Rabbi Shlomo Goren**, chief chaplain of the Israeli Defense Forces, blowing the shofar as Israeli troops reached the Western Wall on June 7, 1967.
- The rising sun, the **fresh grapes, shining silver wine cup** and modern Israeli **wine-label** proclaim the biblical Israelites' descendants' joy at celebrating Jewish life and ritual, as well as a thriving wine industry, within the land today.
- Contrast this with the wine spilled on the previous pages symbolizing Ezekiel's (and Halevi's) horror at the political division and weakness of the divided Israelite and Judean kingdoms

- “Photograph” of the commemorative arch of the **Hurva synagogue** built by Ashenazi settlers in Jerusalem in 1700, soon destroyed and then rebuilt in 1836. Again destroyed during Israel’s 1948 War of Independence, for decades the site was marked by this commemorative arch raised in 1978 [a new synagogue is rising]. Notice the child in foreground, an allusion to Zechariah: 8:5 “*And the squares of the city shall be crowded with boys and girls playing...*”
- “Photograph” of the stones of the **Western Wall tunnel** excavated during the 1990s rests near a picture of the **Knesset** building [Jews again have access to this area, and can begin the process of the physical recovery of their history]
- An **American passport** with Israeli stamps and current **Israeli money** signifies that Jews in the diaspora have the freedom to travel to Israel, without the sacrifices and perils faced by Halevi whose presence in all of these memories is symbolized by the small dove soaring through each sky.
- Finally, the twigs of caper and almond allude to Halevi’s people’s ability to persevere through centuries of separation from its land, and its renaissance upon again reaching the land.

Leader: *What is Halevi’s theme at the end of his Ode to Jerusalem? How do illuminations 7 and 8 reflect this theme? (cf. text: **God chose to dwell in you: Happy the man He chooses to bring near...**)*

Discussion Question: *How appropriate is this poem to Tisha B’Av?*

- ⁶ *Jewish Oil Lamp*, Uri Avida, in *Treasures of the Holy Land: Ancient Art from the Israel Museum*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York:1986, p.241.
- ² *Menorah*, Uri Avida, found in *Archeology Highlights of the Israel Museum*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem 1984, 88
- ³ *Sacred Tree Plaque*, Michal Dayagi-Mendels, in *Treasures of the Holy Land*, p. 168
- ⁴ *Seal of Ma’adana the King’s Daughter*, Ruth Hestrin, found in *Archeology Highlights of the Israel Museum*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem 1984, p. 80.
- ⁵ *Clay bulla of Berechiah son of Neriah the scribe*, Ruth Hestrin, found in *Archeology Highlights of the Israel Museum*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, p. 81
- ⁶ *Two Crouching Lions*, Michal Dayagi-Mendels, in *Treasures of the Holy Land*, p. 169
- ⁷ *Balustrade*, *Treasures of the Holy Land*, p. 170.
- ⁸ Israel Museum