

OUR SERIES ON LEADERS WHO HAVE SHAPED ZIONISM
CONTINUES WITH SOME OF ZIONISM'S EARLIEST INFLUENCERS

Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi

Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, also known by his acronym Rihal, was born in the early 11th century in Spain. He was both a Torah scholar and well versed in the sciences of his time, and was a prominent thinker in Spanish Jewry's Golden Age.

Living during the first Crusade, Rabbi Yehuda was influenced by the history unfolding around him. He challenged the surrounding Christian and Muslim philosophies in his magnum opus, the *Kuzari*, one of the most studied books on Jewish thought. In it, Rabbi Yehuda writes about the greatness of the Land of Israel, explaining that a perfect Jewish life can only be lived in Israel, where G-d's presence is tangible and the Torah can be fulfilled completely. Israel is to all the other countries as the heart is to the limbs of a body.

Rabbi Yehuda's poetic and literary talent was discovered early on. He wrote beautiful and complex poetry and prose in Arabic and in Hebrew from a young age, including dozens of rhyming riddles. Today he is considered one of the greatest Hebrew poets of all time. Many of his *piyutim* are incorporated into our *tefillah*, in *selichot*, *kinnot*, and *zemirot* Shabbat. Like David HaMelech in Tehillim, Rabbi Yehuda often connected his own suffering with that of the nation,

his own personality meshing with that of the greater *Am Yisrael* in his writings.

Although there is a fable that Rabbi Yehuda's daughter was married to the son of the renowned Torah commentator Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, there is little historical proof for this. It is known, however, that Rabbi Yehuda and the Ibn Ezra were well acquainted.

During his later years, Rabbi Yehuda's poetry and writings dealt extensively with *Eretz Yisrael* and longing to return to the Land, a number of which begin with the word *Tzion* and speak to the personified *Tzion* directly, mourning her destruction and beseeching her to pray for her lost children.

"*Tzion*, will you not ask if peace is with your captives?" begins one of Rabbi Yehuda's most celebrated *piyut*.

Another one reads:

"My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west--

How can I find savor in food? How shall it be sweet to me?

How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while yet

Tzion lies beneath the fetter of Edom, and I in Arab chains?

A light thing would it seem to me to leave all the good things of Spain,

Seeing how precious in mine eyes to behold the dust of the desolate sanctuary?"

Naomi Shemer's famous line לְכָל שִׁירֶיךָ אֲנִי כַנּוֹר ("for all of your songs, [Yerushalayim,] I am a violin") from the song אֲנִי כַנּוֹר וְרוּשְׁלַיִם שֶׁל זָהָב was inspired by a line in one of Rabbi Yehuda's poems, אֲנִי כַנּוֹר לְכָל שִׁירֶיךָ.

Although Yerushalayim was then in the hands of the Crusaders, he never lost faith in being able to make *aliyah*. According to Rabbi Yehuda, the physical return to Israel was a spiritual imperative.

He left Spain and arrived in Alexandria on September 8th, 1140. He visited Cairo for a number of months, then returned to Alexandria and set sail to Israel on May 14th, 1141. Many of the details and ordeals of his journey to Israel have been preserved thanks to the famous Cairo Geniza.

Rabbi Yehuda died mysteriously shortly after arriving in Israel. Some say he succumbed to disease, others say he was killed. It is believed that after his death, his writings inspired others to move to Israel and influenced writers of later kabbalistic texts. Described with the epitaph "Poet of *Tzion*," Rabbi Yehuda was a major inspiration to the *Chovevei Tzion* movement and a figure of reverence to modern Zionists and many others. ■

