

## The Legend of R. Yehuda Halevi's Death: Truth or Fiction

by Eliezer Brodt

Among the more famous *kinos* that we recite on *Tisha B'Av* is *Zion Halo Tishali*. This *kinah* was written by one of the greatest *paytanim*, R. Yehudah Halevi author of the classic *Kuzari*. This *piyut* is about the author's passion to walk on the holy soil of Eretz Yisrael. In the Artscroll commentary on the *kinos*, R. Avraham Chaim Feuer writes an ancient manuscript states that R. Yehuda Halevi composed this *kina* while journeying towards Eretz Yisroel and recited it when he reached Damascus, facing the direction of Zion. Although many historians believe that R. Yehuda Halevi only got as far as Egypt, never even reaching Damascus, tradition has it that he finally reached Jerusalem (in 1145). There he fell to the ground in a state of ecstasy. . . . As he was embracing the dust near the temple mount, he was trampled and killed by an Arab horseman.

In this post I intend to discuss the above legend of R. Yehuda Halevi's death, did he actually reach Eretz Yisrael? When did he compose the *piyut* of *Zion Haloeh Tishali*? I will conclude with a discussion on R. Yehuda Halevi's connection to R. Abraham Ibn Ezra. I do not, however, intend to discuss R. Yehuda Halevi's classic work the *Kuzari* nor his life in general for more on those topics one can see the excellent study by [Adam Shear](#), "The Later History of a Medieval Hebrew Book, Studies in the Reception of Judah Halevi's *Sefer HaKuzari*" (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2003); soon to be printed in book form.

R. Abraham Zacuto (1452-1514) in *Sefer Yuchsin* (first printed in 1566) writes that "R. Yehuda Halevi was fifty [years old] when he came to Eretz Yisroel and he is buried together with his first cousin, the Ibn Ezra." (p. 217, Filipowski ed.). Later, however, R. Zacuto writes that R. Yehuda Halevi is buried with R. Yehudah Bar Elayh in Tzefat. (idem., p. 219). Setting aside the apparent contradiction regarding R. Yehuda Halevi's burial place, in both of these descriptions R. Yehuda Halevi actually made it to Eretz Yisrael. Nevertheless, the legend of an Arab horseman killing him is absent. The earliest source for Arab horseman legend appears in R. Gedaliah Ibn Yachi, *Shalsheles Hakabbalah* (first published in Venice, 1587) and he states that he heard this legend from "an old man" (p. 92). Although the *Shalsheles Hakabbalah* appears to be the source for the R. Feuer's statement, the *Shalsheles Hakabbalah* has one addition to the legend -- omitted by R. Feuer -- that R. Yehuda Halevi recited the *kinah* of *Zion Halo Tishali* right before the Arab horseman killed him.

The next time that this legend appeared, after the mention in the *Shalsheles Hakabbalah*, is by R. David Conforte (1618-c.1678) in *Koreh Hadoros* (first printed in Venice, 1746), p. 13, followed by R. Yechiel Halprin (1660- died sometime between 1746-1749) in *Seder Hadoros* (first printed in Karlsruhe, 1769), p. 201, it is then repeated by R. Wolf Heindheim in his edition of the *Kinos*. By the 19th century, this legend became perhaps the most famous story about R. Yehudah Halevi as not much else was known about him.

R. Matisyahu Strashun, however, questions the legend. He explains that Jerusalem, in the times of R. Yehuda Halevi, was ruled by Christians and not by Arabs. R. Strashun allows that although it is possible R. Yehuda Halevi composed *Zion Halo Tishali* when he got to Jerusalem -- not that we know that he did -- but the part of the story with the Arab killing him is certainly not true. As a general matter, R. Strashun notes that it is well known that the *Shalsheles Hakabbalah* is not a reliable sefer at all (*Mivchar Kitavim*, pp. 215-216). R. Shmuel David (ShaDaL) Luzzatto in his collection of poems from R. Yehuda Halevi, *Besulas Bas Yehuda* (Prague, 1840), also questions the the legend due to the Christian and not Arab control during the time of R. Yehuda Halevi. Further, even if there were Arabs around they

would not have done such a blatant act right at the city gate (pp. 25-26). So Shadal concludes that he died on his way from Egypt never even reaching Eretz Yisroel. Interestingly enough, David Kaufmann uses other evidence to prove that the poems of R. Yehudah Halevi have Jerusalem under Christian rule (*Mechkarim Besafirus Haivrit Byemei Habenyim* p. 194).

Israel Zinberg writes that most likely R. Yehuda Halevi returned home to Spain, after visiting Eretz Yisrael, based on the fact that R. Shlomo Parcon, a student of R. Yehuda Halevi who lived in Spain, quotes a statement from R. Yehuda Halevi "after R. Yehuda Halevi was in Egypt" (*Machberes Hauruch* p. 5). Specifically, R. Yehuda Halevi had told Parcon that he was doing teshuva and therefore no longer composing. Independently, we know that during while R. Yehuda Halevi was in Egypt he composed much, Zinberg therefore argues that this statement to Parcon must have taken place after R. Yehuda Halevi was in Egypt, thus R. Yehuda Halevi must have returned to Spain (*Toldos Safrus Byisroel*, vol. 1, p. 115). David Kaufman also uses R. Shlomo Parcon to adduce how R. Yehuda Halevi died. Kaufman points out that had R. Yehudah Halevi died in such a spectacular fashion as the legend has it, R. Shlomo Parcon was sure to note it. As R. Parcon makes no note of an extraordinary death, R. Yehuda Halevi must have died a natural death. (*Mechkarim Besafirus Haivrit Byemei Habenyim*, p. 195). In *Amudei Avodah*, Landshuth also questions the legend due to lack of evidence that R. Yehuda Halevi ever made it to Eretz Yisrael. (p. 70).

In regard to the *piyut*, *Zion Haloh Tishali*, Landshuth brings different opinions where this was written, in Spain or Damascus, Syria (p. 76). Yitzhak Baer (Kinos p. 130) and David Kaufmann (*supra*, p. 195) cite an manuscript -- housed at Oxford -- which says that R. Yehuda Halevi said this *piyut* when he got to the Yerushalayim. Shadal writes it was written in Spain (*supra*).

Earlier I mentioned that the *Sefer Yuchsin* writes that R. Yehuda Halevi was fifty years old when he came to Eretz Yisrael and he is buried with his first cousin, Abraham Ibn Ezra. Later he writes that he is buried with R. Yehuda Bar Elayh in Tzefas. In the *Travels of R. Benjamin of Tudela*, written around 1170 - thirty years after the R. Yehuda Halevi died - records that he visited the grave of R. Yehuda Halevi in Teveriah (there are actually various readings of these words in the manuscripts, but Adler accepts this as the correct reading; p. 29). In the travels of R. Yitzchak Ben Alfurah, written around 1441, he writes that he visited the grave of the Ibn Ezra and R. Yehuda Halevi (Avraham Yari, *Masos Eretz Yisrael*, p. 110). Both of these provide strong evidence that R. Yehuda Halevi actually made it to Eretz Yisrael. Nevertheless, an anonymous traveler in 1473 (*Masos Eretz Yisroel*, p. 113) and R. Yosef Sofer in 1762 (*Iggrot Eretz Yisroel*, p. 301) write that they visited the grave of the Ibn Ezra but make no mention that R. Yehuda Halevi is buried there as well. In the travels of R. Moshe Yerushalmi from 1769, he writes that he visited the graves of the Ibn Ezra and R. Shlomo Ibn Gabriel (*Masos Eretz Yisroel*, p. 438). I would venture to say the author confused R. Shlomo Ibn Gabriel with R. Yehuda Halevi both being famous composers and are sometimes confused. Furthermore, we have no source that R. Shlomo Ibn Gabriel ever came to Eretz Yisrael (aside from a very late letter written in 1747 printed in *Egrot Eretz Yisrael*, p. 273). (See also David Kaufmann, p. 205 and Sinai, vol. 28, p. 290). In a manuscript from the author of the *Koreh Hadoros* (printed in *Sinai* vol. 28, p. 284) it seems that the R. Yehuda Halevi was buried in Jerusalem.

Over one hundred years ago the Cairo Genizah was accidentally discovered and due to this incredible find every areas of Jewish Literature and History have been greatly enriched. Before this discovery the history of R. Yehuda Halevi written by the early scholars of Jewish History was based on the poems of Halevi that were printed by Shadal and others. However,

much has been discovered in Geniza Manuscripts in the past sixty odd years which adds an incredible amount of detailed information to what we knew about the end of R. Yehuda Halevi's life including original autograph letters of Halevi. [One can view some of these online [here](#), and [here](#) is an example of one of documents relating to R. Yehudah Halevi.] These discoveries were made by the great scholar of the Cairo Genizah, Shlomo D. Goitein. Starting in 1954, Goitein printed his discoveries with his explanations of the material, in various journals mostly in *Tarbitz*. Later on, in his classic *A Mediterranean Society* (volume V, pp. 448-468), he included an excellent chapter on R. Yehuda Halevi based on all the material which he had found over the years. Most of his interpretations of the material he discovered have been accepted by Professors C. Sherman and Ezra Fleischer. In *A Mediterranean Society* Goitein writes "a full publication of all the geniza letters referring to Judah Halevi would fill a book." (p. 462). Although Goitein never got around to writing such a book, in 2001 Professors Moshe Gil and Ezra Fleischer did write such a book. The title of the book is *Yehudah Halevei U'bnei Chugo* this book is a six hundred and forty page study of all the material from the genizah discovered by Goitein. This book includes all the original documents with notes and an in-depth history of all that can be gleaned from these letters. It is simply incredible to read what Goitein and than Gil and Fleischer discover in these letters.

The relevant documents are from a Cairo business man named Abu Said Halfon who was a very close friend of R. Yehuda Halevi. What follows is a brief time line of R. Yehuda Halevi's journey to Eretz Yisrael based on the research of these professors. In 1129, when R. Yehuda Halevi was fifty four years old he decided to make the journey to Eretz Yisrael. In the year 1130, R. Yehuda Halevi began his journey. He intended to travel through Egypt. We don't know why he didn't. But we do know that he ended up in North Africa. In North Africa, he became good friends with the Ibn Ezra. For some unknown reason, he ended up back in Spain. Not too much information is known about why this journey to Eretz Yisrael did not end up happening. Ten years later, in 1140, R. Yehuda Halevi began the journey again. He ended up in Alexandria on September 8. He had intended to leave from Egypt to Eretz Yisrael immediately, but was delayed. He ended up going to Cairo until Pesach. After that he returned to Alexandria. A few days before Shavuos of 1141, he boarded the boat, and on Shavuos, he set sail to Eretz Yisrael. In a letter written about 6 months later indicates that R. Yehuda Halevi was no longer alive. It seems that he was alive for 2 months in Eretz Yisrael. We don't have any information about his stay in Eretz Yisrael. It would seem that either he got sick or died a natural death. There is no clear answer whether the legend is true or not. It's rather sad that with all the manuscripts discovered in the Cairo geniza that enriched us with an in-depth, heavily detailed history of R. Yehuda Halevi's last years until he left to Eretz Yisrael, does not tell us anything more. However, there was one letter written three months after the death of R. Yehuda Halevi that does indicate that perhaps the legend is true. The letter (the ellipsis appear in the original) says as follows:

התאר אל ניע תמאה יאיבנ ואבינ תמאב וילע רשא ל"קז דיסחה קידצה יולה הדוהי וניבר תודוא הנממ מלענ אלו  
 מלוע תחונמל ותועב מירופצכ ונורי ויתודואב, וקדצ מידיעמ וילעפ ירמאמו, ותרותבו מיהלא תאריב רובג היה  
 ורקיבו... ורקיתהו, ורקיב הנורת רשא, ויתורובג תוכילהו ויתולודג סנ אשנ אוה המרבו, מיהלא וג דובכ עטוה  
 תומדב... משיו... יזע... תשרל לחנתהל... ידש הנחמ... רוצ... אל ל"קז... הריאהל נעצ הדשב... טיבה 'ה תנומתו  
 מילשורי ירעשב... הארמבו הניכשה

This letter was first printed by Jacob Mann, Goitein highlights the line וניבר תודוא הנממ מלענ אלו ל"קז דיסחה קידצה יולה הדוהי which would seem to indicate that his death was not natural (calling him a kodesh is typically reserved for a martyrs) and especially the end where it says ירעשב מילשורי but the letter is damaged and hard to read so one can not say anything conclusively. But Fleischer (pg 255) is willing to use the letter even with it's missing parts to support the legend! Especially, he says, the author of the letter using the word שדוק twice in the phrase ל"קז instead of the usual ל"ז. From this concludes Fleischer that we are not far off at all about

Halevi death. Fleischer concludes by noting that one should be careful not to make fun of legends!

**Notes:**

There was certainly a strong connection between the Ibn Ezra and R. Yehudah Halevi. Professor D. Kaufman (*supra* p. 206) gives a listing of the many times which the Ibn Ezra quotes Halevi throughout his works. R. Azariah de Rossi, in his *Me'or Eynaim*, writes that R. Yehuda Halevi was the Ibn Ezra's father-in-law (chapter 42). *Koreh hadoros* also brings that he heard this (p. 13). *Shalsheles Hakabbalah* brings a whole legend which he had heard how exactly the Ibn Ezra became the son-in-law of R. Yehudah Halevi (pp. 92-93). Interestingly enough the Meiri in his *Seder Hakabbalah* and the *Sha'ari Zion* make no mention of this relationship between the Ibn Ezra and R. Yehuda Halevi. Both Goitein and Fleischer say that although R. Yehuda Halevi was not the father in law of the Ibn Ezra the son of the Ibn Ezra, Yitzhak did marry R. Yehuda Halevi's only daughter (see *Yehuda Halevi U'bnei Chugo* pp. 247-251). However, M. Gil writes that in the end Goitein changed his mind and realized there was no relation through marriage (p. 250-251). Also, see N. Ben Menachem, *Inyai Ibn Ezra*, pp. 224-240, 346-356 regarding the relationship between Ibn Ezra and Yehuda Halevi including any relationship through marriage.

It is worthwhile noting that R. Immanuel Aboab in his *Bemavak 'al Erko shel Torah*, written in 1615, claims that the Ibn Ezra was both R. Yehuda Halevi's son-in-law as well as a cousin. (p. 247).

On this topic in general see also: Adam Shear, *The Later History of a Medieval Hebrew Book, Studies in the Reception of Judah Halevi's Sefer Ha Kuzari*, pp. 95, 513-514; C. Shirman, *Toldos Hashirah Haivrit Besefard Hamuslamit*, pp. 441-443. On the Ibn Ezra and Eretz Yisrael in general, see N. Ben Menachem, *Sinai*, vol. 10 p. 276 and onwards; see also N. Ben Menachem, *Inyai Ibn Ezra*, pp. 182-190.

More sources on R. Yehuda Halevi and Eretz Yisrael see: Adam Shear, *supra*, pp. 516-517; C. Shirman, *Letoldos Hashirah Vehadramah Haivrit*, vol. one, pp. 319-341; C. Shirman, *Toldos Hashirah Haivrit Besefard Hamuslamit*, pp. 466-480. Franz Kobler, *A Treasury of Jewish Letters*, vol. one, p. 155; Abraham Haberman, *Toldos Hashirah Vhapiut*, vol. one, p. 185;

On the reliability of *Shalsheles Hakabbalah* in general see: A David's doctorate and E. Yassif in *Sippur Ham Haevrei* pp. 351-371)