

LOVE: THE VISION OF IBN GABIROL

The poet-philosopher's poem "Love"

Edna Shahaf

Ibn Gabirol life and works

Solomon Ibn Gabirol was the greatest of the Spanish-Jewish poets, philosopher and a mystic. His Arabic name was Abu Ayyud sulaiman ibn Yahya ibn Jebirul and in Hebrew Shlomo ben Yehuda ibn Gabirol. In his acrostic signature he sometime added ha-malagi indicating his origin from Malaga, which was later, confused with elmelech (the king) hence the title 'King Solomon, The Jew'.

Solomon Ibn Gabirol was born in Malaga in 1021 (or 1022). Malaga located in the south of Spain. His family was of refugees who had fled Cordoba during a political upheaval of 1013 when an army of wild Berbers conquered and sacked Cordoba ending the Ummayyad dynasty.

The Jews of Al-Andalus, as Muslim Spain was called, were an integral part of a wider Mediterranean Jewish civilisation. Settled in Spain since Roman times, (some claim even as early as the Phoenician), were well integrated into the society around them. Persecution and mass baptism of the Jews by the Catholic left no professing Jews by the time of the Arab conquest that begun in 661. The Arabs were welcomed by the Jews as liberators and helped them in their struggle against the Catholic Visigoths. On the whole, religious tolerance was accepted as the way of life, providing Muslims were on top. Berber, Arab or Slav prince's split al-Andalusia up to independent states. All of which welcomed the presence of the talented Jews at their courts. It was the Golden Age of the Jews of Al-Andalusia, a time when they managed to combine significant advances in religious learning with broad secular cultural and real political power. They shared a common culture and language.

An Arab empire stretching from India to the Atlantic Ocean ended the isolation of the Jews and established links with its centre of Jewish learning (Talmudic) in Baghdad and its academies of Sura and Pumbeditha. Communications and trade throughout the wide expanse of the Islamic realm made the exchange of leanings between Babylon and Al-Andalus via the centre in Cairo possible. Arab philosophy influenced and modified Jewish mysticism. The 'Faithful Brothers of Basra' and the translation of Neoplatonic and Aristotelian in the 9th century kindled spiritual awakening in both religions. Jewish literature, philosophy, science and theology were also revived and quickened similarly. This new intellectual openness meant, for both Muslims and Jews, the gradual integration of writing and teachings from the culture centre of Baghdad into the Andalusian culture. The cultural growth in al-Andalus produced great literary figures, Muslim and Jews alike, in the field of poetry, science, philosophy and religious sciences.

Ibn Gabirol was the first Jewish Neoplatonic in Spain. Gabirol was greatly influenced by earlier Jewish philosophers among them Isaac Ben Solomon Israeli who was born in Egypt around 855 and is known as the first Jewish Neo-Platonist. Israeli composed works in philosophy and medicine. In his philosophical work, Israeli developed his doctrine of emanation. Another philosopher of the same period was Sa'adiyah Ben Yusuph, Gaon of Sura academy and is known as the greatest Jewish scholar of the Abbasid period. In the development of Kabbalah and particularly the Toledano line, Gabirol marks the period of transition from the intense mystical experience of the Merkava tradition to one that reconcile reason and revelation. A line that was carried on by numerous Kabbalists throughout history to the present time. Gabirol's contribution to Kabalah was that God is an Absolute unity, in whom form and substance are identical. Therefore no attributions can be ascribed to God, and man can comprehend God only by means of the beings emanating from him. Gabirol mentioned the four worlds as Beriah, Yetzira and Asiya, while he considered Atzilut to be identical with the will.

Cordoba in the 10 century was the centre of the Islamic civilisation of the new Khalifate. Hisdai ibn Shaprut, who was born in Jaen 910, transferred the Jewish learning centre over time from Baghdad to Cordoba. With the decline of Babylonian Academies, Hisdai and his agents bought up unused copies of the Talmud and any other books they could find in Sura and elsewhere for use in Cordoba. The relations between the two centres remained close as affirmed by the lament written by Solomon Ibn Gabirol in 1038 on hearing of the death of Rav Hai, Gaon of Pumbeditha.

Even the revival of the Hebrew language was a direct influence from Muslim Arabs who were obsessed with Arabic, the language of their holy Qur'an, with poetry as the Queen of the Arts. With the introduction of papermaking from China, books were more affordable. Islamic linguistic scholarship had influenced poetic innovation in Hebrew, a language not spoken for more than a thousand years, and stimulated the development of the study of the grammar and vocabulary of biblical Hebrew as discipline in their own right. Dunash ibn Labrat was born Fez 920, studied in Iraq under Sa'adiah Ga'on, a poet who introduced Arabic metrical schemes who also revived Hebrew grammar.

Solomon Ibn Gabirol's parents took him to Saragossa in the north while he was still young and both died there. First his mother, from a broken heart on seen her son's sufferings and of poverty, then his father from exhaustion of the daily grind of bare existence. Saragossa became the main political and cultural centre in Muslim Spain and was one of the greatest and most prosperous of the Muslim-kingdom-cities alongside Granada in the south. In Saragossa, Jews living in the large Jewish quarter managed an orderly community life within and without its walls.

Alone from the age of 12, Gabirol was dependent on the community for his welfare. At first, his neighbours provided for his needs later on financial support was provided by local Jewish community services. The community's support dwindled as soon as Gabirol's poetry received public acclaims for his youthful ingenuity. Gabirol did not lack artistic rivals whom he accused of stealing his poetry and writing it with some changes as their own. He ridiculed the poverty of their ideas and talent and praised his own. His enemies demanded to put a stop to his allowance claiming he was old enough to find a paid work rather than depend on charity. Ibn Gabirol often found refuge in the house of Ibn Ga'nach, a local doctor and a grammarian from whom Gabirol received parental love, Jewish leanings and treatment for his skin disease that afflicted him. Ibn Gabirol suffered from a painful and disfiguring disease, most likely caused by a nervous disposition. His skin conditions caused him great social embarrassment that all he could do was to hide away and avoid the disgust expressed on people's faces on seen him. He often wrote about the torment of his fleshy wounds, the burning sensations taking over his soul.

In Saragossa Gabirol acquired his Jewish education training (Bible, early Midrashim, Heichalot and Merkava-chariot mysticism) in the use of philosophical sources in Arabic. He created an original style infusing Biblical Hebrew with images and idioms from Arabic poetry. His scientific knowledge, especially of astronomy and his neoplatonic learning are evident in his poems. Many of Gabirol's liturgical poetry have been preserved in Sephardi, Ashkenazi and even Karaites prayer books. He had a phenomenal capacity to compose poetry in Hebrew from a very young age as expressed in his poem 'Ani hasar'.

I am the Master singer and Song is my slave...

Thought I am but sixteen, I have the wisdom of a man of 80.

Ibn Gabirol's life style has changed over night on a chance meeting with Yequthiel ibn Hasan al-mutawakkil ibn Kabrun who was a respected court minister in Saragossa. Yekutiel became Ibn Gabirol's patron until his execution due to court intrigues. While Gabirol's feelings toward Samuel Hanagid were ambivalent, his love for Yekutiel was undeniable. Yekutiel was handsome, refined, good nature, educated, wise and tender with his love for the talented young Solomon.

Under Yekutiel patronage, Gabirol writings quickly became known in Saragossa and other places. Ibn Gabirol also served as a liturgical poet in synagogues, his liturgical reached Jewish communities in Italy, France and Egypt. Among his admirers was the notable Rabbi Nisim of Kirwan of Tunis. Ibn Gabirol was only 19 when his patron Yekutiel was murdered causing him great despair and deepened his feeling of loneliness.

Gabirol took refuge in his writing, he saw his predicament as a personal punishment from God and complained yet praised God asking for His boundless mercy. The analogy between Gabirol's personal poetry and the book of Job (Eyov) is made clear in the dramatic structure, in the tragic tone, characterisation (protagonist and antagonist), the motives (wisdom, illness, loneliness, righteousness, sorrow). The analogy is about the higher and hidden purpose behind the personal tragedy. Both are righteous men who suffer, their pain inflicted by higher forces, metaphysical and social from a society that does not understand the existentialist/metaphysical suffering. Both try to proclaim their innocence. While Job is not aware he was chosen and is therefore a cheated victim, Gabirol present his suffering as a justified act of choice.

Gabirol was the first to introduce the Art of poetry into Hebrew. He understood, as did the Kabbalist after him, that language, in particular the Hebrew language is more than a communication tool and revived the Hebrew language. The Hebrew alphabets are seen as spiritual forces with which the universe was created. After the death of Yekutiel, the 19-year-old Gabirol composed Ha-anak, a poem of four hundred verses in which he set forth the rules of Hebrew grammar. An introduction on the superiority of the Hebrew language is followed by an explanation of how words in the language are related to 22 letters of the alphabet in the same way that form is related to matter.

In "Tikun Midot Hanefesh", The Improvements of Moral qualities, a book of ethics of correct behaviour, Gabirol formulated an approach that correlate the five senses with the four elements and four humours (air/blood, water/whit gall, earth/black gall, fire/yellow gall) showing how man's physical make-up is connected to his spiritual potential, which ethical behaviour can realise). It is possible that few of his anecdotes were pointed an accusing finger at his enemies among Jewish scholars of Saragossa. On hate, he said: 'You should know that he who hates men is hated by them'.

In The Choice of Pearls he says about companionship 'A man's best companion is his intellect, his worst enemy his desire'. Concerning poverty: 'I have tasted the bitterness of all things, but I have found nothing so bitter as the taste of begging'.

Gabirol's knowledge of Sefer Yetzira is expressed in a liturgy recited in the New Year service, according to Sephardi ritual, beginning with "He who dwells forever, exalted is he alone". Gabirol managed to versify Sefer Yetzira. In this poem, God is the first cause; to Him the creation of time and place does not apply. The universe is but an emanation of God. The three entities which are accountable for the creation of the universe: Will, Form, and Matter, may be compared to the three agencies involved in writing a book, the Scribe, Script, and Scroll (Shlosa Sefarim). Gabirol also speaks of the ten Sefirot, the En-Sof and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. In his longest philosophical poem "Keter Malkut", Gabirol expresses the same philosophical ideas in a clear and lucid style.

The Jewish community in Saragossa has had enough of him. One story claims that Gabirol, who had an inept knowledge of Sefer Yetzira (some even claim that the commentary related to Sa'dia Gaon, was in fact written by Gabirol), had created a Golem made of wood in the image of a woman who worked as his servant. His enemies denounced him to the authorities and he was forced to undo his creation. Around 1045 Gabirol was forced to leave Saragossa. On leaving Saragossa, he wrote the poem "My throat is parched with pleading".

"..If your heart has grown hard it will soften, faced with the hate that faces me...I am buried, but not in a graveyard, in the coffin of my own home..I mix my blood with my tears, and my tears into my wine. I am treated here as a stranger, despised-as thought I were living with ostriches, caught between crooks and the fools, who think their hearts have grown wise...They are giants in their own eyes, grasshopper here in mine..."

It was in Saragossa that he had produced much — perhaps all — of his philosophical work as well as writing many of his best-loved poems. He reserved Hebrew exclusively for poetry, whether liturgical or social, his prose he wrote in Arabic. After he left Saragossa, his trail became obscure. He left for Granada and enjoyed the patronage of Samuel Hanagid. Shmuel Hanagid who tradition claims was from the House of David, was a poet in his own right and served as the caliph's minister and military commander and led his army, including a Jewish unit to many battles.

At the time, there was a tiny Quasar principality in Eastern Europe whose king had converted his whole kingdom to Judaism. The story raised hopes among the dispersed Jews and rekindled messianic tendencies for the reinstatement of the kingdom of Israel and the return of all Jews to their Promised Land. That dream was shattered when the little Jewish kingdom on the

banks of the Volga River was overtaken and ruined by the Russian prince Svtoslav.

It was in Granada that Gabirol, under the influence of Rabi Nisim, turned his troubled soul toward the Heavens, his poetry took a nationalistic-religious tone. His mythical-religious poems carry a tone saturated with Merkava symbolism. The content and the imagery of these poems suggest they may have been written in moments of ecstasy. It was also said that he often tried to calculate and predict the end of days to find out when the Messiah was likely to show up.

His philosophical work titled *Mekor Chaim* -The Fountain of Life- he wrote in Arabic. Gabirol argued that the manifestation of the physical world is from the unity of the first cause. *Mekor Chaim* was written in Arabic in a neo-platonic style, and had no apparent Biblical references. In Gabirol's mind there was no conflict between his religious inclination and his philosophical mind. Christian theologians, namely Catholics, thought a Muhammad named Avicenna or Avicron might have written the book. The title comes from Psalm 36,10(9) "for with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light we see light". In this book Gabirol expanded on his ideas he expressed in his poem "Keter Malkut" In it Ibn Gabirol endeavours, in magnificent language, to unite religion and philosophy, and the spiritual with the physical, in a perfect harmony so as to glorify and praise the only True Being. *Keter Malkut* is an appeal to God for mercy and forgiveness. It is based on the contrast between the greatness of God and the insignificance of man.

His last years spent wandering alone in Spain living in poverty and seclusion. His skin disease worsened and he knew he wouldn't live long. Ibn Gabirol probably died in either 1058 (aged 37) or in 1070 (aged 48). Even his death was shrouded in mystery and bred fancy stories. One legend claims a non-Jewish scholar jealous of his learning murdered Gabirol and proceeded to bury him under a fig tree, which then produced magnificent crop causing amazement and leading to investigation. The murderer was hanged on the same fig tree.

Gabirol's poetry is as contemporary as ever, It is not the style alone, nor the skill or versification — it is his ability to reach and speak from the depth of his soul and express through his own suffering that of human suffering and human dignity.

The poem Ahava — Love

*For you, oh Living God, my being yearns,
My spirit and soul is consumed by fire.*

*Your Shekinah indwells the hearts
Of your chosen sons and fathers,
And Your living creatures harness to chariots*

And as my heart is filled,
Its radiance illumines from within.

*The mystery wearies even the wisest
Who struggle to comprehend it,
Weary of scanning the icon of splendour:
How then, shall I nourish my soul
At the Temple of honour?*

Desiring, I long for my beloved My aim and purpose: my soul

*Like sapphire, the house of understanding,
The moon's semblance fine gold of Ophir,
And like a young lion she made her home
In the body, secretly.*

*She is my bliss and joy in sorrow,
While chattering thoughts occlude my purpose.*

*Can a guileless man praise her?
And who could deny her perfect beauty?
Answer, oh God! Be swift,
For Your daughter is sick with love.*

*Drink, my daughter, gently drink
From the waters of my salvation:
Because you are my reverence.
Love — Ahava*

In his poetry, Gabirol expresses the tension that existed within him between his thinking-logical-philosophical heart (levav maskil-line 8) and his feeling heart, the one filled with yearnings and pain. Gabirol saw the ultimate aim of man's existence for his soul to unite with the upper world to which it belongs. Sense perception serves to remind the soul of higher knowledge, which was its own in its spiritual existence. Gabirol emphasised the importance of knowledge and practice, knowing things as they really are. The heart-soul is the seat of the intellect but also the seat of emotions. Unity with the Divine (Divine transcendence) to be accomplished by an integrated soul, as in the poem "Love". According to Gabirol the soul has three levels: vegetative, animal and thinking, however in this poem he used the traditional Jewish terms of Yechida, Ruach-spirit, Neshama-soul.

Love is the work of unification. Love is the fire that burns away the veil and the illusion of separation. On the path of Love, the intellect and emotions integrate. The initiate journey and avoda (spiritual purpose and task) is to move from separation to union. This poem can be understood on different levels: literally (Pshat), allegorically (Remez), Metaphysically (drasha) and mystically (Sod). All four makes the name PARDES (Pardes literal translations is orchard/garden). Other aspects added are the nationalistic, the personal and the Divine. In the liturgical poetry titled 'Ahavot' — Love, on a nationalistic-symbolic level the people of Israel speak to their God as a woman to her lover telling of her sorrows while her lover comforts her with promises of her deliverance. In kabbalah 'The people of Israel' reads evolving mankind.

The Ahava-Love liturgies precede the shacharit (Morning) prayer. The morning service begins with hymns and psalms of David; those Psalms express every aspect of human struggle in becoming a living expression of Divine service. The purpose of the liturgy is to awaken love and joy above by means of song and praise preparing the Shekinah to meet her King. In order that perfection and harmony may reign undisturbed every day, both above and below. When unity is proclaimed — the mystery contained in the Shema — a light comes forth from the hidden supernal world illuminating the supernal wedding- the perfect union. The Shacharit ends with the proclamation of the Divine Unity, the Shema; "Shema Israel YHVH Elohe'nu YHVH Echad". (Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, The Lord is one). And then it said, "And thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might". (Deuteronomy/Devarim 6, vs. 4-10). By rising up the Kabbalist consciously helps the Shekinah to manifest below for unity and perfection to be restored.

The poem comes under the umbrella of 'religious' poetry and contains biblical references and idioms. However, the hidden aspect is made clear by examining kabbalistic terminology and the poet own philosophical works, namely 'Mekor Chaim'- The source of life. The "source of life" is God. In the original Hebrew version of the poem there are 22 lines denoting the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew Alphabet. The letters serve to pair off and connect all the Sefirot. In Kabbalah the first letter, Aleph and the last letter Tav signify the union of all things. The Hebrew alphabets are seen as spiritual forces with which the universe was created. The letters are also associated with various times and astrological signs. There are twenty-two path within the Tree of Life added with the ten Sefirot they make up Thirty-two. Sefer Yetzira talks about 32 path of Wisdom. In Hebrew, the number 32 is written Lamed Bet. This spells Lev, the Hebrew word for heart. The heart represents Binah-Understanding and Mother personification (feminine, receptive, the womb). Sefer Yetzira calls the heart "the king over the soul" and is in the spiritual dimension. The line connecting Keter-Crown with Malkut-Kingsdom makes up this dimension. The heart is seen as the link between the Mind and the physical universe. The heart therefore reconciles reason and revelation and unites one with oneself and with the Absolute.

In Gabirol's poetry, the first rhyme in the first stanza, (the stanza or line numbers refer to the Hebrew version), is the key to understanding the theme he sets. Here he uses 'yechidadi'. The Hebrew root is 'Yichud' i.e., Unity, (Yichud ha' el — the unity of God), 'the only one' and Uniqueness. (The English translation in the poem is "my beings"). The soul level of Yechida-Uniqueness is Keter-Crown and exists in a realm above time. This realm is Briah, as Keter-Crown Sefira is the Yesod-Foundation of the Beriatic level. Ruah-Spirit is at Bina-Chochma-Tiferet triad and the Neshama is on the Gevurah-Chesed-Tiferet triad. The unity of Yechida with the Spirit and the Soul with the El-Chai- The Living-God achieves harmony, peace and union both above and below on the central column. Longing is the heart's remembrance of God. Longing and desire remind us what our soul lacks — the ultimate union, total love. Longing ignites the spark that becomes the fire (love) leading our soul back home, to know our true nature and to share God's love. (We can see here the influence of Sufi devotional poetry).

As the soul strives for unity, it begins to journey back to its source by means of identification and personifications. The Shekinah-Divine Presence who is at Malkut-Kingship (feminine aspect of God) dwells in the hearts of the chosen people — evolving mankind. "Sons and fathers" implies closeness to God. It is through the feminine aspect that the Thirty-two paths are revealed to the righteous. The Zadik-righteous ascend the path from Malkut-Kingdom (In the Yetziratic Tree it is the dwelling place of the Shekina - Divine Presence), via Yesod-Foundation to Tiferet-Beauty. To walk the path the initiate has to speak from his heart. The act of unification will rectify the sefirotic separation and ensures an unimpeded flow of divine emanation.

Gabirol summarises Ezekiel's mystical vision in few beautifully written words (lines 5-7). It appears to be the poet's-initiate personal experience and desire to become the Merkava-vehicle to the divine by engaging to the Merkava. It is a higher level of attachment to God in the universe of Yetziratic-Formation. The root of Merkava is 'Rachav' — to ride hence 'riding vehicle'. The act of binding fills his heart with splendour. Zohar-Splendour denotes light and reflections of the divine Sefirot that bring about illumination (Menorah). Gabirol expounded Isaac Israeli's idea that the true and natural state of the soul is pure light. The soul's state prior to her 'contamination' in the physical realm. When the soul awakens she naturally aspires to light and shakes off the night-darkness-ignorance. The more the soul purifies herself and becomes luminous the easier it will be for her to see and perceive visions of light.

This vision (lines 8-10) is beyond Bina-Understanding level or for that matter beyond the grasp of Hod mind. The initiate questions his ability and worthiness to digest the reflection of Maon Kavod- the Holy Palace. The Holy Palace is understood to be the meeting point of Keter-Malkut, Chochma-Wisdom, Bina-Understanding and Malkut-Kingdom. The initiate-Shekinah desires his beloved (Lines 11-12). Desire — sense perception reminds the soul of higher purpose. Word play on Maon-Kavod, which is the Holy Palace that becomes 'my Holy Place' which denotes the Soul.

(13-15), The vision revealed is that of Shekinah-soul described as 'Maon Bina' — house of understanding — Prov. 24:3,4: "With wisdom a house is built, with understanding it is established, and with knowledge its rooms are filled". The Shekinah is likened to a golden moon hiding in the body like a young lion. The moonlight is but an indirect light coming from the sun. The moon's light is seen as indirect knowledge illuminating the darkness of the night (ignorance). The window to the soul has opened, the Soul's hiding place is revealed.

(16-17), "Chattering thoughts occlude my purpose". The initiate-Shekinah's inner conflict. The path is not without its dangers and distractions.

(18-20), The impression is of a woman seeking her lover while making herself beautiful and irresistible. However she loses her patience and urges her Lover to respond urgently for she-the daughter is lovesick. Soul-Shekinah-initiate-the inner lover-daughter is feminine before God, waiting in a state of surrender for the Beloved to come.

(21-22), The Lover (El) responds with great tenderness offering her a drink from His salvation water. Salvation water refers to Mayim Chaim -Living water or The Fountain of Life implying the regaining of direct access to the heart. Water also represents the concept of change and birth. The process of change is at work NOW-in the present moment - the whole Tree becomes one column - the central one. The knowledge of the divine brings the Kabbalist-initiate to the source of life.

Devekut — devotion is a state where the knowing (person), the knowledge and the known become one. The soul-Neshama is the threshold to understanding and grasping higher realms. When the spirit connects with the heart it becomes heart knowledge (Da'at). By line 22, a union-supernal marriage- marriage of Heaven and Earth is achieved and redemption is guaranteed. God's daughter is indeed awe-inspiring. I-You and the believer (Kabbalist-initiate) become one and unify with God.

Gabirol signed his Hebrew name Shlomo acrostics; Shin — line 3, Lamed — line 8, Mem — line 13, and Heh — line 18). The word Shlomo Hebrew root is ShaLeM the same words for Shalom -peace another meaning is whole complete. In Kabbalah Solomon represent the union between male and female, the concept that bring peace and wholeness.

A perfect balance of the soul (balanced Tree of Life) depend on harmonious union of the inner and outer realms of man. Sense knowledge leads man to direct knowledge. An initiate who is integrated resonates divine love. Love is the essence of this union. God is Love. The Love of God helps the initiate to understand what True Love really is. God awakens our heart with the memory of union, and the work of the initiate is to bring this memory into consciousness.

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