“I ASKED ABOUT A HASID, NOT A RULER”: THE HASID AS A RULER IN THE POETRY OF RABBI JUDAH HALEVI

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Abstract

Earlier scholars of medieval Jewish poetry and philosophy found links between the Rabbi Judah Halevi’s (= Rihal) philosophy and his poetry, and between his poetry and the philosophy of his generation. It is not for nothing that Franz Rosenzweig was interested in the Rihal’s poetry; other scholars also turned to the philosophical analysis of various poems of Rihal, comparing the poetry with the philosophy found therein. In my book Poetry in the Sephardic Piyyut in Light of the Liturgical Poetry of Rihal, I showed that various subjects in the Book of Kuzari help us understand his poetry and poetics. In this paper I will examine several of the Rihal’s poems in light of the extensive descriptions of the behavior of the hasid in the first paragraphs of chapter 3 of the Kuzari.

In his essay “Examination of Rabbi Judah Halevi’s Liturgical Poetry,” Ezra Fleischer¹ maintains that one should not look for philosophy in Rihal’s poetry. “Poetry is not the place for philosophy, a meditative man does not write poetry; he writes a philosophical composition. Poetry and philosophy are two different things, almost two opposites of a single subject. He who searches for philosophy in poetry does not love poetry. He is looking for the wrong thing in the wrong place.”

Yeshayahu Leibovitz² rejected this view and contended, “It seems to me that if we did not have the Kuzari we could have reconstructed through his poetry alone all his philosophical and theological thinking.” The contents of the Kuzari are reflected in the liturgical poetry of Rihal—in Yošerot, piyyutim and Selihot. Furthermore, all the questions in the Kuzari are repeated and reflected in his religious works as well. It is possible that there is more than a hint of subjectivity and personal opinion in these two opposing views of a poet and scholar of poetry,

² Ibid., 185–98.
on the one hand, and a philosopher and scholar of philosophy on the other. It is almost certain that it would be very difficult to reconstruct the Kuzari on the basis of Rihal’s poetry, even though there are many philosophical subjects in it.

Earlier scholars of medieval Jewish poetry and philosophy found links between Rihal’s philosophy and his poetry, and between his poetry and the philosophy of his generation. It is not for nothing that Franz Rosenzweig was interested in Rihal’s poetry; other scholars also turned to the philosophical analysis of various poems of Rihal, comparing the poetry with the philosophy found therein. David Kaufman takes this approach in his study of Rihal. It is also the basis of Ben-Zion Dinaburg’s theory as to the reasons for the Rihal’s ‘aliya and the messianic excitement in his time, as well as the motive for Yitzhak Heinemann’s philosophical analyses of Rihal’s poetry. Other scholars also searched for and found Rihal’s philosophy mirrored in his poetry. In his book Between a Philosopher and a Prophet, Yochanan Silman presented various poems that contain and reflect different points of Rihal’s philosophical outlook.

In my book The Poetics of the Sephardi Piyyut according to the Liturgical Poetry of Judah Halevi, I showed that various subjects in the Book of Kuzari help us understand his poetry and poetics. In this paper I will examine several of Rihal’s poems in light of his extensive descriptions of the behavior of the hasid in the first paragraphs of chapter 3 of the Kuzari.

In the beginning of the third chapter of the Kuzari (paragraph 2), the king asks the Jewish scholar to describe for him the actions of a pious man, a hasid, according to the Jewish view. While describing the

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3 Mainly in the research work of A. Mirsky on the relationship between Spanish poetry and Hovot Halevavot (Duties of the Heart). See A. Mirsky, From Duties of the Heart to Songs of the Heart (Jerusalem, 1992).
4 F. Rosenzweig, J. Halevi, Zweiundneunzig Hymnen und Gedichte (Berlin, 1926).
5 See n. 1, above, and The Rihal’s Collection [Hebrew], Zmora edition (Tel Aviv, 1999).
6 D. Kaufman, Research in Hebrew Literature of the Middle Ages [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1962), 166–207.
8 In the above-mentioned collection, 166–233.
9 Y. Silman, Between a Philosopher and a Prophet [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan, 1985).
10 E. Hazan, The Poetics of the Sephardi Piyyut according to the Liturgical Poetry of Judah Halevi [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1986).