**Light and darkness in the Poetry of R. Moshe ibn Ezra and R. Yehuda Halevi**

The poetry written by R. Moshe ibn Ezra and R. Yehuda Halevi reflects the personal experiences, upheavals, and changes that occurred between the early and later periods of their lives. The poetry they wrote in the early periods of their lives reflects an elevated mood of vivacity, light, the joy of life, stability, happiness, and wealth. In contrast, the poetry written in the later, more difficult periods of their lives depicts a dark, despondent mood, reflecting hardship, instability, wandering, alienation, and loss of homeland.

People are affected by the environment and atmosphere in which they live. People who perceive the time and place in which they live as positive will live a pleasant life. A person who is not suited to the time, place, and environment may suffer throughout life. These factors affect individuals’ personalities and moods, which are then reflected in their behavior or work.

Both of these poets were influenced by the conditions they experienced, the good and the bad. These changing conditions brought about a fundamental shift in their mood and psyche, which was reflected in many of the poems they wrote. To illustrate the impact of life histories and crossroads in the poets’ lives, I will cite examples of poems and the fateful events that caused a radical change in the design of their poetry, which reflected the instability in their lives.

# Rabbi Moshe ibn Ezra (1055 -1140)

Moshe ibn Ezra (1055-1140), a poet and philosopher in the golden age of Spanish Jewry, is considered one of the greatest Jewish poets of all time. He was born in Granada, into a respectable and well-established Jewish family. He and his three brothers all received a comprehensive education in both Judaism and Arab science and culture.

Moshe ibn Ezra developed into a rare and special individual in the Sephardic world of his time. He showed exceptional talent and excellence in his work and in all areas of his life. The intriguing events in his life have always attracted the attention of other poets – his contemporaries as well as those who studied his life and work long after his death. He made another significant contribution by helping to establish a circle of educated young poets. One of the young poets whose talents ibn Ezra discovered was Yehuda Halevi. Halevi received great support and encouragement from ibn Ezra and became one of the most prominent Jewish-Spanish poets of the time.[[1]](#footnote-1)

However, when ibn Ezra was about 35 years old, a radical Muslim movement (the Murabitun) invaded Muslim Spain and conquered Granada. Most of the city’s Jews fled. Ibn Ezra fled north, to Christian Spain, and never again had the privilege of seeing his children, who died while he was still alive. Thus, the history of Moshe ibn Ezra’s life can be divided into two important stages, the Granada period, when he lived a life of wealth and ease, and his later life as a miserable exile in Christian Spain.

## The Granada period - happiness and wealth

This first period (1055-1090) had a formative impact on ibn Ezra’s psyche. During this time, the city of Granada in southern Spain was one of the most important cities for the Jews in Andalusia. The ibn Ezra family was respected, privileged and wealthy. They held important roles in the government. Despite the profound change in the lives of the Jews of Granada after the Murabitun uprising and the assassination of Joseph the Great, governor of the Kingdom of Granada in the pogrom of 1066, the Jewish community prospered again and once again occupied important positions in the government.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The ibn Ezra family consisted of four sons: Yitzhak the eldest son, Moshe, Zeraḥya and Yosef. Of these four brothers, Moshe ibn Ezra, born around 1055, became the most prominent and gained high status in Granada. He served in various positions in the royal court and became the chief of police (*Zahab al-Sharta*).[[3]](#footnote-3)

In his youth, Moshe ibn Ezra studied at the famous yeshiva in the city of Lucena near Granada. One of the greatest sages in Spain taught there, Yitzhak ben Giat, who wrote a book of Jewish law, commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud, and was also a great poet. Moshe ibn Ezra learned much from him and was greatly influenced by him in the field of sacred poetry. In addition to ibn Ezra’s comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of the Hebrew language, he studied and became proficient in written and spoken Arabic, as well as well-versed in Greek philosophy.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Moshe ibn Ezra acquired both a Jewish and Arabic education because diverse peoples lived together in the Iberian Peninsula at that time: Muslims, Christians, and Jews, each group with its own language. The rulers of the land were Arabic-speaking Muslims, and many of the inhabitants learned Arabic, as did the Jews of Spain who lived within and absorbed Arab culture. In particular, Spanish-Jewish poets saw Arabic poetry as high art. Their admiration of Arabic poetry led them to seek similar means of expression. The strong and comprehensive influence of Arabic poetry can be seen in their poems. This influence is prominent in the forms and content, motifs, and images that characterize them.

During this period, ibn Ezra authored a massive book comprised of closely related poems entitled *Ha-Sefer Ha-Anak* [The Giant Book]. In this book, ibn Ezra addressed issues typical in contemporary secular poetry, such as the beauty of youth, fairness, love, and separation. In addition, Moshe ibn Ezra had sections of poems dedicated to old age, asceticism, and lamentations.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, he addressed these latter issues only briefly, without devoting much space to them in his book. The poet’s emotional state was positive and optimistic. His works expressed a strong desire to enjoy life. He wrote many poems describing and praising the pleasures and beauty of the world, wine, and love, reflecting his positive mood, and the joy and pleasures of this period in his life.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is important to note that Moshe ibn Ezra was the only Jewish composer in the Middle Ages to author a book that provided a comprehensive poetics of Hebrew poetry. His *Book of Studies and Discussions (Katab al-Muhachara and al-Mu'dakra*) was originally written in Judeo-Arabic. This book is intended to guide young poets and to educate an audience that did not recognize the value and seriousness of poetry. It was written, allegedly, after one of the poet's acquaintances presented him with eight questions about the history, essence, and teachings of poetry.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Moshe ibn Ezra's poetry faithfully follows the norms he described in this book. His anthology of secular poems contains all the genres that were widespread in Spain at the time: poems of praise, poems about friendship, poems of wine and love, poems of lamentation, contemplation, asceticism, refinement, and wit.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Until the blossoming of Hebrew poetry in Spain in the 10th century, Hebrew poetry had been almost entirely religious poetry. Medieval Jews primarily composed *piyyutim* that dealt with religious issues, Torah observance, and religious commandments. They served as prayer leaders, speaking for the people as the voice of the congregation. However, Arabic poetry ushered in a fundamental change and renewal in Hebrew poetry. Many poets began to incorporate their personal reflections and traits into their poetry. That is, they wrote poems about themselves. At the core of these poems is an individual recounting personal experiences, pleasures, and enjoyment. Only in a few cases did they make any reference to religious issues.[[9]](#footnote-9)

## Songs of wine and desire by ibn Ezra

Moshe ibn Ezra devoted three chapters of *Ha-Sefer Ha-Anak* to the subjects of wine and desire. In poems of this type, one can smell the scent of the pleasures and joys of life as he enumerates the physical pleasures of life such as beauty, wine, gardens, and leisure time.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The poet embellishes his descriptions to awaken and stimulate his friends and readers to dedicate their lives to enjoying the pleasures of the senses. It is possible to see the two categories of poems of wine and poems of desire as a single genre because in both a hedonistic theme can be discerned, and they share similar motifs. Moreover, both types are usually formulated in the first person, a trait that distinguishes them from other types of poetry. Most of the poems of wine are devoted to describing a hedonistic atmosphere such as summer nights, pouring wine into crystal goblets in the hands of a young man or beautiful woman, the blossoms of spring after the cold weather passed, a banquet, a party with friends, the blooming garden next to a palace, sitting in the shade of balsam trees listening to poetry, music and songbirds. It may be noted that ibn Ezra also wrote some poems of wine when he was in exile, but in these poems, it is possible to note hints of the loneliness and bitterness in the heart of a poet wandering in a foreign country. Still, these hints are made in passing, and immediately the poem returns to the hedonistic tone.

In the poems of desire, Moshe ibn Ezra describes the pleasures the beauty of the hidden young man or woman, and especially the anguish of love, the intensity of tormented desires of the lustful, and the cruelty of the coveted one’s refusal.[[11]](#footnote-11)

To illustrate the first period of his life in Granada, I will mention three poems that illustrate his period of happiness and youth: “A Coat of Many Colors,” “Come Down to the Garden,” and “How I Will Worry.”

**כָּתְנוֹת פַּסַּים לָבַש הַגָּן / וּכְסוּת רִקְמָה מַדֵּי דִשְׁאוֹ,**

**וּמְעִיל תַּשְׁבֵּץ עָטָה כָל-עֵץ / וּלְכָל-עַיִן הֶרְאָה פִלְאוֹ.**

**כָּל צִיץ חָדָשׁ לִזְמָן חֻדַּשׁ / יָצָא שׂוֹחֵק לִקְרַאת בּוֹאוֹ,**

**אַךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם שׁוֹשָׁן עָבַר, / מֶלֶךְ, כִּי עָל הוּרָם כִּסְּאוֹ,**

**יָצָא מִבֵּין מִשְׁמָר עָלָיו / וַיְשַׁנֶּה אֶת בִּגְדֵי כִלְאוֹ**

**מִי לֹא-יִשְׁתֶּה יֵינוֹ עָלָיו / הָאִישׁ הַהוּא יִשּׂא חֶטְאוֹ.**

The garden put on a coat of many colors/ and its grass garments were like robes of brocade.

All the trees dressed in chequered tunics/ and showed their wonders to every eye.

The new blossoms all came forth in honor of Time renewed/ came gaily to welcome him.

But at their head advanced the rose/ king of them all, for his throne was set on high.

He came out from among the guard of leaves/ and cast aside his prison clothes.

Whoever does not drink his wine upon the rose-bed/—that man will surely bear his guilt![[12]](#footnote-12)

This is one of the most famous poems written by Moshe ibn Ezra during the first period of his life, while still living in his hometown of Granada. The poem describes a fresh, colorful spring landscape at the center of which is a description of the flower that is like royalty among the flower beds that bloomed in honor of the coming of spring.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The poem consists of three sections. The first two verses, the introduction to the poem, depict changes that have transpired in nature as the renewal of spring arrives. The garden is personified, described as wearing striped tunics and covered in an opulent garment comparable to that of the high priest, as suggested by the Hebrew phrase *middei dish’o* (robes of herbage). The motif of clothing is expressed throughout the poem via metaphors and personification. The entire first stanza is a metaphor, indicating that the garden is clothed in vibrant vegetation. In the second stanza, ibn Ezra describes the blossoming trees as enwrapped in a patterned coat of colorful flowers and leaves.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The second section (stanzas 3–5), details other developments in the garden, joyful with the coming of springtime, such as the blossoming of flowers that are described as a new coat that the garden has donned with the passing of winter, and the appearance of the rose, royalty among flowers, aloft its throne. At this time, the rose has emerged from confinement and changed out of its prison garb, naturally with the continued use of personification.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The third section is comprised of the sixth stanza. At this point, the poem transforms from a poem about nature and a blooming garden to a poem about wine.[[16]](#footnote-16) It concludes, as expected, with the imbibement of wine. The invitation to drink emerges from *joie de vivre* and threatening punishment in almost biblical terms for anyone who dares to abstain. Ibn Ezra cheerfully announces that anyone who fails to drink is a sinner and will bear his iniquity, for the natural beauty and hedonistic atmosphere of the place cannot be complete without the drink so beloved by the poet.[[17]](#footnote-17) The final line is farcical: no true infraction has been committed, and hence no serious penalty can be invoked.

The poem is informed by what can be called the principle of amalgamation. The poem contains a variety of topics that are amalgamated together. Its various sections are strongly connected, proceeding from the description of the blossoming garden to concluding words of praise for wine, in the absence of whose glory the beautiful landscaping would be of no value.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In addition to the pleasant atmosphere of blooming roses, the coming of spring, the beauty of the fountain, the redness of the wine, ibn Ezra makes metaphoric use of spices, precious stones, embroidery, and golden jewelry. The poet also uses personification, as noted previously, as well as homonymy (such as with the Hebrew ‘*alav*, denoting “its leaves” in the fifth verse and “upon him” in the sixth) and biblical allusions. Ibn Ezra was an observant Jew, and all those around him were religiously observant. He therefore made ample use of biblical terms and phrases, knowing that his audience would understand the intent of the scriptural language. For example, the striped tunic is from the story of Joseph, the description of the king sitting atop his throne is borrowed from the story of Jeconiah, and the declaration that anyone who does not drink will bear his iniquity is from the Book of Numbers (9:13).

Ibn Ezra’s jovial optimism is reflected throughout the poem in his choice of expressions, descriptions, and terms indicative of a calm, pleasant, and happy life. The depiction of spring and the appearance of the roses conjure up an atmosphere of fresh happiness. All are in keeping with the lavish drinking parties and earthly delights that occupied much of the time of the Spanish-Jewish upper class, of which ibn Ezra was a member.

The second poem is “Come Down to the Garden” (*Redah ’el ha-Gan*), another work that reflects the hedonism and indulgence characteristic of the first part of his life.

רְדָה אֶל גַּן אֲשֶׁר לָבַשׁ תְּכֵלֶת / וְאַרְגָּמָן וְעָטָה חוּר וְכַרְפַּס

וְאֶל נָהָר אֲשֶׁר צַחוּ פְלָגָיו / וְלֹא נִדְלַח בְּכַף רֶגֶל וְנִרְפָּס

וּבֵן שׂרֵק כְּאוּר דֹּלֵק וּבֹרֵק / וְאַךְ נֶאְחַז בְּגָבִיעַ וְנִתְפָּשׂ

וְהַקֶּצֶף עֲלֵי פָנָיו כְּנִטְפֵי / בְדֹלַח אוֹ כְמוֹ מָן דַּק מְחֻסְפָּס.

Come down to the garden that has donned blue / And purple, and wrapped itself in white and green,

And to a river of clear tributaries, / Neither muddied by foot nor trampled,

Where a tender vine like fire burns and shines, / Yet is seized in goblet and captured,

The froth upon its surface like drops of / Crystal or like thin, rounded manna.[[19]](#footnote-19)

This poem contains four stanzas, of which the first and the last two comprise separate sections. The first section is devoted to a description of the wondrous garden, while the latter describes the wine. In the first stanza, the poet invites his companion to come to the garden, whose colorful blooms are compared to expensive, royal blue and purple fabrics. In the second stanza, the poet sets his gaze on one of the elements of the garden landscape: the central irrigation trench, from which extend tributaries, or smaller trenches, carrying pure water undirtied by human feet. This brings to a close the first section, which has prepared the ground for the depictions of wine in the second.

The third stanza describes the glowing bright red wine, which can scarcely be contained by the glass. The poet likens the red wine to a red fire burning in the glass. In the fourth stanza, the poet continues to depict the wine as fire, and the foaming wine being poured into the mouth as crystal drops or white manna. Also from this poem, one can conclude that ibn Ezra devoted his life to the pleasures and joys of life, The expressions, words and descriptions reflect his happiness.

The last poem, “How Shall I Worry” is short, and further illustrates the excellent mood and sense of optimism that characterized the poet.

רְדָה אֶל גַּן אֲשֶׁר לָבַשׁ תְּכֵלֶת / וְאַרְגָּמָן וְעָטָה חוּר וְכַרְפַּס

וְאֶל נָהָר אֲשֶׁר צַחוּ פְלָגָיו / וְלֹא נִדְלַח בְּכַף רֶגֶל וְנִרְפָּס

וּבֵן שׂרֵק כְּאוּר דֹּלֵק וּבֹרֵק / וְאַךְ נֶאְחַז בְּגָבִיעַ וְנִתְפָּשׂ

וְהַקֶּצֶף עֲלֵי פָנָיו כְּנִטְפֵי / בְדֹלַח אוֹ כְמוֹ מָן דַּק מְחֻסְפָּס.

How shall I worry, when I hear a voice/

the sound of water and the call of a crane and a dove in a beech tree

I will sit in the shade of the myrtle and blossoms/

My garden is my bed and a beech tree my pillow.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In this poem, ibn Ezra honestly wonders how he can worry while he is in the pleasant bosom of nature. How can he worry as he listens to the sound of water flowing by him, the call of the crane, as he lies in the shade of myrtle and garden flowers? The description of the garden is a metaphor for ibn Ezra’s enjoyment, delight in life, happiness, and repose. It shows that he is satisfied with his life. This poem clarifies that there is no reason for a person who is in his favorite place to worry about life.

## Theperiod in Christian Spain - exile and alienation

For centuries, the city of Granada suffered the evils of strife between its various peoples and religious groups. Nevertheless, Granada withstood all this, until a decisive battle broke out in 1090 between the Muslims and the Christians, which caused the collapse of the Kingdom of Granada and its fall to Yusuf ibn Tashfin.[[21]](#footnote-21) After 1086, the Christians began their conquest of the Muslim cities of Spain. Alfonso VI succeeded in conquering and annexing Toledo which became the capital of the new Castile.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The rulers of Muslim Andalusia resisted and tried to protect their homeland. However, because these rulers were pleasure-seekers, their armies had weakened over time and could no longer withstand the enemy, thus enabling the Christians to conquer most of their cities. The Muslims turned to the barbaric leader Yusuf ibn Tashfin, from North Africa, who led his battalions to Spain and managed to repel the Christians. He then returned to his home, but later came back to Andalusia and settled there permanently. Additionally, the Muslim group known as the “Murabitun” remained there and quickly became the real enemy of the local Muslims.[[23]](#footnote-23)

These historical events had severe consequences for the fate of the Jews of Granada, many of whom were captured, deported and even killed.[[24]](#footnote-24) The ibn Ezra family suffered greatly from the destruction of Granada and Moshe ibn Ezra’s life was turned upside down. His family members managed to escape from Granada and migrated to various places, but Moshe ibn Ezra remained in his country, although he was deprived of his position and property and was reduced to poverty.

אֲבָל יִזְּלוּ עיֵנַי/ וְאֶשָֹא בְשָֹרִי בְשִׁנַּי / כִּי נִשְׁאַרְתִי בוֹדֵד בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹלַדְתִּי/ וְאֵין אִישׁ אִתִּי, וַאֲנִי בָּהּ נֶחְשָׁב /כְּגֵר תּוֹשָׁב/ וְלֹא אֶחֱזֶה גֶבֶר סְבִיבִי / מִמִּשְׁפַּחְתִי וּמִבֵית אָבי.

But my eyes will stream/ And I will bear my flesh in my teeth/ Because I am left alone in my homeland/ And there is no one with me, and I am considered within it/ as a resident stranger/ And I have no man around me/ From my family or from my father's house.*[[25]](#footnote-25)*

In a letter, ibn Ezra described his feeling of foreignness, alienation and loneliness.

אַבִּיט עַל יָמִין וְאֶרְאֶה וְאֵין לִי מַכִּיר/ וְאַף עַל פִּי שֶׁאֲנִי בְּאֶרֶץ תּוֹלְדוֹתַי / וְעִיר קִבְרוֹת אֲבוֹתַי / צוֹעֵק אֲנִי מִן הַמֵּצַר / כִּי הָיְתָה עָלַי כְּחוֹתָם צַר.

I will look to the right and will see what I do not recognize/ Even though I'm in the land of my heritage/ And the city where my fathers are buried/ I am calling out from the straits/ For it was a narrow impression upon me.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Around the year 1095, when Moshe ibn Ezra was 45 years old, after he had married and become a father, he managed to escape from Granada to northern Spain. This began the period of suffering and bitterness, which lasted until the end of his life.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The period of happiness in the poet's life ended at the time when there was a decisive change in the political history of Muslim Spain. Around 1090, the Muslim empire disintegrated and was replaced by many principalities that weakened Islam in Western Europe. The second period in Moshe ibn Ezra’s life (1090 -1135) began when he left his homeland and went into exile in northern Spain and painful events ended his days of happiness and tranquility.

Following the events of 1090, ibn Ezra’s years of wandering and loneliness as a foreigner began. Ibn Ezra’s wealth was stolen, and he lost his status. He was left with nothing but his poetry, which he considered his most precious asset since he could express his feelings through it. His life in Christian Spain was exceedingly difficult. He was exiled from his homeland and became a lonely wanderer, separated from his children and friends. He was left with nothing but the poems he wrote, expressing the great sorrow of this time in his life. Circumstances and fate had taken him from his homeland into exile, and he wrote poems of longing for his children, friends, and homeland of Granada. He wrote lamentations about his brothers and sons, who died before he ever got to see them again.

## Moshe ibn Ezra’s poems of lamentation

The events of 1090 dictated a bitter fate, changing the life of Moshe ibn Ezra and his family. He fled Granada and wandered throughout Andalusia. His brothers, Yoseph and Yehuda ibn Ezra, moved to Toledo, which was under Christian rule, and Yitzhak ibn Ezra also settled in Toledo for some time.[[28]](#footnote-28) However, for some reason, Moshe ibn Ezra did not escape with his brothers and was forced to stay in Granada for another five years, during which his life was in grave danger. In 1095, he finally managed to escape from Granada. This saved his life, but Moshe ibn Ezra was forced to leave his homeland and children and wander in a foreign land, in a state of deprivation and poverty. The difficult experiences were expressed in his set of “personal poems.” His lamentations comprise three chapters in *Ha-Sefer Ha-Anak*. In the fifth chapter, ibn Ezra laments old age, in the sixth, he laments the upheavals of fate and the betrayal of his brother, and in the seventh chapter, he remembers his exile and wanderings.[[29]](#footnote-29) At this time in his life, ibn Ezra composed many lamentations mourning his living situation, recounting how he went from being a respectable and rich man to a lonely and poor man. He railed against the fate that took him from his land, robbed him of his pleasurable life, and left him without friends, alone, a stranger.

The uniqueness of his poems of lamentation is revealed in their linguistic design. These poems describe the concrete tangible state that the poet experienced at this time of his life. That is, the poet is speaking about himself.[[30]](#footnote-30) Ibn Ezra was well-acquainted with the Arabic poems of lamentation, and adapted his poetry to this tradition, by generally using the form of a dramatic monologue through which he expressed his feelings and thoughts.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Moshe ibn Ezra’s sorrow did not end. Until the end of his life, he endured separation from his family, from his world. Depression overtook him, and he became ever-more isolated and miserable. His departure from Granada, the devastated and plundered city, was something of a mystery. He longed with all his soul to escape from the place. He wrote:

וּמִי יִתֵּן, הוא אומר, הֱיוֹתִי נָע וְנָד בָּאֲדָמָה/ וְיַעֲבוֹר עָלַי מָה.

 And who would let me, I would leave and wander in the earth / and let happen what will pass over me.[[32]](#footnote-32)

But for some reason, Granada captivated him, and when he finally escaped from it, his life in grave danger, he knew he could never return to his homeland. A hint emerges in one of his poems, indicating that the culprit in his exile was the daughter of his older brother, Yitzhak.[[33]](#footnote-33)

When they were young, events transpired that made his life bitter and depressed his soul. Moshe ibn Ezra loved the daughter of his brother Yitzhak, and she loved him in return, but her father refused to give her to him in marriage. With a broken heart, Moshe ibn Ezra left his hometown and went to Portugal and Castile. While there, the news reached him that his beloved had been given to his younger brother as a wife. She ultimately died in childbirth in the year 1114 in Córdoba. When he received this tragic news, ibn Ezra wrote a lamentation about her that he sent her to her father - his brother Yitzchak. This lamentation brought peace between the brothers. Ibn Ezra returned to his hometown and probably stayed there for the rest of his life. In the two stanzas he wrote in Castile and sent to his brother, the picture becomes clear:

**הִנֵּה לְרַגְלָהּ נִלְכָּדָה רַגְלִי בְּפַח / גֵּרוּת כְּתוֹא מִכְמָר וְהִתְגַּלָּעְתִּי**

**וּלְמַעֲנָה בָּאתִי בְּכוּר עֹנִי, וְאֶת / נַפְשִׁי בְּקֶלַע הַנְּדוֹד קִלָּעְתִּי.**

Here at her feet, my feet were ensnared in the trap/ She was a stranger, and like a beast I burst out

And for her sake I came, a poor firstborn, and to you/ My wandering soul from a catapult was shot.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Ibn Ezra loved and admired his niece, and despite the anguish he suffered because of her, he did not blame her. In the poem in question, he calls her *dror* (sparrow), but it is not known whether this was her real name or a nickname.

When Moshe ibn Ezra arrived in Castile, he sent a lamentation to one of his loved ones in Granada, in which he recounted his many hardships. He sent sentiments of peace to his faithful friends, and in particular his beloved niece, because of whom he wandered and fell into in poverty. His intense burning love for the delight of his heart, which did not diminish with distance from the place and the passage of time. He says of this love:

**וּדְרוֹר אֲשֶׁר קֵן לָהּ בְּצַלְעוֹתַי, וּבָהּ / שָֹמַח כְּבוֹד נַפְשִׁי וְהִשְׁתַּעֲשַׁעְתִּי.**

And the sparrow that nested her in my ribs, and in her / the honor of my soul rejoiced and I was pleased.[[35]](#footnote-35)

His life in exile was very difficult and his suffering increased with each passing day. Moshe ibn Ezra traveled extensively in northern Spain but did not find peace or rest. He always felt himself a stranger among people who were different from him. Many people abused him. In northern Spain, ibn Ezra met many Jews but was not received as he would have expected from fellow Jews. He thought he was treated rudely and that they were stingy and hypocritical. In response, he spoke to them “with the language of ridicule” because he could not find a common language with them.

During those difficult times, Moshe ibn Ezra had to turn to his brother Yitzhak, as the only one who could help him.[[36]](#footnote-36) Moshe ibn Ezra was greatly disappointed by his brother, and this only increased his grief. Further, his children did not feel sorry for their father either, and apparently, he felt they did not deserve all the love and affection he gave them. Many times, he wrote poems in which he expressed his longing for them and for Granada and his spiritual connection to them. However, they denied him and even mocked him and treated him with indifference.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Following all the difficult experiences that Moshe ibn Ezra experienced, signs of old age appeared on his face and body despite his young age. Grief and the hardships of exile and wandering overcame him, until he foresaw his death as a stranger, alone, without family. His hope of returning to his homeland was denied, and he was left with nothing but the one hope that people would remember him for his poetry. In his last years, ibn Ezra began to adapt to his difficult situation, to contemplate everything that happened to him, and to find peace.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The following poems illustrate the difficult situation and poverty in which ibn Ezra found himself. These poems portray his sorrow and constitute a personal lament for his miserable condition and the homeland he left behind.

אַחַר יְמֵי הַשַחֲרוּת פָנוּ / כַצֵל וְצָדוּ צַעֲדֵי שָׁנָי

קָרָא נְדֹד הַשַּׁאֲנָן קוּמָה / וּלְשַׁאֲנַנּוֹ צָלֲלוּ אָזְנָי

קַמְתִּי בְלֵב רַגָּז וְיָצָאתִי / תֹּעֶה וְלָאֵל שִׁוְּעוּ בָנָי

הָיוּ מְקוֹר חַיַּי וְאֵיךְ אֶחְיֶה / בִלְתָּם וְאֵין אִתִּי מְאוֹר עֵינָי

נָחְה זְמָן אֹתִי אֱלֵי-אֶרֶץ / בָּהּ נִבְהֲלוּ רֵעַי וְרַעְיוֹנָי

עַם לַעֲגֵי שָׂפָה וְעִמְקֵי פֶה / מִשּׁוּר פְּנֵיהֶם נָפְלוּ פָנָי

עַד כִּי-אֱלֹהִים לִי דְרוֹר יִקְרָא / מֵהֶם לְהִמָּלֵט בְּעוֹר שִׁנָּי.

After the days of youth have passed/ like a shadow they haunt the steps of my years.

Called: wander, serene one, decamp! / my ears rang at his serenity.

I arose with a raging heart and departed/ straying and imploring God for my sons.

They were the fount of my life – how can I survive / without them, when the light of my eyes is not with me.

Time has led me to another land/ where my friends and notions are perturbed.

A people of inchoate language and dour mouths/ my face fell at their stern countenances.

Until God calls me to liberty/ to escape them by the skin of my teeth. [[39]](#footnote-39)

In this fragment of a poem, ibn Ezra recounts, in the first person, the difficult events he has undergone. From the opening of the poem, it is possible to discern that the events took place when he was no longer young.[[40]](#footnote-40) In this lamentation, ibn Ezra grieves about being in exile, isolated, and distant from his family. He says that the dark days passed like a shadow, meaning that the days of his youth passed quickly, in the blink of an eye, which is a biblical image to mark the passing of time.

In the first stanza, he clarifies that his darkest days are over, which means that his good life was quite short, and he no longer had time to enjoy the pleasures of life. In this stanza, ibn Ezra generates a contrast. On the one hand, he says that the days of adolescence have passed by, and on the other hand he says that in his old age his steps were shortened (meaning he walked slowly) and he had many problems. He wandered from place to place and could not find rest and serenity, as he had in Granada.

Afterward, the poet speaks on the subject of wandering; after all, he was the protagonist of the story. Using personification, the poet describes exile as a man who gives commands and imposes orders. Exile turns on him rudely and orders him to get out of Granada; that is to say, exile forced the poet to leave Granada against his will.

In the third stanza, the poet declares that he obeyed the voice of exile, yet he went with a raging heart, and instead of the serenity that had previously occupied his heart, his heart became angry and tumultuous. In this stanza, the poet speaks in the first person and says he has gone astray and lost his way. His departure from Granada is presented in a completely negative way, and his pain is increased because his children stayed in Granada. Ibn Ezra laments the distance from his children. He says that they are the source of his life and without them, he may as well die. When his children are far from him, his life has no meaning, because they are the light of his eyes.

The poem has a surprising ending. The last stanza is different from the previous ones. It has an optimistic mood, in contrast to the pessimistic mood of the other stanzas. At the end of the poem, the poet expresses hope. He turns to God and asks him to give him freedom because only God can change his bitter fate. He so intensely hopes that God will bring him back to Granada that he is willing to give up anything to return to his homeland. In this poem, one can discern the poet’s suffering and sorrow, but despite his difficult situation in exile, he maintained the hope that the day would come when God would give him the sign that he could return to his desired home.

In another poem, “And the young dove nests in a treetop”: he laments his loneliness as a stranger and expresses his longing for his children, who are far from him.

וּבֶן-יוֹנָה, בְּרֹאשׁ אָמִיר מְקַנֵּן / בְּגַן-בֹּשֶׂם, עֲלֵי מַה זֶּה יְקוֹנֵן?

אֲפִיקָיו לֹא יְכַזֵּבוּ לְמוּלוֹ, / וְצֵל תָּמָר עֲלֵי רֹאשׁוֹ יְגוֹנֵן,

וְאֶפְרֹחָיו יְרַנֵּנוּ לְפָנָיו / וְהוּא לָהֶם זְמִיר פִּיהוּ יְשַׁנֵּן.

בְּכֵה גוֹזָל, בְּכֵה נוֹדֵד, וּבָנָיו / לְמֵרָחוֹק, וְאֵין טַרְפָּם מְכוֹנֵן,

וְלֹא יִרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר יִרְאֶה פְנֵיהֶם, / וְלֹא יִשְׁאַל לְבַד אוֹב וּמְעוֹנֵן,

נְהֵה עָלָיו וְהִתְנוֹדֵד לְנוֹדוֹ, / וְאַל נֶגְדּוֹ תְשַׁו גִּילַת וְרַנֵּן,

וְהָבָה לוֹ כְנָפֶיךָ וְיָעוּף / אֲלֵיהֶם, וַעֲפַר אַרְצָם יְחוֹנֵן!

And a young dove in a treetop nests / in a perfumed garden, about what does it lament?

Its streams will not dry up in front of it/ and the shade of a date palm will protect its head,

And its chicks will sing before it/ while it will repeat a serenade to them.

Weep fledgling/ weep wanderer and his children/ are distant, and their sustenance is not prepared,

He cannot see what they see, / and cannot in his loneliness ask a medium or diviner,

Wail for him and wander like his wanderings, and do not express before him joy and song,

Give him your wings that he might fly/ to them and be graced with the dust of their land. [[41]](#footnote-41)

This poem can be divided into two parts, in terms of structure. In stanzas 1-3, the poet describes the dove. He marvels and wonders about her deeds. In this stanza, ibn Ezra describes the dove and the playful chicks learning their songs. This section ends with idealized family peace. In stanzas 4-7, the poet speaks directly to the dove, as if trying to prevent her from singing.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Ibn Ezra focuses on the dove throughout the poem through the personification of the dove as the addressee.[[43]](#footnote-43) In this poem, ibn Ezra dismisses the possibility that humans can understand him and empathize with his condition, so he turns to animals, who are understanding and compassionate creatures.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The poem opens with the cry of lamentation and mournful cooing of a dove in its nest, even though its chicks are with it and the nest is in a safe place. In the beginning, ibn Ezra uses the voice of the dove to bemoan the suffering and disaster that had befallen it, and he tries to understand the reason for his mournful cooing. The dove discovers that its situation is actually quite good, its nest in the treetop is in a protected and safe place, in a perfumed garden full of trees. Flowing channels of abundant water surround the garden. Leaves shade the nest, where the chicks are playing and learning to sing.

Through this, the poet marvels at his own fortunate condition, and concludes that although he is lamenting and crying, he has nothing to complain about, while in the first stanza, the poet contrasts the dove’s cry of lamentation to its real situation. This contrast is highlighted by the linguistic pairing of the last words in the first and second stichs: *qonen* [nests] / *yeqonen* [lament] that make up the *delet* and *soger* that are a classical flourish of the genre.

A surprise occurs in the fourth stanza. The poet addresses the dove and asks it to continue to lament and weep, not for itself but for the sad condition of the poor poet, who is enduring a great and real disaster. He asks the dove to mourn the exile that has destroyed him, body and soul, and his fate to be alone on his last day. The poet asserts that it is his condition that deserves crying and lamenting over, not that of the dove. In this stanza, there is a repetition of the word ‘weep,’ emphasizing, the magnitude of the poet’s suffering and sorrow, who is far from his children, who he worries are also suffering and starving without their father, who is supposed to take care of their livelihood. The image of the distant sons and the father who is unable to provide for their needs is, of course, contrary to the image of the playful dove caring for and feeding its chicks.

The fifth stanza highlights the great distance of the father from his children. He cannot see them or even meet with people who may have seen them, so he doesn’t know anything about their situation or if they are safe. This increases his suffering. In this stanza, there is a repetition of the word *yir’eh* [see] to emphasize the great distance separating them. Therefore, the poet again asks dove to weep over him and to mourn even more because of its own joy, as it remembers that their situations are not equivalent.

In the last stanza, the poet begs the dove to give him his wings to fly so he can see and hug and kiss his children and return to his homeland. Of course, he knows that he cannot fly, and this is another contrast between him and the dove.[[45]](#footnote-45) The mood of the poem is sorrowful, reflecting ibn Ezra’s poor state of mind, pessimism, and despair. Until the end of his life, ibn Ezra continued composing poems and epistles expressing this mood and the evil of his condition in exile.

Another of his poems begins with the question: “What will be of me that time causes pain?” In this lamentation, ibn Ezra expresses his sorrow and suffering in exile when he was in a fortress on a mountain of Castile. In this poem, ibn Ezra laments his separation from his loved ones, family and friends, and the social alienation he suffers from among the Jews of Christian Spain. He recounts his adventures along the way, describing specific events and explaining his reaction to them. He describes his lonely, isolated, condition, surrounded only by animals.

The poet speaks of himself in the third person, rather than in the first person as in his other poems, in order to portray his observations as objective truth said by an uninvolved spectator.

מַה לִּי וּזְמָן יַכְאִיב כּוֹאֵב, / יִצְפֹּר לָנִיד צִפּוֹר נוֹדֵד?

אֵיכָה יָרוּץ לִשְׁלֹל שָׁלוּל / אוֹ אֵיךְ שָׁדוּד יִהְיֶה שׁוֹדֵד?

כִּי לוֹ הֵצַר לַעְלוֹת מִבְצָר / וִהְיוֹת שָׁמָּה עַל גַּג בּוֹדֵד:

לֹא יִשְׁמַע רַק מִסְפַּד תַּנִּים / אוֹ בֶן-יַעְנָה כִּי יִתְנוֹדֵד,

נֶגְדּוֹ יַרְחִיב נֶשֶׁר קָרְחָה / וַעְלֵי פִיהוּ הוּא יִתְגּוֹדֵד.

עִם כּוֹכָבִים הֵכִין רִבְעוֹ, / גַם תַּחְתָּיו שָׁת עָנָן רוֹדֵד,

צֻוָּה לִסְפֹּר כּוֹכְבֵי מָרוֹם / אוֹ רָקִיעַ לִהְיוֹת מוֹדֵד.

הָהּ עַל אֶרֶץ אֵין בָּהּ רֵעַ / יָנוּד לוֹ אוֹ בוֹ יִתְעוֹדֵד!

What will be of me that time causes pain, / to cry for movement, a migrating bird?

How can he run to plunder the plundered/ or how can the robbed be the robber?

For he confined him in a high fortress/ becoming desolation on a lonely roof:

He only hears the lament of a jackal / or an ostrich as it wanders,

Against him, a vulture extends his bald head/ and with his mouth he wounds himself.

His cell has been prepared among the stars / and even the layered cloud is below him,

He is commanded to count the stars of heaven / or to be a measurer of the firmament.

Ha! On a land without evil, / he wanders by himself or finds comfort in it![[46]](#footnote-46)

The first two stanzas are formulated as questions, reflecting the poet's desire to know why fate is so cruel to him. Since fate is described as cruel precisely by those who are already suffering, the poet asks why fate continues to harm those who are already suffering. Why is fate making those already in exile wander further? The poet describes fate as someone who wakes early to make trouble for him, to force him from his city. He goes on to ask how fate pursues him to deprive him, although he has nothing to take. He complains that fate harms him and causes him problems as if he is guilty, although the poet had not sinned.

The first two stanzas have two pairs of words with similar roots in Hebrew: *yitzpor* [cry]/ *tzipor* [bird] – *lanid* [for movement]/ *noded* [migrating]. Through this metaphor, the poet identifies with a migrating bird as he leaves his home. Using descriptive language, the poet identifies with animals, especially birds also in the fourth and fifth stanzas.

Three other pairs of words come in a fixed order, in which a verb is followed by a word for trouble and suffering: *yach’iv* [causes pain] / *ke’ev* [pain]; *lanid* [for movement] / *noded* [migrating]; lishlol [to plunder] / the plundered. However, a fourth pair has its order reversed, *shadud* [robbed] / robber [*shoded*]. This reversal of the order of the components is an accepted way in Arabic writing to mark an end, and ibn Ezra uses it to end the section within the poem.

The third stanza reveals the disaster that caused him suffering and trouble until he had no choice but to flee and eventually ascend to the high fortress and be there alone, friendless. In the fourth stanza, the poet describes his experiences in the fortress where he lives alone, surrounded by animals such as jackals and ostriches. The animals’ sounds of mourning and lamentation express the suffering emanating through the poet’s voice.

The poet then relates how he met a vulture with a bald featherless head, flying around the fortress. The poet identifies the bald vulture with sorrow and suffering because in those days shaving one’s head was one of the signs of mourning and sorrow. In the sixth stanza, the poet refers to the immense height of the fortress in which he is imprisoned. He describes it as being among the stars, above the clouds. These images emphasize the poet's distance from others and his loneliness. The poet likens his time in this place to a decree that he count the stars and measure the firmament. These actions indicate two things, first that ibn Ezra is far away from heaven, and on the other hand the inaction resulting from loneliness. This is a familiar image in Arabic poetry, in which a person wishes to sleep but cannot, and occupies himself with tasks done just to pass the time.

The last four stanzas are in a deliberate order, moving from things far below to those high above. After the poet has finished describing the fortress, he turns his attention outside and describes the surrounding land. But the earth is far away, and it is difficult for him to discern the things that are on it. Therefore, he first describes the sounds of the birds, which he can see because they are close to him. Then he looks up beyond the vultures in flight, and the poet can see all the things that are close to them. He finally describes the stars and says his fortress is among them, and beneath him are the clouds. The described items grow greater in power and elevation until in the last stanza the great distance of the poet and his suffering reach a peak. He then utters sounds of sorrow and weeping and declares “Ha!” regarding the existence of a land without evil. In the fortress, he has no friends who will share in his sorrow and encourage him, and how difficult it is for him to be distant and isolated from his family.[[47]](#footnote-47)

# R. Yehuda Halevi (1075-1141)

In this chapter, I will refer to some examples of the poems of R. Yehuda Halevi and examine the poet’s mood as reflected in the poems he wrote during the two periods of his life. I will first discuss the poems he composed during his period of happiness and peace, followed by those he composed during the second period when he was in exile and far from the Land of Israel. Schirmann conducted the first research on R. Yehuda Halevi and attempted to construct a comprehensive description of his life. Later, S. D. Goitein (1954) making use of the Cairo Genizah, wrote a biography of R. Yehuda Halevi that greatly enriched the research literature on this subject.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Yehuda Halevi was born in 1075 in Spain. He became a great poet, whose name is always mentioned at the top of the list of the great poets of his generation. In terms of personality traits, Yehuda Halevi was wise and intelligent. He began to study at a relatively early age and acquired a great deal of knowledge. He was fluent in Hebrew, Arabic and Spanish, and was a scholar of both Jewish law and philosophy.[[49]](#footnote-49)

R. Yehuda Halevi’s life spanned three main events in the medieval period that left their mark on the people of Israel. The Reconquista, during which control of most of Spain passed back to the Christians, began around 1075. It lasted for decades and forced masses of people to migrate. The Jews, who held prominent positions in the governments of both sides, suffered greatly and were identified by each side as an enemy. During the war, R. Yehuda Halevi migrated from northern to southern Spain. He witnessed the war and some of his friends died in it. The Jews particularly suffered during the period of the Murabitun, who came from North Africa and first appeared in Andalusia in 1086, seizing power in the following decade. The Murabitun were known for their intolerance of religious minorities. During the First Crusade in 1096, Jews living in Christian lands were massacred and tortured. As a result of these historic events, many Jewish families fled Spain. These three events shaped the life and thinking of R. Yehuda Halevi.

The period of happiness and serenity

At first, R. Yehuda Halevi was not well-known or famous, but his ability was apparent, and he was invited to a wine feast for great Spanish poets, headed by Moshe ibn Ezra. One of those present at the banquet offered a prize to anyone who could compose a poem similar in structure to the poems of Moshe ibn Ezra. Many attempts were made, but no one won the competition. Fortunately, R. Yehuda Halevi was present, and he composed a poem of praise for Moshe ibn Ezra. Everyone at the feast was amazed as he demonstrated his special poetic talent. Halevi’s success in this competition opened many doors for him. He became well-known, and his reputation began to grow.[[50]](#footnote-50) Ibn Ezra appreciated the rare talent of Halevi and invited him to stay in his home, under his patronage. Of course, Halevi accepted this invitation, which he recognized as a great opportunity.

During this period, Halevi enjoyed a life of happiness and peace. He knew many distinguished scientists and poets who helped him develop and advance his talents. In those days he composed many poems that reflected this mood, filled with the joy and happiness that enveloped his life, such as songs of wine and love that were read at wedding parties. For example, he composed the poem “I Shall Sing Your Praise” in this first period of his life, for a friend who sent him some sweet wine. The serenity that prevailed in the poet's life in those days is reflected in the lines of the poem. He had no worries. He pursued pleasures and drinking wine, which he considered one of the joys of life and would not consider giving up.

בך אעיר זמירות כל ימותי / ובעסיסך אשר מצו שפתי

ו"אחי" אקראה אל כד שלחתו / ומפיו אטעמה טוב מגדנותי

עדי רעי חשבוני לסובא / ועקב זאת שאלוני " למתי?"

עניתים "איך צרי גלעד לנגדי / ולא אשתה לרפא מחלותי?

ואיכה אמאסה בכד עדנה / ועוד לו נגעו עד כ"ד שנותי?”

I shall sing your praise all my days

For the nectar you sent for my lips.

Brother Jug joins in my lays

And from him I won’t cease my sips.

Even though all my friends say, “Come, come!

How much longer will you play the rake?”

“What?” I’ll reply. “I have Gilead’s balm

And shan’t drink to cure every ache?”

“I’m too young to put down the cup

I’ve only begun to pick up. To and for

What end should I stop

When my years are not yet two and four?”[[51]](#footnote-51)

In the first stanza, the poet thanks his friend who sent him a jug of sweet wine that filled him with such cheer and happiness that he had to write poems expressing this pleasure, which will last until the end of his life. In the second stanza, the poet tells his friend that he will treat the wine jug as a friend and brother, because it gives him great satisfaction, and thanks to it, he drinks a taste of fine fruit. In the third stanza, the poet is so full of joy from the wine, his friends think he is drunk and ask him how long he will continue in this way. In the fourth stanza, the poet answers his friends’ question by asking how he could stop drinking wine scented like fine spices that were used in ancient times as a medicine, and how he could abstain from this drink always by his side, which will cure all his ailments. In the fifth stanza, the poet poses a rhetorical question of how he could be tired of drinking wine when he is not yet twenty-four years old.

It is similarly easy to discern the poet's uplifted mood in the love poem “The Fair Maiden.” He describes the coveted maiden with special words and expressions that arise from enjoying observing her. His descriptions make it clear that he is serene and pleasurably immersed in love and experiences no suffering or torment.

ליל גלתה אלי צביה נערה / חמת לחייה וצמת שערה

 צהב - כעין אדם בכסותו עלי / רקת בדלח לח תמונת תארה –

 דמתה כשמש בעלותה תאדים / את ענני נשף בלהב זהרה

The night when the fair maiden revealed the likeness of her form to me,

The warmth of her cheeks, the veil of her hair,

Golden like a topaz, covering

A brow of smoothest crystal—

She was like the sun making red in her rising

The clouds of dawn with the flame of her light.[[52]](#footnote-52)

 In the first stanza, the poet describes the beautiful girl’s appearance, depicting her face as if it were shining like the sun and her yellow hair like a veil over her face. In the second stanza, the poet likens the girl's hair to a gemstone covering the sides of her face, which is white like a crystal. In the third stanza, the poet continues to emphasize her beauty, which he says is like the sunrise, when the sun turns the clouds into red flames, like her beauty.

## The period of loneliness and longing for the Land of Zion

Halevi’s days of happiness and joy did not last long. They ended with the outbreak of wars between the Andalusian Muslims and the armies of North Africa -- the Murabitun.[[53]](#footnote-53) During Halevi’s time, the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Spain took a turn for the worse. Since the conquest of Spain by the Muslims, the Christians fought them to regain control of the Spanish cities they had lost. The situation of the Jews in Spain was not comfortable or stable. Their situation was directly affected by events and the mood of the local ruler. The Jews gained the status of patrons and were required to pay heavy taxes to finance the war. With the outbreak of the war, many families had to abandon their homes, were deprived of their property, or were killed.

The attacks against Andalusia affected Halevi’s life. He became helpless after watching the barbarian battalions invade and destroy the cities of Spain. Most of the Jews tried to save themselves. Halevi had no safe place to return to. This is when his period of wandering began. Halevi wandered by foot between various cities in Muslim and Christian Spain until he finally settled in Córdoba. There was no one to support him, so he started looking for ways to survive the upheavals and events that befell Andalusia. He studied medicine, which guaranteed him a livelihood.

Despite the difficult conditions he encountered, he did not stop writing poems. He made strong connections with other famous poets of his generation and everyone paid him great respect. The difficult conditions that affected the course of the poet's life led to a fundamental change in the design and content of his poems. He stopped composing poems expressing the joy of life, and instead composed lamentations and mournful poems about the situation of the people of Israel in exile. The new situation overwhelmed him, and in a time of emotional crisis, he felt the need to express his feelings and express his hopes. The poems were a vent through which he could breathe a sigh of relief. Writing them provided him with emotional comfort. He composed many sacred poems in which he turned to God, begging Him and asking for redemption for himself. After seeing the indifference of the people to the Land of Israel, he also prayed for God to cause the Jews to emigrate *en masse* to Israel (*Aliyah*).[[54]](#footnote-54)

Yehuda Halevi witnessed how distant the people of Israel were from Zion and the land of the patriarchs. Halevi was eager to immigrate to Israel and believed that there could be no rest for the people of Israel living in exile under foreign rule. His vision of immigration to the Land of Israel and his longing for the national homeland is expressed in his Poems of Zion.[[55]](#footnote-55) In his book *Kuzari*, the exiled people of Israel are portrayed as “a body without a head and without a heart.” He perceived immigration to the Land of Zion as an expression of individual, personal perfection, and positive propaganda, since Aliyah is a national act expressing the redemption of the people.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Like Moshe ibn Ezra, Yehuda Halevi wandered throughout Spain throughout his youth. When he reached the age of fifty, he was spiritually exhausted, and he wished to find a place to rest in his old age. He came up with the idea of realizing the vision of immigrating to the Land of Israel, the land of the patriarchs to which he dedicated many poems, and to see the city of Jerusalem, the land of his ancestors from ancient times.[[57]](#footnote-57) This was his wish and his dream, and Halevi wanted to fulfill this vision. However, his family and many of his loyal friends forcefully tried to sway his decision. Some of them spoke to him about the strangeness of this desire, and others rebuked him for wanting to throw his life away by going to the Land of Israel in his old age and during a time of crisis. After the First Crusade in the year 1096, Jerusalem and the surrounding area were under the control of the Christians. From 1098 until 1186, no Jews were allowed to come to Jerusalem.

An example of the anger expressed by one of Halevi’s friends regarding his desire to go to the Land of Israel can be found in Halevi’s book *The Book of Refutation and Proof on Behalf of the Despised Religion*, usually known as the *Kuzari*, in which the king of the Khazars is angry when he hears that his interlocutor the Rabbi has decided to go to Jerusalem. The king says to him: “And what will you ask for today in Jerusalem and in the land of Canaan, and the Shechinah is absent from them, etc., and why will you endanger yourself in the deserts and in seas?”[[58]](#footnote-58)

Halevi insisted on realizing his dream of emigrating to the Land of Israel and nothing could stand in his way. He traveled by sea to Alexandria, where he met Jews who were living peacefully in Egypt. They tried to stop him from continuing to the Land of Israel because of the wars in the area, but Halevi’s spiritual and nationalist fervor to reach the Land of Israel were greater.[[59]](#footnote-59) Halevi’s desire overcame all his hesitations, despite his awareness of the dangers along the way. His response to the protestations was unequivocal: “One day in the Land of Israel is better than a thousand in the land of a stranger.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

According to legend, Halevi went to Jerusalem and saw himself the land’s desolation. Weeping, he knelt on the ground to pray to God, and a Muslim soldier on horseback ran over him, killing him, in approximately the year 1141.[[61]](#footnote-61)

His Poems of Zion embody the idea and vision of going to the Land of Israel. The first poem, “Zion, Do You Wonder?”[[62]](#footnote-62) describes Halevi’s spiritual and nationalist longings for the Land of Zion. This poem uses the name Zion, another name for the Land of Israel and Jerusalem, along with many places mentioned in the Bible. Halevi is credited with being the first poet to conceive of a Zionist ideal. In it, the poet personally addresses Zion in an open letter shared with the reader:

לִבִּי לְבֵית־אֵל וְלִפְנִיאֵל מְאֹד יֶהֱמֶה וּלְמַחֲנַיִם וְכֹל פִּגְעֵי טְהוֹרָיִךְ

My heart stirs for Peniel, and for Bethel, and Machanayim, those places with their pure traces of God’s presence…

Three places are mentioned in the patriarch Yaakov’s journey from Aram to the Land of Israel: Machanayim (Genesis 32:3), Peniel (Genesis 32: 31) and Bethel (Genesis 35:1).

אַף כִּי בְעָמְדִי עֲלֵי קִבְרוֹת אֲבֹתַי וְאֶשְׁתּוֹמֵם בְּחֶבְרוֹן עֲלֵי מִבְחַר קְבָרָיִךְ!

אֶעְבֹר בְּיַעְרֵךְ וְכַרְמִלֵּךְ וְאֶעְמֹד בְּגִלְעָדֵךְ וְאֶשְׁתּוֹמֲמָה אֶל הַר עֲבָרָיִךְ, הַר הָעֲבָרִים וְהֹר הָהָר, אֲשֶׁר שָׁם שְׁנֵי אוֹרִים גְּדוֹלִים מְאִירַיִךְ וּמוֹרָיִךְ.

Pressed to your earth, cherishing its soil and stones – / Yes, even so, the graves of patriarchs, Wondrous in Hebron at your choicest tombs.

I would cross Gilead, and Carmel’s woods, And stop to marvel at your lofty peaks Across the Jordan, on which, illustrious, Lie buried the greatest of your teachers.

Hebron is the city of ancestral tombs, hidden in the Cave of the Patriarchs. Mount Abarim and Mount Hor are mentioned in the description of the wanderings of the children of Israel in the wilderness in the Book of Numbers. Carmel and Gilad are mentioned in some of the later books of the Hebrew Bible (for example, Nachum chapters 1 and 4, Chronicles chapters 2 and 26, and Micha chapters 4 and 7).

עֵת אֶזְכְּרָה אָהֳלָה – אֶשְׁתֶּה חֲמָתֵךְ, וְאֶזכֹּר אָהֳלִיבָה – וְאֶמְצֶה אֶת־שְׁמָרָיִךְ.

When I remember Ohelah, I will drink of thy wrath, and I will remember the Ohelibah, and I will embrace thy watchmen.

Ohelah and Ohelibah appear in the prophecy of Ezekiel, in the verse: “And their names were Ohelah the elder, and Ohelibah her sister, and they were Mine, and they bore sons and daughters, and their names-Samaria is Oholah, and Jerusalem, Oholibah.”[[63]](#footnote-63) These are two women who symbolize the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah.

The Poems of Zion reflect an intense longing for Zion and also a spiritual mental process that was realized in Halevi’s journey to the longed-for land.[[64]](#footnote-64)

The second poem, “My Heart is in the East”[[65]](#footnote-65) is considered one of the most important poems in medieval poetry of Spanish Jewry. It is a poem of longing for the Land of Israel and belongs to the Poems of Zion, one of the most original collections of poetry in secular Hebrew poetry from Spain. The narrator vows to immigrate to the Land of Israel, but this raises a geographical difficulty (“…and I in the uttermost West”) and a political difficulty in terms of the battles between Christians (“the fetter of Edom”) and Muslims (“Arab chains”).[[66]](#footnote-66) In this poem, there are many contrasts that aim to express the storm of emotions the poet feels because he is in the West (in Spain), but longs to be in the East, in the Land of Israel.

This poem reveals the irony that while control over Jerusalem had changed hands, the city did not return to its true owners.[[67]](#footnote-67) His intense longing and emotional conflicts make it difficult for him to experience the physical pleasure of food. The poet adds that he would prefer to leave all the pleasures of Spain and be covered in the dust of the destroyed Temple. This stanza is an example of how, throughout the generations, the destroyed Temple was expressed in Jewish consciousness and Jewish literature as a symbol of the people's longing for the Land of Israel.[[68]](#footnote-68)

This poem was written while Halevi was still in Spain (“the uttermost West”). However, when referring to this poem of Halevi, Avi Sagi quotes Jonathan Smith, who says that home is first and foremost a category of nostalgia. A home is not necessarily the place where a person, lives but the place where one’s memories and desires are stored.[[69]](#footnote-69)

The poem presents two rhetorical questions expressing the poet's longing and frustration:

1. “How can I find savor in food? How shall it be sweet to me?”- How can I taste food and know it will taste good to me?
2. “How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while yet Zion lieth beneath the fetter of Edom, and I in Arab chains?” How will I keep my promise to go to Zion?

In the second rhetorical question, one can see a slipping between topics in the sentence. Although the poem is short, it includes many linguistic devices, such as an acrostic: the first letter in each line of the first stanza spell an acronym for the words “to Israel.” This literary device is used to enhance the words in the poem and emphasize his desire to be in the land flowing with milk and honey. Halevi uses this literary device to emphasize his great desire to be in the Land of Israel. There are a number of paired words: - *ma‘arav* [west] / *ya‘arev* [sweet]; *nedaray* [my vows]/ *’esaray* [my bonds]; *ḥevel* [fetter] / *kevel* [chains]; *yeqal* [be light] / *yeqar* [be precious]. Additional devices used include a metaphor: “my heart in the East,” and anaphora in words *’eikh* [how] and *’eikhah* [how is it?], referring to the Book of Lamentations, which mourns the destruction of the Temple, and additional biblical references and allusion such as Psalms 103:12 “as the distance from East to West”.

It can be seen in the poem that the poet is in a poor emotional state. He expresses depression due to the destruction of the Temple and his inability to reach the Land of Israel. His longing for Zion takes away his taste for life and causes him severe spiritual frustration. He cannot enjoy anything because of his intense longings for Zion, nor can he fulfill his vows to get there. The poet’s despair is evident in the last stanza in which he declares his willingness to give up all the pleasures of life in Spain only to see the ruins of the destroyed Temple.

The third poem is “Beautiful View.”[[70]](#footnote-70) It is a song of longing for Jerusalem and sorrow for its ruined condition but a desire to reach it from exile at the end of the western world, despite its destruction and desolation.

He uses other affectionate names to refer to Zion include such as the beautiful, the joy of the whole world, and the seat of God - showing that the poet longs for it even from Spain, at the distant end of the western world. The poet is moved by the memory of the glorious ancient days of Jerusalem and of its ruin, God’s departure from it, and the destruction of the Temple. The poet wishes to go to Jerusalem immediately and miraculously, and there saturate the dry dirt of its ruins with his tears.

The poet vows to care for Jerusalem, even if the city no longer has a king as in ancient times. Even if perfumed oils have been replaced by the venom of snakes and scorpions, the poet will love its fallen stones and kiss them, and the dirt of its ruins will seem sweeter than honey.

While Halevi was in Egypt, he composed the poem “If the Will of Your Soul” in which he describes his aspiration to go to the Land of Israel and see the Temple. The Jews in Egypt befriended him with love and honor and fulfilled all but one of his requests; they did not allow him to leave because the road to Israel was very dangerous. Halevi saw his stay in Egypt as temporary, but it lasted many days and was still there and wanted to go to his Lord, to God, to His dwelling place, the destroyed Temple in the Land of Israel.

אם רצון נפשכם למלאת רצוני,

שלחוני ואלכה לאדוני-

כי מנוחה לא אמצאה עוד לרגלי,

עד אכונן בבית מעונו מעוני.

If your soul desires to fulfill my will,

Send me and I will go to my Lord-

For rest she found no more at my feet,

Until I establish in His dwelling place from my suffering.[[71]](#footnote-71)

The poet is in the depths of despair, feels no sense in life, finds no rest anywhere as long as he is far from the Temple, even though he is in a place that everyone loves and cares about him. He emphasizes that, because of his desire, love and sense of belonging for the Land of Israel, he is willing to give everything up and die for the Temple.

# Summary

We have seen how both poets’ moods were products of the upheavals of fate and the events they experienced firsthand in Spain. Their moods had a powerful influence on the tone of the personal poems written by Moshe ibn Ezra and Yehuda Halevi. The poems written in the early period of each of their lives reflect the pleasures, amusements and joys of their lives in Andalusia. It is easy to discern their happiness, wealth, and intense desire to indulge in the pleasures of life. However, the joyful life of these two poets did not last long, because their fates were cruelly reversed.

Poems from the second period from the lives of these two poets express their hardships and suffering, and descent into poverty. The poems reflect a tone of weeping and sorrow because they went through hardships and difficult experiences. Moshe ibn Ezra was exiled from his homeland, separated from his family, and for the rest of his life, he wandered in various places, alone, without friends or his children. Yehuda Halevi spent the rest of his life contemplating how to fulfill his vision of going to the Land of Israel and seeing the Temple. This was the major dream of his life. In his Poems of Zion, Halevi describes his obsessive longing to reach Zion and his maritime voyage, which was full of risks.

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