

CHAPTER TWO

R. JUDAH HALEVI
THE KUZARI

Introduction

"Your thoughts are pleasing to God, but your actions are not!" is the message imparted by an angel to the King of the Khazars in a dream. The king's quest to understand the dream and its message sets the dramatic setting for R. Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*. The ruler of the Khazars seeks enlightenment first from a philosopher, next a Christian, and then a Moslem. Unsatisfied with each of their answers, he reluctantly turns to a Jewish sage.¹ The inferior social situation of the Jews convinces him that they will not be able to satisfy him in his quest. If might does not make right, at least it reflects it. The sage in Halevi's rendering of the story succeeds of course in unraveling to the Khazar king the meaning of the dream. The king and his court subsequently convert to Judaism. After the conversion, the king continues to receive instruction from the sage. The dialogue

¹ *Kitāb al-Khazari*, David Baneth ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977). The *Kuzari* was translated into English by Hartwig Hirschfeld. All English translations from the *Kuzari* in this chapter are my own based on the Arabic original. I have consulted with Hirschfeld's translation (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), the medieval Hebrew translation of Yehudah Ibn Tibbon, and the modern Hebrew translations of Yehuda Even Shmuel (Tel Aviv: Dvir Publishing, 1972) and Joseph Kafih (Kiryat Ono, Israel: Machon Mishnat ha-Rambam, 1997). Both Hirschfeld and Even Shmuel frequently tend to translate quite freely, so the reader should exercise wariness when using their translations. Page numbers by the translated passages refer to Hirschfeld's translation unless otherwise noted. For a history of the Khazars, see D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967). The tale of the king's dream appears in the correspondence of the Khazar king to Ḥasdai Ibn Shaprut. For a translation of this correspondence, see Curt Leviant ed., *Masterpieces of Hebrew Literature* (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1969): 164-69. The authenticity of this correspondence is questionable, but its veracity was widely accepted by the Jews of Spain. It provided Halevi with the key "historical" elements upon which he based his fictional dialogue.

between the king and the sage covers the five sections of the *Kuzari*. At the end of the treatise, the sage begs his leave of the king in order to make his way to the Land of Israel.

Halevi — a physician by profession and a poet by calling — completed his treatise, written in Arabic, shortly before 1140 C.E., the year he left Spain to journey to the Holy Land. More than any other Jewish philosophical treatise, with the possible exception of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, the *Kuzari* influenced subsequent trends in Jewish thought. Like R. Saadiah's *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, it is a multi-layered work serving both as a defense and as an exposition of Judaism. It addresses Jews whose faith in their ancestral heritage has been weakened by challenges from diverse quarters. The very subtitle of this treatise, *The Book of Refutation and Proof of the Despised Faith*, highlights its most immediate goal. It too combines notions from traditional Jewish literature with those borrowed from the Islamic intellectual milieu.

The differences between these two treatises, however, are far more glaring than their similarities. Instead of the evident tight organization characterizing the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, a seemingly loosely structured dialogue between the Khazar king and the Jewish sage marks the *Kuzari*.² While R. Saadiah's treatise was apparently written over a short period of time, over twenty years separate the earlier and later drafts of the *Kuzari*.³ One is left with the distinct impression that Halevi retained in the treatise many of his earlier views, even after his approach underwent revision. Absent from the *Kuzari* is the unbridled faith in the power of the intellect to discover and reinforce the fundamental teachings of Judaism, a faith that characterizes R. Saadiah's thought. A decidedly ambivalent attitude towards intellection underlies Halevi's approach. Aristotelian philosophy, and not the theology of the *kalām*, epitomized "reason" for him.

² The structure of the *Kuzari* has been analyzed in detail by Eliezer Schweid in: *Feeling and Speculation* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Massadah Press, 1970): 37-79. Schweid argues that a much tighter organization characterizes the book than I have suggested here. In my view it is precisely the looseness of the organization that endows the dialogue with its authentic quality.

³ See S.D. Goitein, "The Biography of R. Judah Halevi in the Light of the Cairo Geniza Documents", *PAAJR*, 28 (1959): 41-56; idem., *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 5 (Los Angeles: University of California, 1988): 465.

The Aristotelian worldview was hardly in harmony with traditional Jewish doctrines. In the final version of the treatise, it is treated as the most dangerous of its antagonists, posing even a greater threat than do the other monotheistic religions. As opposed to R. Saadiah, Halevi often felt the need to emphasize the limits of human reason in order to bolster the foundations of Judaism.

Yet Halevi was far from an anti-rationalist. He was too greatly impressed by the enormity of the philosophers' intellectual achievement to dismiss it lightly, or to view it solely as a threat. Moreover, he was aware that the Islamic philosophers attempted to narrow the gap between philosophy and their religious tradition.⁴ Philosophy was viewed as a two edged sword, with one of its edges supporting and contributing to our comprehension of revelation.⁵ The *Kuzari* reflects Halevi's attempt to defend and understand Judaism at the same time that he wrestled with the challenge and attraction of the philosophers' worldview.

As is the case with any multi-layered text, the *Kuzari* has been subject to a wide variety of readings. Most have viewed it as a philosophical text. One can discern in it an underlying conceptual scheme, bolstered by rational argument, which ties its disparate parts together. Others considered Halevi's worldview to be more mystical than philosophical in character.⁶ Some have viewed this text primarily as apologetic, and dismissed any

⁴ *Kuzari* 4.3.

⁵ I have analyzed aspects of Halevi's complex attitude to philosophy in two previous studies: "Judah Halevi and the Problem of Philosophical Ethics [Heb.]", in: A. Sagi and D. Statman eds., *Between Religion and Ethics* (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan, 1993): 171-183; "Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*: Between the God of Abraham and the God of Aristotle", in: R. Munk, F.J. Hoogewoud eds., *Joodse filosofie tussen rede en traditie* (Kok-Kampen, 1993): 24-34. For an additional significant perspective on this issue see, Y. Tzvi Langerman, "Science and the *Kuzari*", *Science in Context*, 10 (1997): 495-522.

⁶ See Alexander Altmann, "The Climatological Factor in Judah Halevi's Theory of Prophecy [Heb.]", *Melilah*, 1 (1944): 15-16. The distinction between philosophic and mystical is a difficult one to delineate in this period in light of the fact that mystic elements mark the prevalent Aristotelian-Neoplatonic philosophic tradition. More recently Elliot Wolfson has shown the importance of earlier Jewish mystical conceptions in Halevi's thought. See "Merkavah Traditions in Philosophical Garb: Judah Halevi Reconsidered", *PAAJR*, 57 (1990-91): 179-242; idem. *Through a Speculum that Shines* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1994): 163-187.

Prophecy

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