

## *Misinterpreting Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi*

By: H. NORMAN STRICKMAN

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi (ca. 1075–1141) was one of the greatest Jewish poets of the middle ages. He was acclaimed by his contemporaries as “the quintessence and embodiment of our country, our refuge and leader, an illustrious scholar of unique and perfect piety.”<sup>1</sup> He was not only a great poet but also a great Jewish thinker. His philosophical work the *Kuzari*, which was written in Judeo-Arabic, is one of the great philosophical texts to come out of the Middle Ages. Many place it alongside Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch who was very critical of Maimonides’ philosophy points to Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi as one of those “very few [who] stood with their intellectual efforts entirely within Judaism, and built it up of its inner concepts.”<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna (1720–1797), taught, “The *Kuzari* is holy and pure, and the fundamentals of Israel’s faith and the Torah are contained within it.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the major points of the *Kuzari* is that God revealed himself to Israel and that no nation aside from Israel has the ability of receiving Divine revelation (*Inyan Ha-Elohi*).<sup>4</sup> *Inyan Ha-Elohi* is a potential power. Not

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence J. Kaplan, “‘The Starling’s Caw’: Judah Halevi as Philosopher, Poet, and Pilgrim,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Volume 101, Number 1, Winter 2011.

<sup>2</sup> R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters on Judaism*, (NY: Feldheim, 1969) pp. 121-122.

<sup>3</sup> Yehuda Even Shmuel, *Sefer Ha-Kuzari Le-Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi*, Tel Aviv 1972, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Josef Kafich renders *alamr elalabi* as *Ha-Davar Ha-Elohi*. However, Judah ibn Tibbon, the first translator of the *Kuzari* into Hebrew, renders *Alamr Elalabi* as

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every Jew is a prophet, but every Israelite is a potential possessor of the *Inyan Ha-Elobi*.

Other nations can learn from Israel. They can convert to Judaism. The converts can be Torah scholars. They can be paragons of piety. They cannot, however, be prophets, for they have not inherited the potential to receive the Divine Element.

Any Gentile who joins us unconditionally shares our good fortune without, however, being quite equal to us, because we are the treasure<sup>5</sup> of mankind.<sup>6</sup>

The *Inyan Ha-Elobi* was first possessed by Adam. Adam “was ... perfect in body and mind. No flaw can be found in a work of a wise and Almighty Creator, wrought from a substance chosen by Him, and fashioned according to His own design...<sup>7</sup> Adam left many children, of whom the only one capable of taking his place was Abel, because he alone...” possessed the *Inyan Ha-Elobi*. After Abel was slain by Cain ... the potential of receiving the *Inyan Ha-Elobi* passed to his brother Seth.<sup>8</sup>

The potential for receiving the *Inyan Ha-Elobi* was then passed on to select individuals from generation to generation. Noah inherited this potential as did Shem and Eber. The potential for receiving the *Inyan Ha-Elobi* was eventually passed on to Abraham. Abraham passed on this potential to Isaac, “to the exclusion of the other sons who were all removed from the land, the special inheritance of Isaac.” From Isaac the potential of receiving the *Inyan Ha-Elobi* passed on to Jacob. Henceforth the potential of receiving the *Inyan Ha-Elobi* remained in the possession of the Jewish people.<sup>9</sup> This is the reason God chose them to be “His special treasure”<sup>10</sup> and a “kingdom of priests” and a “holy nation.”<sup>11</sup>

While the greatest minds in Judaism have nothing but praise for the *Kuzari*, a number of modern writers have strongly attacked Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi. The Israeli journalists Yuval Elbashan and Sefi Rachelevsky; Rabbi Israel Drazin of Maryland and the late and noted Israeli thinker Dr.

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*Ha-Inyan Ha-Elobi* (the Divine). Most of the translators of the *Kuzari* followed suit. This is the term we employ in this essay.

<sup>5</sup> Arabic, *altzafu'ab*. Ibn Tibbon, Even Shemuel and Kapach render this as *segullah*. See Ex. 19:6: “Ye shall be Mine own treasure (*segullah*) from among all peoples.”

<sup>6</sup> *Judah Halevi's Kitab al Khazari*. Translated by Hartwig Hirschfeld, 1905, 1:27

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 1:95

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ex. 19:5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. v. 6.

Yeshayau Leibowitz are representatives of those who are, to say the very least, uncomfortable with the *Kuzari*. Yuval Elbasha writes:

I never liked the *Kuzari*. Since the first time I was exposed to the contents of this 12th-century Jewish apologia written by Golden Age philosopher, physician and poet Rabbi Yehuda Halevy, I viewed it as a racist book whose goal was to elevate the People of Israel above others. I sensed that the book's claims about the choosiness of Israel exempted us from basic moral constraints and caused us to close our eyes to unending acts of wrongdoing and abuse perpetrated against those who are under our control.<sup>12</sup>

According to Elbasha, not only is Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi a racist but he is responsible for the policies of today's Israeli government in Judea and Samaria, which Elbasha considers to be a series of "wrong doing and abuse perpetrated" against those who are under Israel's control. According to Elbasha,

The *Kuzari* appears to say that the world is comprised of different strata. On the bottom there is the somnolent world, in the middle is the animal kingdom and above is the world of man. In the somnolent stratum there is nature; in the animal layer, there are matters spirit and emotion; and on the human level, there is rationality. In the stratum above man there is something the *Kuzari* calls "the divine matter;" in Halevy's breakdown of the world, this stratum avails itself only to Jews. Under this system, the reason for Jewish superiority is not that Gentiles are not human beings; it derives from the fact that non-Jews are only human beings. According to Halevy, the people of Israel exist on a more elevated level, and only Jews have the ability to connect to the divine stratum... It would be difficult to express a more blunt form of racism.<sup>13</sup>

Sefi Rachelevsky, an Israeli journalist, claims that the *Kuzari* teaches that non-Jews are nothing more than talking animals. He writes:

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi maintained that there are four levels in nature: inanimate, vegetable, animal, speaker. The speaker is the talking animal, the Gentile. Above them is the fifth and highest level, the Jew,

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<sup>12</sup> Yuval Elbasha. "How I learned to love 'The Kuzari'," *Ha-Aretz*, Feb. 14:2013. This is a total distortion of R. Judah Ha-Levi's views.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

the only one defined as a human being and human rights exist for him alone.<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Yeshayahu Leibowitz claims that Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi believes that once one has achieved the status of belonging to a holy people it is no longer necessary for them to observe the commandments for one is already holy.<sup>15</sup>

Rabbi Israel Drazin similarly attacks Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi's thesis. He writes:

Yehudah Halevi... holds the extreme view that Jews are inherently superior to non-Jews. He insists that Jews are the only people that God loves; God gives Jews special attention and even unearned assistance. Only Jews receive prophecy, which is an exclusive valuable gift from God, expressing his love for the Jews. Jews are smarter and more virtuous; they, and only they, with perhaps a few exceptions, are granted life after death.

Thus, to illustrate Halevi's view of non-Jewish converts to Judaism: one cannot convert a camel into a sheep by a conversion process of immersion and circumcision because one is left with a clean and circumcised camel, but the camel is still not a sheep.<sup>16</sup>

Elbashan, Rachelevsky, Leibowitz and Drazin represent the opinion of many who are strongly opposed to Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi's concept of the Jews as being carriers of the *Inyan Ha-Elohi*.

Dr. Micah Goodman, of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and the Hebrew University, recently published a work on Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi.<sup>17</sup> He argues that the "*chaver*," the representative of Judaism in the *Kuzari*, does not necessarily represent the views of Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi. He argues that the Book is a dialogue and in a dialogue various sides are presented. In other words, according to Dr. Goodman, Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi does not really believe that Jews are the carriers of the *Inyan Ha-*

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<sup>14</sup> Sefi Rachlevsky, "The laws of education for violence," *Ha-aretz*, Sep. 8, 2010. See also Sefi Rachlevsky, *Chamoro shel Mashi'ach* (Israel 1998), p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "*Sheva Shanim Shel Sichot al parshat ha-shav'ah*," pp. 680-681. This is a totally wrong reading of R. Judah Ha-Levi. R. Judah Ha-Levi requires one to observe both the ritual and ethical laws before he is worthy and can activate the *Inyan Ha-Elohi*.

<sup>16</sup> Israel Drazin, *The Mistaken Theology Of Yehudah Halevi*. <booksnthoughts.com/the-mistaken-theology-of-yehudah-halevi/>.

<sup>17</sup> Micah Goodman, *The Dream of the Kuzari* (Or Yehudah: Dvir, 2012).

*Elohi*.<sup>18</sup> He mentions it because it was a view held by some Jews. However, he personally rejects it.

The *Kuzari* opens as follows:

I was asked to state what arguments and replies I could bring to bear against the attacks of philosophers and followers of other religions, and also against [Jewish] sectarians who attacked the rest of Israel. This reminded me of something I had once heard concerning the arguments of a Rabbi who sojourned with the King of the Khazars. The latter, as we know from historical records, became a convert to Judaism about four hundred years ago. To him came a dream, and it appeared as if an angel addressed him, saying: 'Thy way of thinking is indeed pleasing to the Creator, but not thy way of acting.' Yet he was so zealous in the performance of the *Khazar* religion, that he devoted himself with a perfect heart to the service of the temple and sacrifices. Notwithstanding this devotion, the angel came again at night and repeated: 'Thy way of thinking is pleasing to God, but not thy way of acting.' This caused him to ponder over the different beliefs and religions, and finally become a convert to Judaism together with many other Khazars. As I found, among the arguments of the Rabbi, many which appealed to me, and were in harmony with my own opinions, I resolved to write them down exactly as they had been spoken.<sup>19</sup> The wise will understand.<sup>20</sup>

“The wise will understand” in Jewish Medieval writing usually indicates that there is a hidden meaning in the text. According to Goodman what Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi is hinting at is that he doesn’t necessarily agree with everything the *Chaver* says, namely that the Jews and only the Jews are the carriers of the *Inyan Ha-Elohi*.

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<sup>18</sup> Elbasha changed his mind regarding R. Judah Ha-Levi after he read Goodman’s book. Hence the title of Elbasha’s article: “How I learned to love ‘The Kuzari.’” It should be noted that Isaac Heinemann first put forth this idea that Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi did not seriously believe that Jews were biologically superior to non-Jews. See Introduction to “Yehudah Halevi: Kuzari,” *Three Jewish Philosophers* (NY: Toby, 1981) p. 24. See also Lippman Bodoff, “Was Yehuda Halevi Racist?,” *Judaism*, 38 (Spring 1989), p. 175.

<sup>19</sup> *Book of Kuzari*. Translated by Hartwig Hirschfeld. New York, 1946, p. 31.

<sup>20</sup> Hirschfeld omits the words “the wise will understand.” I cannot fathom why he did so. The words are found in the Arabic original and in all the other translations of the *Kuzari* such as Ibn Tibbon, Even Shemu’al and Shilat. “The wise will understand” usually indicates that the writer does not want to be explicit about a sensitive issue and leaves it to the reader to ascertain his intention. For an example see Ibn Ezra to Gen. 12:6 and Lev, 12:6.

However, this is not necessarily true. According to the plain reading of the text, “The wise will understand” refers to what immediately precedes, namely, the account of the king’s conversion. It means that the wise will understand that the *Kuzari* does not contain a verbatim record of the dialogue between the King and the *Chaver* but that the dialogue in the *Kuzari* was produced by Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi.

The truth of the matter is that the idea of the Jews being the carriers of the *Inyan Ha-Elohi* is not seriously challenged in the *Kuzari*. The King of the Khazars, early on in the book, questions the *Chaver’s* assertion that Israel is a unique people. He asks, How can Israel be a superior nation when they made a golden calf after experiencing the revelation on Mount Sinai?<sup>21</sup>

The question is answered by maintaining that the golden calf was not worshipped as a god, but was an instrument used to focus the mind when worshipping God. The sin of Israel consisted in utilizing the golden calf as an object in religious ritual.<sup>22</sup> The worship of the calves in Dan and Bet El is explained away in the same manner.

In order to accept Dr. Goodman’s thesis we must deconstruct the *Kuzari*. We must say that Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi did not really believe the argument put forward by the *Chaver*, that the worship of the golden calf and the worship of the calves in Bet El and Dan did not really entail idol worship, and that Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi identifies with the charge of the king of the Khazars that the supposed superiority of Jews is an exaggeration. This, however, is a stretch. It turns the *Kuzari* on its head. If Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi concealed his true belief as to Israel’s potential possession of the *Inyan Ha-Elohi*, then he really succeeded, for no one from 1140 when the *Kuzari* was published until 2012, when Goodman published his work, unraveled its true meaning.

Dr. Goodman’s thesis is not based on an objective study of Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi’s thought. He put forth this interpretation to safeguard Rabbi Judah’s Ha-Levi’s reputation from the charge of racism.<sup>23</sup>

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi claims, regarding Israel’s place in God’s plan, that it did not, as claimed by Elbashin, exempt Jews from basic moral constraints. Nor did it teach “that once one has achieved the status of belonging to a holy people it is no longer necessary for him or her to observe the commandments for one is already holy” as claimed by

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<sup>21</sup> *Kuzari* 1:7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 1:92.

<sup>23</sup> Yitzchak Silat, “Segulat Yisrael enah gizanut,” *Makor Rishon*, Jan. 4, 2013.

Leibowitz. In fact Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi was opposed to everything that Elbashin and Leibowitz ascribe to him.<sup>24</sup>

True, Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi argues that there are five levels of being: mineral, plant, animal, human, and prophet. He does not, however, say that there are five levels of being: mineral, plant, animal, human, and Jew.

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi is not speaking politically. He is not preaching bigotry. He is not implying that people who have the potential to receive the *Inyan Ha-Elohi* are destined to rule over people who do not possess the *Inyan Ha-Elohi*. Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi does not propose that people who do not possess the potential to receive the *Inyan Ha-Elohi* should be enslaved. He is not saying that people who do not possess the potential for the *Inyan Ha-Elohi* should be denied human rights. He does not say that people who do not possess the *Inyan Ha-Elohi* be segregated. He says that the person who possesses the *Inyan Ha-Elohi* is in a unique category.<sup>25</sup> He asks:

If we find a man who walks into the fire without hurt,<sup>26</sup> or abstains from food for some time without starving,<sup>27</sup> on whose face a light shines which the eye cannot bear,<sup>28</sup> who is never ill, nor ages, until having reached his life's natural end,<sup>29</sup> who dies spontaneously just as a man retires to his couch to sleep on an appointed day and hour,<sup>30</sup> equipped with the knowledge of what is hidden as to past and future:<sup>31</sup> is such a degree not visibly distinguished from the ordinary human degree?...

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<sup>24</sup> According to Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi, in order for a person to be a prophet he has to observe all the moral and ritual laws of the Torah.

<sup>25</sup> See Ehud Krinis's letter to the Editor in *Ha-Aretz* 9/13/10:

ר' יהודה הלוי עצמו כתב את "ספר הכוזרי" כחיבור הגותי ולא כחיבור הלכתי. המסקנות שהוא גוזר מן ההבחנה בין הדרגה הרביעית של "המדבר" (היא דרגת "העניין השכלי") לדרגה החמישית של נבחר האל (היא דרגת "העניין האלוהי") אינן מתייחסות ל"זכויות האדם" - מושג מודרני, שהוא זר למחבר שחי במאות ה-11-12 - אלא לטבע העל-אנושי של הנבחרים הנמצאים בדרגה העליונה, כפי שהוא משתקף בתופעות הייחודיות של הנבואה ושל שלטון הרצון האלוהי במהלך ההיסטוריה של עם ישראל.

<sup>26</sup> Kafich (p. 13) believes that the reference is to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan. 3). However, what follows shows that the reference is to Moses who ascended Mt. Sinai which was ablaze with fire. See Ex. 19:18-19.

<sup>27</sup> The reference is to Moses. See Ex. 34:28.

<sup>28</sup> The reference is to Moses. See Ex. 34: 29–35.

<sup>29</sup> Deut. 34:5–8.

<sup>30</sup> *Sifrei, Ha'azinu*.

<sup>31</sup> *Sifrei*, Deut 34:2. See also Rashi.

Such an individual is in a special class by himself. He is of the divine and seraphic degree... [he] belongs to the province of the divine influence, but not to that of the intellectual, human, or natural world.

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi says not that every Israelite is “of the divine and seraphic degree,” but only that every Israelite has the potential of being a prophet under certain conditions.<sup>32</sup> Israel’s place in God’s plan did not, according to Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi, exempt Jews from basic moral constraints, as claimed by Elbashin. Nor did it teach “that once one has achieved the status of belonging to a holy people it is no longer necessary for him or her to observe the commandments for one is already holy” as claimed by Leibowitz.

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi did not consider non-Jews as talking animals as claimed by Rachelevsky and Drazin. He considers Christians and Moslem as rational beings.

Those parts of the *Kuzari* that feature the points of view presented by Islam, Christianity and philosophy display a respect for those who hold these views. They are not pictured as irrational beasts. Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi was opposed to everything that Elbashin, Rachelevsky, Leibowitz and Drazin ascribe to him.<sup>33</sup>

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi argues that there are five levels of being: mineral, plant, animal, human, and prophet. He then goes on to describe the prophet. Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi says not that every Israelite is a prophet, but only that every Israelite has the potential of being a prophet. Furthermore, while the convert himself cannot be a prophet his descendants can.<sup>34</sup>

A convert must undergo circumcision, for “circumcision is a divine symbol, ordained by God relating to the organs of overpowering desire. This sign was placed on these organs so that they be defeated and so that he use them in a fit manner, by placing his seed in a proper place, in a proper time and in a proper mode. If he does so then he has the possibility

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<sup>32</sup> Observing the commandments of the Torah and living in the Land of Israel at a time when the Temple in Jerusalem is in existence.

<sup>33</sup> According to Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi, in order for a person to be a prophet he has to observe all the moral and ritual laws of the Torah.

<sup>34</sup> Contrary to Drazin’s claim regarding Halevi’s view of non-Jewish converts to Judaism: [that is] “one cannot convert a camel into a sheep by a conversion process of immersion and circumcision because one is left with a clean and circumcised camel, but the camel is still not a sheep,” see note 16.



of having praiseworthy seed that will succeed in receiving the Divine element.”<sup>35</sup>

It should be noted that Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi’s theory that non-Jews cannot be prophets is nuanced. The *Kuzari* opens with an angel of God appearing to the King of the Khazar with an oracle. The angel tells the King, Your intentions are good, but your deeds are not.

The opening of the *Kuzari* presents a problem. The appearance of an angel is a type of prophecy. In fact the Bible records many prophecies that come via an angel. The book thus opens with a prophetic revelation to a non-Jew and then goes on to say that non-Jews cannot be prophets, even if they convert to Judaism.<sup>36</sup>

The appearance of the angel to the king of the Khazars recalls the appearance of angels to non-Jews in Scripture.

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi wrote for an audience that was well acquainted with Scripture. They could not fail to make the connection between the appearance of angels in Scripture and the appearance of the angel in the *Kuzari*.

The Bible records a number of encounters with angels who bring divine messages to non-Jews. When angels appear to non-Jews in Scripture, it is never for the revelations of Laws. It is to save them, to inform them of future events, or to prevent them from doing evil. Two angels appear to Lot to save him from being destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>37</sup> The Lord appears to Abimelekh and tells him not to touch Sarah but to restore her to Abraham.<sup>38</sup> God appears to Laban and tells him not

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<sup>35</sup> *Kuzari*: 1:114. My translation of Kafich’s and Shilat’s Hebrew version of the *Kuzari*. See David Berger, “Jews, Gentiles, and the Modern Egalitarian Ethos: Some Tentative Thoughts,” *Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, “The divine element can somehow be attained [by descendants of a convert] within two generations through spiritual effort.” Also see Dov Shyarts, “Central Problems of Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” p. 87, “In the first generation... [converts] remain excluded from prophecy... [However,] the Divine Element can be attained within two generations.” Lippman Bodoff quotes a contrary view in “Was Yehuda Halevi Racist?,” *Judaism* 38 (Spring 1989), p. 175, fn. 10. One thing is certain. Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi never said that descendants of converts cannot be prophets. Had Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi believed it he would have said so. I believe that this segment indicates that the reason a convert cannot be a prophet is because he was not conceived in holiness.

<sup>36</sup> This apparent anomaly in the *Kuzari* is one of the reasons that Dr. Goodman claims that the Chaver’s assertion that only Jews can be prophets does not really represent the opinion of Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi.

<sup>37</sup> Gen. 19:1–24.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 20:1–7.

to harm Jacob.<sup>39</sup> Pharaoh has two dreams predicting a coming famine.<sup>40</sup> The Lord appears to Balaam and warns him not to curse Israel.<sup>41</sup> God reveals the future to Nebuchadnezzar, in a dream.<sup>42</sup>

The appearance of the angel of God to the king of the Khazars is similar to the above. The angel tells the king, “Your intentions are good, but your deeds are not.” The angel does not tell the king what deeds are pleasing to God. Such a revelation is vouchsafed for those who possess the *Inyan Ha-Elahi*.

The angel keeps on reappearing to the king. This eventually leads the king on a quest to find the way that is satisfying to God. When the king finds the way pleasing to God he and many of his people convert to Judaism.

According to Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi, non-Jews are not cut off from connection to God. They are cut off from the revelation of mitzvot, or a new religion.

What led Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi to believe that only Jews have the potential for the *Inyan Ha-Elahi*?<sup>43</sup> There are those who believe that Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi was trying to inspire a discouraged Jewry.<sup>44</sup>

In the twelfth century the Jews were under the heel of the Christians and Muslims. The first crusade had devastated the Jewish communities of the Rhineland. Islam was on the march. Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi asked, “Is there in the east or in the west a place where we can hope to be secure?”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 31:24.

<sup>40</sup> See Gen. 41:25, “For what God is about to do He hath declared unto Pharaoh.”

<sup>41</sup> Num. 22:12.

<sup>42</sup> Dan. 2:29.

<sup>43</sup> Shlomo Pines and Ehud Krinis believe that Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi was influenced by Moslem thinking and took the idea of the *Inyan Ha-Elahi* from the Shi'ites. The Shi'ites believe that a divine light is passed down through the descendants of Ali the son-in-law of Mohamed. Only one from the line of Ali can be a Shi'ite imam and possess the Divine light. This is not exactly what Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi teaches. Krinis, however, believes that Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi reshaped the Shi'ite idea for his own purposes. See Ehud Krinis, “God’s Chosen People: Judah Halevi’s Kuzari and the Shi’i Imam Doctrine,” *Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (N.V. Brepols Pub, February 28, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> See Lippman Bodoff, “Was Yehuda Halevi Racist?,” *Judaism* 38 (Spring 1989), p. 176. [Ha-Levi’s] “primary reason for writing the *Kuzari* was to prevent Jews from weakening in their faith, faced as they were with the ascendancy of Islam and their own degradation.” See also, Hillel Halkin, “Yehuda Halevi” (Schocken, 2010), and Micah Goodman, “The Dream of the Kuzari” (*Or Yehudah*, Dvir, 2012).

<sup>45</sup> S.M. Urbach in *Amudei Ha-Machshavah Ha-Yisraelit*, Jerusalem 1971, p. 248.

The Jews were “of low station, few in number, and generally despised.”<sup>46</sup> They were looked upon “as people of reduced condition... [whose] misery left them nothing commendable.”<sup>47</sup>

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi's response was that the Jews are far from being a God-forsaken people. They are, whether the world knows it or not, the “*segullab*” of mankind. They served as a link with God in the past, do so in the present and will continue to do the same in the future.

In reality, however, there is more than an attempt to uplift the Jewish ego in Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi's theory. Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi's assertion that the Jews are the carriers of the *Inyan Ha-Elohi* is based on his reading of Holy Scripture.

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi lived in an age of faith. He, like all Jews, Christians and Moslems of his age believed that if the Holy Scripture says something, then it is so. Genesis states:

Now the Lord said unto Abram: ‘Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing. And I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse; and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed’ (Gen. 12:1-3).

Exodus reads:

Now therefore, if ye will hearken unto My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be Mine own treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine; and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Ex.19:5-6).

Deuteronomy reads:

For thou art a holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to be His own treasure out of all peoples that are upon the face of the earth (Deut. 14:2).

Dr. Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem writes:

I believe that the idea of choosiness must remain central to how we understand ourselves. That we are a chosen people is a core aspect of what it means to be Jewish. It is rooted in the origins of our people, in the biblical narratives of Abraham and in the redemption and revelation that made us who we are. Exodus 19 says it in three different ways. First, we are an *am segullah*, precious to God, as well

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<sup>46</sup> *Kuzari* 1:4.

<sup>47</sup> *Kuzari* 1:12.

as *mamleket kohanim*, God's nation of priests, and a holy nation or people, a *goy kadosh*. It is significant that this is how God names us at the moment we are given the Torah with its commandments to create an ethical society. I understand these three statements to mean that from ancient times to the present era, whether we were celebrated or decimated, we understood ourselves to be precious, priestly, and holy.<sup>48</sup>

Rabbi Shai Held of Mechon Hadar similarly notes:

So central is election to the Bible that contemporary Jews who wish to have a theology rooted in scripture have no choice but to reckon with choosiness. To jettison the language of closeness, I fear, is to jettison the Bible itself.<sup>49</sup>

Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi and Shai Held are non-orthodox thinkers. Can we expect anything less from Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi? For Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi, to deny Israel's choosiness was tantamount to heresy.

The question that Rabbi Judah faced was: Why did God choose the Jews to be His own treasure (*segullah*)? According to Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi, God did not choose Israel because of political considerations. He chose Israel as the carrier of His word to mankind. Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi compared Israel to a seed planted in the soil which turns its environment into a plant identical to itself.

God has a secret and wise design concerning us, which should be compared to the wisdom hidden in the seed which falls into the ground, where it undergoes an external transformation into earth, water and dirt, without leaving a trace for him who looks down upon it. It is, however, the seed itself which transforms earth and water into its own substance, carries it from one stage to another, until it refines the elements and transfers them into something like itself, casting off husks, leaves, etc., and allowing the pure core to appear, capable of bearing the Divine Influence. The original seed produced the tree bearing fruit resembling that from which it had been produced. In the same manner the law of Moses transforms each one who honestly follows it.

Christianity and Islam took many elements of their religions from Judaism "to pave the way for the expected Messiah, who is the fruition, and they will all become His fruit. Then, after they acknowledge Him, they

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<sup>48</sup> <<http://shma.com/2015/02/are-jews-chosen>>.

<sup>49</sup> <<http://shma.com/2015/02/a-bolt-from-the-blue>>.

will become one tree. Then they will revere the origin which they formerly despised.”<sup>50</sup>

If Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi was a bigot, if he believed that non-Jews are animals, would he say that Israel and the nations are destined to become one tree? If Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi was a bigot, would he believe that the descendants of converts could be prophets?<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore it must be emphasized that the defense of the Jewish people was not Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi’s only concern in writing the *Kuzari*. The *Kuzari* is a defense of Judaism, God’s revealed law.

The major part of the *Kuzari* is devoted to explaining Judaism. Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi deals with the attributes of God, the reasons for the Divine commandments, free will, the world to come, and the religious life.

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi called his work “The Book of the Khazars: In Defense of the Despised Faith.” He did not call his work “The Book of the Khazars: In Defense of a Despised People.”

The *Kuzari* opens with a description of the King of the Khazars seeking a religion. It does not open with the king of the Khazars seeking a nation.

As noted above Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi believed that the world would ultimately accept Judaism. In other words Judaism was eternally valid. This was not, however, the position of Islam, Christianity, and philosophy. The Moslems and Christians argued that their religions replaced Judaism. The Moslems argued, “Our prophet is the Seal of the prophets,

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<sup>50</sup> *Kuzari* 4:23. Maimonides had a similar concept: “The thoughts of the Creator of the world are not within the power of man to reach them, ‘for our ways are not His ways, nor are our thoughts His thoughts.’ And all these matters of Jesus of Nazareth and that of the Ishmaelite who arose after him are only to straighten the way of the king Messiah and to fix the entire world, to serve God as one, as it is stated (Zephaniah 3:9), ‘For then I will turn to the peoples (into) clear speech, to all call in the name of G-d and serve Him unanimously.’ [12] How (will this come about)? The entire world has already become filled with the mention of the Messiah, with words of Torah and words of mitzvos, and these matters have spread to the furthestmost isles, to many nations of uncircumcised hearts, and they discuss these matters and the mitzvot of the Torah. Some say: ‘These mitzvot are true, but were already nullified in the present age and are not applicable for all time.’ Others say: ‘Hidden matters are in them (mitzvos) and they are not to be taken literally, and the messiah has already come and revealed their hidden (meanings).’ And when the true Messiah stands, and he is successful and is raised and exalted, immediately they all will retract and will know that fallacy they inherited from their fathers, and that their prophets and fathers caused them to err.” (*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings*, 11:10–12.)

<sup>51</sup> See note 33.

who abrogated every previous law, and invited all nations to embrace Islam.”<sup>52</sup>

The Christians argued, “We belong to their number. Although we are not of Israelite descent, we are well deserving of being called Children of Israel (that is, we are the chosen people) because we follow the messiah.”<sup>53</sup>

Medieval philosophy offered a major challenge to traditional Judaism. It taught that the way to God is through the intellect. The observance of commandments of the Torah is of no consequence.<sup>54</sup>

Philosophy teaches that he “who is equipped with the highest capacity, receives through it the advantages of disposition, intelligence and active power. . . . wants nothing to make him perfect.”<sup>55</sup> The philosopher tells the king, “seek purity of heart in which way thou are able, provided thou hast acquired the sum total of knowledge in its real essence; then thou wilt reach thy goal, viz. the union with this Spiritual, or rather Active Intellect. Maybe he will communicate with thee or teach thee the knowledge of what is hidden through true dreams and positive visions.”<sup>56</sup>

The philosopher does not seek God in order to establish a relationship with God. The philosopher does not fear God for the sake of reward, nor does he refrain from committing crimes because of fear of Divine punishment. According to the philosopher, God does not know man and is not concerned with him.<sup>57</sup> The philosophers hold these beliefs because philosophy is not based on revelation.

The concept of the *Inyan Ha-Elohi* is vital to Judah Ha-Levi's defense of Judaism. Judah Ha-Levi is arguing that Judaism cannot be displaced by another religion, or by any philosophy, for their teachings are not based on Divine revelation.

Judah Ha-Levi's assertion that only the Jews are the bearers of the *Inyan Elbohi* is directed at the claim of the Christians and Muslims that Islam and Christianity have replaced Judaism. It is similarly directed at the philosopher who believes that religious rituals are meaningless and that philosophy is the only way to achieve perfection and gain immortality.

Judah Ha-Levi's thesis, that only Jews possess the potential for the *Inyan Ha-Elohi*, is thus an argument for the eternal validity of Judaism. If the way to religious truth is through the *Inyan Ha-Elohi* then Islam, Christianity and philosophy cannot supplant Judaism.

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<sup>52</sup> *Kuzari*: 1:5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*: 1:4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*: 1:1.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

Islam cannot supplant Judaism for Mohammed was not Jewish and could therefore not be a prophet and have the *Inyan Ha-Elohi*.

Christianity cannot supplant Judaism because Christians do not possess the *Inyan Ha-Elohi*. How can they when they do not observe the mitzvot of the Torah and the observance of the Commandments is a basic requirement for the *Inyan Elohi* to rest on a person? Judah Ha-Levi points out that Jesus knew this. He therefore said, "I came not to destroy one of the laws of Moses, but I came to confirm and support it."<sup>58</sup>

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi's claim, that only very special Jews possess the *Inyan Ha-Elohi*, is the ultimate refutation of Moslem, Christian and philosopher arguments that they have replaced Judaism.<sup>59</sup>

Dr. Meir Soloveitchik argues that "It is not unreasonable to suggest that... the key to Jewish survival [is] the belief that the individual Jew must maintain his Jewishness because he is the beloved of God. This belief found expression not simply in creed but also in Jewish practice. The dedication of generations of Jews to Jewish law was not out of a blind sense of duty, but out of a firm belief that these laws were the expression of the Creator's special love for the Jewish people, and their betrayal would be a betrayal of that love. It is this belief, perhaps above all else, which sustained Jewish communities through the hardships of exile, persecution, and pogrom. And it may still."<sup>60</sup>

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi's critics identify his theory of the *Inyan Elohi* with modern genetics. Hence they end up charging Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi with racism. *Inyan Elohi*, however, is not a gene. It is not subject to genetic engineering. You can't experiment with it, as you do with genes. It has no genetic markers. It cannot be injected. There is no *Inyan Elohi* gene.

The *Inyan Elohi* is a divine gift. It does not belong to the world of physics. It is in the realm of metaphysics. It pertains not to the natural but to the realm of the supernatural. It is in "the province of the divine" and not of the "human, or natural world."

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<sup>58</sup> *Kuzari* 1:4.

<sup>59</sup> See Lippman Bodoff, "Was Yehuda Halevi Racist?" *Judaism* 38 (Spring 1989), p. 177. "For Halevi, therefore the inability of even converts to Judaism to achieve the level of prophecy is not a matter of Xenophobia but a matter of sound reasoning and experience. If individuals or groups could become spiritually equal to the Jewish people through an act of will and intellect, the true religion would have developed naturally, without the need for God's revelation."

<sup>60</sup> Meir Soloveitchik, "God's Beloved: A Defense of Choosiness," *Azure* 2005.

One may disagree with Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi's interpretation of *am segullab*. In fact, according to some, Maimonides apparently did,<sup>61</sup> but one should not misrepresent what he taught. ❧

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<sup>61</sup> See David Hartman, "Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest" (Jewish Publication Society, 2002) p. 267, note 73. Yitzhak *Shilat*, *Iggarot Ha-Rambam*, (Jerusalem, Maale Adumim, 1995), p. 234; James A. Diamond, "Maimonides and the Convert: A Juridical and Philosophical Embrace of the Outsider," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 125–146; Isador Twersky, "Introduction to the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides" (Hebrew), (Jerusalem, 1991), p. 34.