

Time Servers

Time-servers are the cowering slaves of slaves,
Alone on earth, who serves the Lord is free,
Each soul shall win the gift that it most craves;
Seek God, my soul -- God shall your portion be!

Yehudah ha-Levi

"O My Lord, Your Dwelling Places Are Lovely"

O My Lord, Your dwelling places are lovely
Your Presence is manifest, not in mystery.
My dream brought me to the Temple of God
And I praised its delightful servants,
And the burnt offering, its meal and libation
Which rose up in great pillars of smoke.
I delighted in the song of the Levites,
In their secrets of the sacrificial service.
Then I woke, and still I was with you, O Lord,
And I gave thanks - for to You it is pleasant to give thanks!

Yehudah ha-Levi

The Grey Hair

One day I observed a grey hair in my head;
I plucked it right out, when it thus to me said:
"You may smile, if you wish, at your treatment of me,
But a score of my friends soon will make of you a mockery."

Yehudah ha-Levi

A SELECTION OF HIS POEMS IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

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THE POEMS

TO THE SOUL

Oh, you that sleep in the bosom of childhood, how long will you rest there? Know that youth is shaken off like straw! Do you think boyhood lasts for ever? Get up, go out and see the grey heralds, who have come to rebuke you. Shake off Time as birds shake off the dew-drops of the night. Soar like a swallow to find freedom from your sins and from the vagaries of Fortune, that rage like a sea. Pursue your King, at one with the souls who flock towards the bounty of God.

Translated by T. Carmi

from [The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse](#), edited by T. Carmi

THE APPLE

You have enslaved me with your lovely body;
 You have put me in a kind of prison.
 Since the day we parted,
 I have found nothing that is like your beauty.
 So I comfort myself with a ripe apple—

Its fragrance reminds me of the myrrh of your breath,
Its shape of your breasts, its color
Of the color that used to rise to your cheeks.

Translated by Robert Mezey

SONG

Let the morning pursue me
with the wind that senses her body.
Let the clouds carry my message.
Then might she yield.

Lying in the constellation of The Bear,
have pity, gazelle, on him who must fly
to the stars to reach you.

Carl Rakosi

After Jehudah Halevi

From "Eight Songs and Meditations (1971-1975),"

in *The Collected Poems of Carl Rakosi*

(Orono, ME: The National Poetry Foundation/University of Maine, 1986).

CUPS WITHOUT WINE

Cups without wine are low things
Like a pot thrown to the ground,
But brimming with the juice, they shine
Like body and soul.

Translated by Robert Mezey

AYIN NEDIVAH ("GENEROUS EYE"):
QASIDA FOR SOLOMON IBN GHIYYAT

I can't stop crying.
My eyes are like peddler women.
What they buy is: you are gone.
What they sell is: tears,
And business is good:
Enough tears for a jeweled necklace.

I am weeping here in the ruins
Where lovers used to live.
I can't hear a thing.
I can't say a word.
Wasn't it enough for you
To break our home when you left?
Why did you break my heart?

The place doesn't even look the same.
I don't even recognize it.
Only my heart tells me if I am in the right place;
My eyes deny it.

Good luck on your journey.
You take with you the tears that I gave you
And my sleep that you stole.

I could forget my lover
Were it not for the stars
Which remind me.

The moon is conspiring against the sun, her king.
She thinks he has gone traveling in the Western Sea
And drowned.
Unsheathing her swords of lightning
She strikes the earth's back with her staffs of fire.
The lightning bolts dance,
Swirl their golden skirts and sway.
The earth joins battle in its armor of darkness;
The stars hurl their javelins of light.
The moon flees and grows dim,
But now she stands on the face of the sky
Like a golden brooch on a cloak,
Her face red with the dust of battle
Like the face of a queen leading her armies.

I am a shepherd. My flock is the stars;
I herd them, leading them home.
They move as slowly as if they were sick or lame.

I weep for the Twins, who are always apart.
I am jealous of the Pleiades, who are together for eternity.
Does Orion reach out his hand to touch his neighbor?

Or to measure the distance between the spheres?

Where is the sun? Has its chariot broken a wheel?
Has the road it travels been cut off?
The gates of the East—are they locked?

When will ebony turn to pearls?
When will this black veil be lifted and the white cheek revealed?
I hate this night.
The moon looks to me
Like a scab on the skin of an African.

When I see the first tongues of fire, I shall rejoice.

A night like an African.
“Can the Ethiopian change his skin?”
A sky like a leopard,
Spotted with stars.
Dark forevermore.
I give up. My eyes will never see the warm sun. Too late.

A breeze is stealing between the trees,
Whispering to the willows a rumor of a secret love.
The birds are twittering.
Far away, a pigeon-dove murmurs a poem. As the night folds her wings,
A light rain of beauty is falling,
Raining down the dew of love like manna.
There is a fragrance like incense or myrrh.
Has Solomon sent me a poem, perfumed, wrapped to a pigeon-dove's
leg?
From the poem's lines of black letters, greetings break forth like the dawn,
Light amid the grey morning,
Letters ink-black as night, but words bright as the dawn,
Like a girl who hides her cheeks behind her dark hair.
A poem not just perfumed but mined from the hills of perfume!
“Comely am I and black,”
Pitch-black letters like the black tents of Kedar
On paper like the white tents of Solomon.

Marvels never seen: letters carved from fiery rock.
Shall these pages contain the flame of his words
Or will they feed the fire? When did fire not conquer straw?
These words are locked now within my heart,
Engraved there letter for letter

Placed there forever.
His poem is like a tapestry woven by the hands of thought,
Framed with beauty,
Worn like a crown.
His poem is like a song of jeweled fruit,
A song, a poem for the reader to taste.
My tongue shall sing it on a glass of wine.

Here, for you, are the fruits of my poetry
Ripe after months of waiting.
But for my love you need never wait.

A poem from your friend,
Whose fame has waited
Until after his best days.
Now he is so well known
That what he does not write
May be an oral tradition.

He follows generous friends
And seeks out their company.
He is never far away.
If they are a hand, he is their thumb.

Men sleep until the dawn awakes them,
But his soul is awake and his heart wakes the dawn,
To seek the love of his friend,
Pure love, inside and out.

Take from my clumsy lips these golden words of poetry;
Place them around your neck.
Wear them like a bracelet.
For they are daughters of love, mined from the hill of love,
Given to you for your love like a dowry.

The morning breeze warms the face of every lover,
But to me it shall always say: All is well with Solomon. Shalom.

Translated by Joseph Davis

THE MEETING OF THE STARS

The stars of the world have joined to-day.
'Mid the host on high none are found like these.

The Pleiads desire such unity,
For no breath can come between them.
The star of the east hath come to the west;
He hath found the sun among the daughters thereof.
He hath set up a bower of thick branches;
He hath made of them a tent for the sun.

Translated by Nina Salaman

from Heinrich Brody, ed., *Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi*
(Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1924, 1952).

THE FAIR MAIDEN

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.

Translated by Nina Salaman

from Heinrich Brody, ed., *Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi*
(Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1924, 1952).

(UNTITLED 1)

So we must be divided; sweetest, stay,
Once more, mine-eyes would seek thy glance's light.
At night I shall recall thee Thou, I pray,
Be mindful of the days of our delight.
Come to me in my dreams, I ask of thee,
And even in my dreams be gentle unto me.

If thou shouldst send me greeting in the grave,
The cold breath of the grave itself were sweet;
Oh, take my life, my life, 'tis all I have,
If it should make thee live, I do entreat.
I think that I shall hear when I am dead,
The rustle of thy gown, thy footsteps overhead.

Translated by Amy Levy

(from the German of Abraham Geiger)

From Lady Katie Magnus, *Jewish Portraits* (1888;
Rptd. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972).
(Also see Melvyn New, ed., *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings
of Amy Levy* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993).

(UNTITLED 2)

A dove of rarest worth
And sweet exceedingly;
Alas, why does she turn
And fly so far from me?
In my fond heart a tent,
Should aye prepared be.
My poor heart she has caught
With magic spells and wiles.
I do not sigh for gold,
But for her mouth that smiles;
Her hue it is so bright,
She half makes blind my sight,

* * * *

The day at last is here
Filled full of love's sweet fire
The twain shall soon be one,
Shall stay their fond desire.
Ah! would my tribe could chance
On such deliverance.

Translated by Amy Levy

(probably from the German of Abraham Geiger)
From Lady Katie Magnus, *Jewish Portraits* (1888;
Rptd. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972).

SONG

On the wind
in the cool of the evening
I send greetings to a friend.

I ask him only to remember the day
of our parting when we made a covenant
of love by an apple tree.

Carl Rakosi

After Jehudah Halevi

From "Eight Songs and Meditations (1971-1975),"

in *The Collected Poems of Carl Rakosi*

(Orono, ME: The National Poetry Foundation/University of Maine, 1986).

MEDITATION

How long will you remain a boy?

Dawns must end.

Behold the angels of old age.

Shake off temporal things then
the way a bird shakes off the night dew.

Dart like a swallow
from the raging ocean
of daily events
and pursue the Lord
in the intimate company
of souls flowing
into His virtue.

Carl Rakosi

After Jehudah Halevi

From "Eight Songs and Meditations (1971-1975),"

in *The Collected Poems of Carl Rakosi*

(Orono, ME: The National Poetry Foundation/University of Maine, 1986).

MY HEART IS IN THE EAST

My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west—

How can I find savour in food? How shall it be sweet to me?

How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while yet

Zion lieth beneath the fetter of Edom, and I in Arab chains?

A light thing would it seem to me to leave all the good things of Spain—
Seeing how precious in mine eyes to behold the dust of the desolate
sanctuary.

Translated by Nina Salaman

from Heinrich Brody, ed., *Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi*

(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1924, 1952).

FROM JEHUDA HALEVI'S SONGS TO ZION*

My heart in the East
and I at the farthest West:
how can I taste what I eat or find it sweet
while Zion
is in the cords of Edom and I
bound by the Arab?
Beside the dust of Zion
all the good of Spain is light;
and a light thing to leave it.

And if it is now only a land of howling beasts and owls
was it not so
when given to our fathers—
all of it only a heritage of thorns and thistles?
But they walked in it—
His name in their hearts, sustenance!—
as in a park among flowers.

In the midst of the sea
when the hills of it slide and sink
and the wind
lifts the water like sheaves—
now a heap of sheaves and then a floor for the threshing—
and sail and planks shake
and the hands of the sailors are rags,
and no place for flight but the sea,
and the ship is hidden in waves
like a theft in the thief's hand,
suddenly the sea is smooth
and the stars shine on the water.

Wisdom and knowledge—except to swim—
have neither fame nor favor here;
a prisoner of hope, he gave his spirit to the winds,
and is owned by the sea;
between him and death—a board.

Zion, do you ask if the captives are at peace—
the few that are left?
I cry out like the jackals when I think of their grief;

but, dreaming of the end of their captivity,
I am like a harp for your songs.

*There was some question in my mind if I should try to use rhyme as Jehuda Halevi did or at least follow his rhythms. Franz Rosenzweig, translating him into German, said it was sheer laziness not to do both. Perhaps. But the reproduction of a meter in another language does not necessarily have the effect it had in the original: rhyme and rhythm stirring in the Hebrew may be cloying and merely tiresome in English; it may be light instead of grave and so clever as to be nothing else. And it is of interest to note that Jehuda Halevi himself said (Jewish Publication Society's edition, p. xxii): "It is but proper that mere beauty of sound should yield to lucidity of speech." —C. R. [Charles Reznikoff's note on his translation.]

Charles Reznikoff

From Charles Reznikoff, *The Poems of Charles Reznikoff, 1918-1975*,
edited by Seamus Cooney (Boston: David R. Godine, 2005).

JERUSALEM

Beautiful heights, city of a great King,
From the western coast my desire burns towards thee.
Pity and tenderness burst in me, remembering
Thy former glories, thy temple now broken stones.
I wish I could fly to thee on the wings of an eagle
And mingle my tears with thy dust.
I have sought thee, love, though the King is not there
And instead of Gilead's balm, snakes and scorpions.
Let me fall on thy broken stones and tenderly kiss them—
The taste of thy dust will be sweeter than honey to me.

After Halevi

Robert Mezey

from Robert Mezey, *Collected Poems*
(Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000).

MOUNT AVARIM

Shalom, Mount Avarim. Blessed be your slopes.
Somewhere on you the greatest of men was gathered,
Sacred bones now buried deep in your side.
If you do not know him, ask the Red Sea,
Ask the green bush, ask Sinai, and they will tell you:

“He was not a man of words, but he did God’s work.”
I have vowed to visit you soon, God willing.

Translated by Robert Mezey
1973.

TO THE RIVALS

The lovely doe, far from her home, whose lover is angry—why did she laugh? She laughed at the daughter of Edom and the daughter of Arabia who covet her beloved. Why, they are nothing but wild asses, and how can they compare to the doe who nestled against her gazelle? Where is the spirit of prophecy found, where the lampstand, the Ark of the Covenant, the ever-present Shekinah? No, my rivals, do not try to quench love, for if you do, it will blaze up like fire!

Translated by T. Carmi
from [*The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*](#), edited by T. Carmi
(Allen Lane, 1981).

TO ISRAEL, IN EXILE

O Sleeper whose heart is awake, burning and raging, now wake and go forth, and walk in the light of My presence. Rise, and ride on! A star has come forth for you, and he who has lain in the pit will go up to the top of Sinai. Let them not exult, those who say, 'Zion is desolate!'—for My heart is in Zion and My eyes are there. I reveal Myself and I conceal Myself, now I rage, now I consent—but who has more compassion than I have for My children?

Translated by T. Carmi
from [*The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*](#), edited by T. Carmi
(Allen Lane, 1981).

THE HOME OF LOVE

Ever since You were the home of love for me, my love has lived where You have lived. Because of You, I have delighted in the wrath of my enemies; let them be, let them torment the one whom You tormented. It was from You that they learned their wrath, and I love them, for they hound the wounded one whom You struck down. Ever since You despised me, I have despised myself, for I will not honour what You despise. So be it, until Your anger has passed, and again You will redeem

Your own possession, which You once redeemed.**

**From the bondage of Egypt.

Translated by T. Carmi

from *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, edited by T. Carmi (Allen Lane, 1981).

WHERE SHALL I FIND THEE?

O Lord, where shall I find Thee?
All-hidden and exalted is Thy place;
And where shall I not find Thee?
Full of Thy glory is the infinite space.

Found near-abiding ever,
He made the earth's ends, set their utmost bar;
Unto the nigh a refuge,
Yea, and a trust to them who wait afar.
Thou sittest throned between the Cherubim,
Thou dwellest high above the cloud rack dim.
Praised by Thine hosts and yet beyond their praises
Forever far exalt;
The endless whirl of worlds may not contain Thee,
How, then, one heaven's vault?

And Thou, withal uplifted
O'er man, upon a mighty throne apart,
Art yet forever near him,
Breath of his spirit, life-blood of his heart.
His own mouth speaketh testimony true
That Thou his Maker art alone; for who
Shall say he hath not seen Thee? Lo! the heavens
And all their host aflame
With glory show Thy fear in speech unuttered,
With silent voice proclaim.

Longing I sought Thy presence,
Lord, with my whole heart did I call and pray,
And going out toward Thee,
I found Thee coming to me on the way;
Yea, in Thy wonders' might as clear to see
As when within the shrine I looked for Thee.
Who shall not fear Thee? Lo! upon their shoulders

Thy yoke divinely dread!
Who shall forbear to cry to Thee, That givest
To all their daily bread?

And can the Lord God truly—
God, the Most High—dwell here within man's breast?
What shall he answer, pondering—
Man, whose foundations in the dust do rest?
For Thou art holy, dwelling 'mid the praise
Of them that waft Thee worship all their days.
Angels adoring, singing of Thy wonder,
Stand upon Heaven's height;
And Thou, enthroned o'erhead, all things upholdest
With everlasting might.

Translated by Nina Davis
from Nina Davis, *Songs of Exile*
(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1901).

THE PHYSICIAN'S PRAYER

My God, heal me and I shall be healed,
Let not Thine anger be kindled against me so that I be consumed.
My medicines are of Thee, whether good
Or evil, whether strong or weak.
It is Thou who shalt choose, not I;
Of Thy knowledge is the evil and the fair.
Not upon my power of healing I rely;
Only for Thine healing do I watch.

Translated by Nina Salaman
from Heinrich Brody, ed., *Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi*
(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1924, 1952).

AT MORNING

O Lord, my life was known to Thee
Ere Thou had'st caused me yet to be,
Thy spirit ever dwells in me.

Could I, cast down by Thee, have gained
A standing place, or, if restrained
By Thee, go forth with feet unchained?

Hear me, Almighty, while I pray;
My thoughts are in Thy hand alway.
Be to my helplessness a stay!

O may this hour Thy favour yield,
And may I tread life's battle-field
Encompassed by Thy mercy's shield.

Wake me at dawn Thy name to bless,
And in Thy sanctuary's recess
To praise and laud Thy holiness.

Translated by Alice Lucas
from Alice Lucas, *The Jewish Year*
(New York: Bloch, 1926).

GOD, WHOM SHALL I COMPARE TO THEE?

God, whom shall I compare to Thee,
When Thou to none canst likened be?
Under what image shall I dare
To picture Thee, when everywhere
All nature's forms Thine impress bear?

Greater, O Lord, Thy glories are
Than all the heavenly chariots far.
Whose mind can grasp Thy world's design?
Whose word can fitly Thee define?
Whose tongue set forth Thy powers divine?

Can heart approach, can eye behold
Thee in Thy righteousness untold?
Whom did'st Thou to Thy counsel call,
When there was none to speak withal
Since Thou wast first and Lord of all?

Thy world eternal witness bears
That none its Maker's glory shares.
Thy wisdom is made manifest
In all things formed by Thy behest,
All with Thy seal's clear mark impress'd.

Before the pillars of the sky
Were raised, before the mountains high
Were wrought, ere hills and dales were known,
Thou in Thy majesty alone
Did'st sit, O God, upon Thy throne!

Hearts, seeking Thee, from search refrain,
And weary tongues their praise restrain,
Thyself unbound by time and place,
Thou dost pervade, support, embrace
The world and all created space.

The sages' minds bewildered grow,
The lightning speed of thought is slow.
"Awful in praises" art Thou named;
Thou fillest, strong in strength proclaimed,
This universe Thy hand has framed.

Deep, deep beyond all fathoming,
Far, far beyond all measuring,
We can but seek Thy deeds alone;
When bow Thy saints before Thy throne
Then is Thy faithfulness made known.

Thy righteousness we can discern,
Thy holy law proclaim and learn.
Is not Thy presence near alway
To them who penitently pray.
But far from those who sinning stray?

Pure souls behold Thee, and no need
Have they of light: they hear and heed
Thee with the mind's keen ear, although
The ear of flesh be dull and slow.
Their voices answer to and fro.

Thy holiness for ever they proclaim:
The Lord of Hosts! thrice holy is His name!

Translated by Alice Lucas
from Alice Lucas, *The Jewish Year*
(New York: Bloch, 1926).

ADMONITION

Long in the lap of childhood didst thou sleep,
Think how thy youth like chaff did disappear;
Shall life's sweet Spring forever last? Look up,
Old age approaches ominously near.
Oh shake thou off the world, even as the bird
Shakes off the midnight dew that clogged his wings.
Soar upward, seek redemption from thy guilt
And from the earthly dross that round thee clings.
Draw near to God, His holy angels know,

For whom His bounteous streams of mercy flow.

Translated by Emma Lazarus

from Emma Lazarus, *The Poems of Emma Lazarus*, vol. 2
(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1888).

WHO IS LIKE THEE

Who is like Thee, revealing the deeps,
Fearful in praises, doing wonders?

The Creator who discovereth all from nothing,
Is revealed to the heart, but not to the eye;
Therefore ask not how nor where—
For He filleth heaven and earth.

Remove lust from the midst of thee;
Thou wilt find thy God within thy bosom,
Walking gently in thine heart—
He that bringeth low and that lifteth up.

And see the way of the soul's secret;
Search it out and refresh thee.
He will make thee wise, and thou wilt find freedom,
For thou art a captive and the world is a prison.

Make knowledge the envoy between thyself and Him;
Annul thy will and do His will;
And know that wheresoever thou hidest thee, there is His eye,
And nothing is too hard for Him.

He was the Living while there was yet no dust of the world;
And He is the Maker and He the Bearer;
And man is counted as a fading flower—
Soon to fade, as fadeth a leaf.

Translated by Nina Salaman

from Heinrich Brody, ed., *Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi*
(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1924, 1952).

WHEN MY SOUL LONGED
The Beginning of His Journey

That day when my soul longed for the place of assembly,
Yet a dread of departure seized hold of me,
He, great in counsel, prepared for me ways for setting forth,
And I found His name in my heart a sustainment.
Therefore I bow down to Him at every stage;
And at every step I thank Him.

Translated by Nina Salaman
from Heinrich Brody, ed., *Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi*
(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1924, 1952).