

N. Daniel Korobkin is the rabbi of Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto Congregation and immediate past president of the Rabbinical Council of America.

RABBI YEHUDA HALEVI AND PETER ABELARD: MIRROR IMAGES

In the annals of medieval Jewish literature, there are not many works that take the form of a fictional dialogue between religious figures debating the tenets and truths of Judaism. While a few do exist,¹ the most famous is undoubtedly Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's *Kuzari*, written in the early twelfth century and completed shortly before he departed Spain for the Land of Israel in 1140. *Kuzari* features as its two primary discussants a rabbi and the King of the Khazar Empire, who eventually converts to Judaism. At the beginning of this work, the King summoned a Greek philosopher, a Christian scholastic, and a Muslim *qadi*, or judge, to engage in a symposium. Each guest presented unsatisfactory arguments, and while the King had originally presumed that Judaism would have the least convincing arguments, he invited a rabbi to weigh in and was ultimately most impressed with his presentation.

While philosophical inquiry presented in dialogue goes back at least as far as Plato, medieval Christian literature utilized the form only rarely.² If we were to discover a work written by a Christian theologian, assigning a very similar cast of characters to that of *Kuzari*, contemporaneous with Halevi's composition, this would naturally pique our curiosity, and we would wish to compare it to *Kuzari*. Such a book would shed light on what Christians were saying about Judaism at the very moment one of our most significant thinkers was commenting on Christianity, and it might help us glean insights into how to respond to Christian counterpoints to the Jewish arguments. Additionally, were we to encounter significant differences in approach and emphasis in these works, we would

¹ See Aaron W. Hughes, "The Art of Philosophy: The Use of Dialogue in Halevi's *Kuzari* and Abravanel's *Dialoghi D'Amore*," *Medieval Encounters* 13 (Brill, 2007), 470–498.

² Eileen Sweeney, "Literary Forms of Medieval Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/medieval-literary/#Dia>.

better understand how religious approaches varied not only by faiths but also by region and culture. Learning about the variegated approaches to religious dialogue in one isolated era can help inform how approaches can vary in other historical periods, including our own.

In fact, just such a Christian work was written by the renowned—some would argue, notorious—philosopher, Peter Abelard (1079–1142). It is titled, *Dialogue Between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian*.³ While Abelard and Halevi had virtually nothing in common other than both being theologians interested in defending the claims of their respective faiths, their respective works present almost mirror images of one another.

R. Yehuda Halevi spent the overwhelming majority of his life in Andalusian Spain, where the Jews enjoyed a very vibrant intellectual life and benefited from the Umayyad and Almoravid Muslim culture of the time, which emphasized scholarship, art, architecture, science, and philosophy. Halevi was himself influenced by the Arabic literary trends of his era and composed beautiful poetry on sundry secular and religious topics, including his spiritually infused *Shirei Tzion*, devotional poetry about *Eretz Yisrael*. Very little is known about Halevi's personal life, but we do get a sense from his more provocative poetry that he appreciated wine and admired human beauty.⁴ We also note an interesting passage from *Kuzari*, where Halevi discusses the life of a *hasid*, a saintly person. He notes that sometimes one is unable to fully detach himself from his past:

If he is unable to achieve repentance for his improper thoughts because of the overpowering images that remain within him—because his memory has stored the songs, and poetry, and so on which he heard as a youth—at least he is able to be cleansed of any sinful act, and he

³ This work is also known by other names using the Latin, *Collationes* and *Dialogus*; both words roughly translate as “dialogue.” We reference the edition translated by Paul Vincent Spade (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1995). There is some dispute as to when Abelard's *Dialogue* was written. M.M. Adams places the date between 1136 and 1139. H. Liebeschütz believes it was written at the very end of Abelard's life, 1141–1142 (this might explain why it appears to be unfinished). C. Mews, however, dates this work earlier, from 1127–1132. *Kuzari* is generally dated to 1140, but as Yochanan Silman observes, *Kuzari* may have been composed over the course of decades; see his *Philosopher and Prophet: Judah HaLevi, the Kuzari, and the Evolution of His Thought* (SUNY Press, 1995).

⁴ See the relevant sections on Halevi's secular and spiritual poetry in Raymond P. Scheindlin, *Wine, Women, & Death: Medieval Hebrew Poems on the Good Life* (JPS, 1986) and his *The Gazelle: Medieval Hebrew Poems on God, Israel, and the Soul* (JPS, 1991).

confesses his thoughts [to God]. He then commits himself never to verbalize these thoughts and certainly never to act upon them.⁵

Whether this paragraph contains autobiographical resonances is purely speculative. Yet, it supports our impression of Halevi as a product of his time and culture, where even young religious students might enjoy secular art and culture, and later in life feel remorseful over their youthful “indiscretions.”

Whereas Muslim Andalusia in the early twelfth century was cosmopolitan and open to the arts and robust social interaction, Christian France in between the first two Crusades (1096 and 1147) maintained a more morally rigid society that promoted austerity and monasticism. When contrasted with this general milieu, Peter Abelard lived a life that is the stuff of tabloids and Hollywood dramas. Born in 1079, he quickly rose to prominence due to his sharp philosophical mind and studied and taught theology in Paris. There, Abelard met the beautiful and brilliant Heloise, a niece of one Fulbert, a canon of Notre Dame, and arranged to become her tutor. This relationship eventually produced a child out of wedlock, and Heloise’s uncle insisted that they get married. Because Christian scholars had to live lives of celibacy, and because Abelard did not want to interrupt his career, he secretly married Heloise but then arranged for her to enter a convent so as to hide their union from the public.

Infuriated at this deception, Fulbert sent a band of men to Abelard’s residence and they castrated him. Abelard accepted his punishment as Divine retribution and penance for his sins, and spent the rest of his life in his religious order, teaching both religious and secular subjects.

Both Halevi and Abelard were self-critical of their respective faith communities and recognized their shortcomings.⁶ What becomes apparent from the very outset of *Kuzari* is that Halevi viewed the Judaism of his time as being under attack. Living in a sophisticated and literate society, many—both from within Judaism and from without—viewed the Jewish faith as primitive and counter-intellectual. Although Andalusia housed many different strands of Islam in the twelfth century, some respected intellectual enclaves within that society had embraced Greek philosophy—and particularly Aristotelianism—as a way of explaining its faith principles. With this strong emphasis on philosophical reasoning, many Jews of Halevi’s time may have felt intellectually inadequate about

⁵ *Kuzari* 3:5; English translations from *The Kuzari: In Defense of the Despised Faith*, translated by N. Daniel Korobkin (Feldheim Publishers, 2009), 272–273.

⁶ See, e.g., *Kuzari* 1:115 and 2:24.

their faith. This is why the subtitle of *Kuzari* is “The book of refutation and proof on behalf of the despised faith.”

Halevi felt obliged to explain that Judaism, despite its non-philosophical approach, was perfectly rational and intellectually appealing. His strategy was twofold: First, to demonstrate how philosophy is deeply flawed, because it relies on a very tenuous tool, the human intellect, to demonstrate theological principles. The mind is an unreliable arbiter of truth, and this is demonstrated by, among other things, flaws in logic and the lack of consensus about basic concepts among the philosophers themselves. Second, he sought to demonstrate that Judaism possesses a superior source for its theology, which is the unbroken chain of prophecy and Torah transmission. This foundation is rock-solid and not subject to philosophical error.

Abelard was disturbed by an opposite concern about his own faith. Having become an outstanding philosopher, he felt that the Christianity of his time had become too counter-intellectual and did not sufficiently embrace philosophy as a means of expressing its faith claims. In Abelard’s language, it was wrong to rely on the “authority” of Divine texts as the primary basis for accepting the tenets of Christianity. Rather, anything taught by his faith should be demonstrable using philosophical methodology and thus appeal to human reason.

The structures of *Kuzari* and *Dialogue* are strikingly similar, but with some important differences. *Kuzari* opens in the actual first-person voice of Halevi, explaining that he was asked to provide proofs for the veracity of Judaism’s faith claims. This request made him recall the story, occurring some centuries earlier, of the pagan Khazar king who was searching for ultimate truths about God and proper religious service. The king was visited in a dream by an angel, who tells him “Your intentions are desirable to your Creator, but not your deeds” (1:1). This impels the king to seek out wise men from the various philosophical and religious traditions. In Halevi’s narrative, the king asks the Greek philosopher to present his arguments first, followed by the Christian scholar, the Muslim scholar, and finally the rabbi. After documenting how the king rejects the first three presentations, the rest of *Kuzari* is dedicated to the dialogue between the rabbi and the king.

Just as *Kuzari* begins with Halevi’s voice, *Dialogue* begins with the real voice of Peter Abelard. Abelard states that one night he had a dream (unlike *Kuzari*, whose dreamer is the story’s Khazar king). In this dream, he envisioned three men who appeared before him. They explained that they are debating the one true path to God, and that they have chosen

him, Abelard, as their objective judge and arbiter of truth.⁷ The three men are identified as a Jew, a Christian, and a “pagan.” It becomes clear later in *Dialogue* that this “pagan” is a Muslim philosopher.⁸ This designation may be due to the fact that Abelard considered all Muslims pagans because they rejected the biblical text, or that many philosophers of the Muslim world were viewed even by their own communities as infidels because they embraced Aristotelian philosophy over their own Quranic faith.⁹

At the very outset, one notes an important but subtle difference in the texts, which informs their opposing objectives. In Abelard’s dream, all three disputants claim to serve the same God (*Dialogue* §2), but with “different *faiths* and different kinds of life.” The main objective is to arrive at the correct *faith*, that is, the theological underpinnings of one’s own religion. In *Kuzari*, by contrast, the king is searching, first and foremost, for the most correct *behavior*. This is evidenced by the angel’s opening challenge to the king.

Furthermore, in *Kuzari*, the first person the king seeks out is the philosopher, which may be a nod to the prime of place philosophy held in Islamic Andalusia. But after the philosopher has made his case, the king rejects him on the grounds that his quest began by the angel’s critique that his *behavior* was found wanting, not his opinions. As the philosopher offered no behavioral directive, he could not possibly aid in the king’s quest.

By contrast, in *Dialogue*, instead of utilizing an uneducated truth-seeker like the Khazar king, Abelard has his philosopher appear as the main protagonist, first debating the Jew, and then the Christian. It seems that Abelard, despite being a Christian, nevertheless wished to portray the philosopher as the objective truth-seeker. It becomes clear that Abelard has a great admiration for philosophy, to the point where he does not wish to position himself as the Christian debater in *Dialogue*, but rather as a passive observer who must weigh the arguments and decide the winner. This may indicate his own personal struggle in balancing Christianity with philosophy. In fact, Abelard, unable to submit to

⁷ Much has been written about Abelard’s arrogance, and the difference between how each author situated himself in his work is noteworthy.

⁸ *Dialogue*, 90, where the Jew addresses the pagan philosopher: “You yourselves preserve [circumcision] to this day when, imitating your father Ishmael, you receive circumcision in the twelfth year.”

⁹ We refer the reader to Maimonides’ *Guide* (I:69–76) for a better understanding of the philosophical and theological disputes between the Mutakallimun and Aristotelian philosophy.

certain doctrines that he could not reconcile with reason, was accused of heresy by certain Church leaders and condemned by Pope innocent II.¹⁰

It is here we discover that just as Halevi was combatting the pervasive philosophical rationalism within his own intellectual milieu, Abelard was combatting the exact opposite: His Church preached certain doctrines that ran counter to rationality, and, in his mind, even basic morality.¹¹ Abelard, seeing the utterly irrational nature of some of the Church's teachings, sought to incorporate a philosophical corrective to purify Christian faith.

Halevi, on the other hand, was seeking to distance philosophy from Judaism. He viewed this as a dangerous mixture and believed that instead of philosophy enhancing Judaism, it would end up distorting it. Halevi may have feared that his coreligionists were likely to leave the fold if they were to attempt to integrate philosophical teachings into Judaism. Whereas a philosopher attempts to prove issues to himself using his intellect, Halevi continuously argues throughout *Kuzari* that the intellect is not a reliable tool for arbitrating truth. A tradition of Divine communication, passed down from generation to generation through the prophets and later the rabbis (that which Abelard calls "authority"), is the only trustworthy means of ascertaining God's will. Halevi felt that a Jew must embrace the Torah's teachings because of its reliable Author, and not because of its intellectual appeal.

Abelard created a similar dichotomy but constructed it in the opposite direction. He regularly raises the issue of authority vs. reason as the main theological dispute of his time. His contempt for the Jew's arguments is based on the Jew's over-emphasis and reliance on the "authority" of the Law, whereas the Christian, who is intellectually closer to and friendlier with the philosopher in his narrative, relies primarily on reason over authority. One example of his criticism of Judaism appears in the philosopher's generally amicable conversation with the Christian:

Your point that errors sometimes occur in distinguishing or recognizing reasons is certainly true and obvious. But this only happens to people lacking in experience of rational philosophy and in discerning arguments. The Jews who ask for signs instead of arguments, and those who put their defense in another person's words, admit to being like this—as though it's easier to judge about the authority or text of someone absent

¹⁰ See Marilyn McCord Adams' introduction to *Dialogue*, viii.

¹¹ One doctrine to which Abelard objected was condemning to eternal damnation the unbaptized who die in infancy.

than about the reasoning or view of someone present, and as if the former's meaning can be examined better than the latter can.¹²

Halevi's main argument was not with Christianity, which is why he devotes so little space to presenting and refuting it. It appears that this religion did not pose a major threat to his compatriots in Andalusia. If anything, he viewed Christianity as being irrational and making faith claims, such as the virgin birth and the trinity, that were irreconcilable with logic. Such faith claims can only be accepted if proven by overt, empirical miracles. As the King tells the Christian disputant:

Logic plays no part in your argument; if anything, logic dictates the exact opposite. When it comes to things illogical, the only way a person will be convinced [that reality is different] is by seeing something first-hand. When a person sees something with his own eyes, he has no choice but to fully accept the phenomenon as true, despite its illogic. The individual is then forced to reconcile the logic of the case with what he saw, and to gradually work out some logical explanation for the phenomenon. A good example of this is found among the empirical scientists. They develop their theories in conformity with logic and also dismiss various phenomena as being logically impossible. But if you demonstrate to them empirically that something they had previously dismissed actually exists, they are forced to revise their theories and find a way to explain the new phenomenon based on the stars or nature. Because ultimately, you cannot deny your eyes. In your case, however, you have not shown me any physical evidence to substantiate your beliefs. Furthermore, what you suggest is totally foreign to me; I was not raised with these ideas. Therefore I need to search more thoroughly until I find the truth (*Kuzari* 1:5).

Nowhere, however, did Halevi hurl any insults or harsh criticism against the theologians of other faiths in his narrative. The only person who is treated somewhat dismissively is the rabbi himself. The Khazar King states about Jews that due to their exilic history, they have "lost their connection to their past and have no depth of wisdom."¹³ He did not think that the Jew would be able to teach him anything, which is why he only called upon him as a last resort. Throughout *Kuzari*, Halevi expresses a self-awareness of how the world cynically views the Jewish nation. But he also reserves genuine criticism for the state of Judaism in his time. Halevi is

¹² *Dialogue* §167.

¹³ *Kuzari* 1:12.

certainly following biblical tradition, which is to be textually self-critical about our state as the Chosen People.

Abelard, who devotes more space in his *Dialogue* to his fictional Jew than Halevi does to his fictional Christian, does not hide his contempt for Judaism. At one point, Abelard's obliviousness to his own bias against Judaism is comically evident, when, placing words in the mouth of the wise philosopher who is standing together with the Christian and the Jew, he states, "I found that the Jews were fools and the Christians crazy—so to speak, *no offense to you who are called Christian*."¹⁴

We may not be surprised that while the philosopher is concerned about offending the Christian, he has no such problem regarding the Jew.¹⁵ In fairness, Abelard may have felt that he was more deferential to Judaism than many of his Church contemporaries, whose hostility was far more overt and who would have never even considered including the words of a Jew in a theological text.

Furthermore, when reading the arguments of the Jew, one gets a sense that Abelard maintained only a superficial knowledge of Judaism and, in fact, misunderstood much about Judaism, in both its emphases and the reasons behind its commandments. For example, the Jew of his narrative places an inordinate amount of emphasis on *berit mila* (circumcision) as the most important mitzva, and further argues (*Dialogue* §73) that the reason why Jews have the commandments of *mila* and *kashrut* is primarily to separate them from gentiles. While there are aspects of these themes latent in these *mitzvot*, we would be hard-pressed to find Jewish commentaries suggesting that this is the sole basis for these commandments.

We will not be able to review the entirety of Abelard's *Dialogue* in this space. Suffice it to say that Abelard used his fictional disputation with the Jew to set up a straw man that would bolster his argument that faith based on authority does not pass the philosopher's test, nor does it pass Abelard's standards. His usage of Judaism to demonstrate this is merely a vehicle to argue that Christianity must do better if it is to survive the war of ideas.

Halevi takes the exact opposite approach. Faith is not the opponent; philosophy is. Philosophy offers only a pale image of truth when compared to the vivid images of the Prophets. We rely on the authority of God's word because we, via our ancestors and the chain of faithful transmission,

¹⁴ *Dialogue* §6.

¹⁵ For an analysis of Abelard's attitude towards Jews of his time, see Constant J. Mews, "Abelard and Heloise on Jews and Hebraica Veritas in *Christian Attitudes Toward the Jews in the Middle Ages: A Casebook*, edited by M. Frassetto (Routledge, 2006), 83–108.

experienced the events at Sinai first-hand, as it were. *Experiencing* God and His teachings is far more powerful and truth-affirming than inferring those truths from logic and reason.

The irony of this twelfth-century dialectic between a Christian rationalist and a Jewish traditionalist is that the pendulum swung back and forth within both faiths for centuries. Christian doctrinaires opposed philosophers like Abelard, but Abelard would find support among his own kindred spirits in the decades and centuries that followed. Similarly, Halevi would prevail among a certain segment of Jewish thinkers, but, as Menachem Kellner has observed, “Judah Ha-Levi wrote his *Kuzari* precisely in order to refute the kind of Judaism which was soon to find its classic expression in the works of Maimonides.”¹⁶ In a certain regard, Maimonides’ *Guide* may have much more in common—in this rationalist vs. traditionalist dichotomy—with Peter Abelard than it does with Halevi. This is not as shocking as it seems, because Abelard’s philosophical heir in the thirteenth century was Thomas Aquinas, who was influenced by Maimonides’ Aristotelian distillation of the Torah, citing him several times throughout his works.

While Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and Peter Abelard certainly never met, and were unaware of each other’s existence, they utilized uncannily similar methods in arguing for their respective brands of religious thought, at almost exactly the same moment in time. Even though their theological inclinations were mirror images of each other and their ideas were in many ways diametrically opposed, we can imagine something at work in the twelfth-century religious “collective consciousness” which led each to similar modes of exploration and expression. Although Halevi and Abelard lived in different “worlds,” there are parallels in a common language and way of thinking.

We benefit from a better understanding of the historical zeitgeists of great Jewish thinkers of the past. Understanding what they felt were the greatest challenges to Judaism in their time and place enables us to identify our own contemporary struggles. What is the “collective consciousness” of our own era? Should today’s Jewish thinker be positioned more

¹⁶ Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), 15. Kellner further observes: “I hope I may be permitted the following conceit: Maimonides struggled against ‘proto-kabbalah,’ the most elite (and perhaps therefore dangerous) expression of which was Halevi’s *Kuzari*; that book itself, in turn, was written in reaction to ‘proto-Maimonideanism.’” Kellner’s “proto-kabbalah” refers to those works, like *Kuzari*, that reject arguments for the sake of Judaism using rational logic, and instead discuss the esoteric and mystical aspects of Judaism based on traditions that transcend logical proofs.

TRADITION

like Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, staving off the rationalists, or more like Maimonides (and Peter Abelard), tilting swords with fundamentalists and mystics? Finally, encountering the literary styles and devices of the great expositors of religious thought of the past, both Jewish and non-Jewish, equips us to more effectively explore and communicate Jewish thought today. As we witness the corrosive effects of a post-modern deconstruction of religion, no doubt a contemporary *Kuzari* would be a welcome addition to Jewish life, learning, and literature.