

## Judah Halevi

Born with a silver spoon in his mouth, Judah Halevi, (1075-1141) was known primarily as a writer – and over 800 of his poems are still extant. His fame as a poet led him to have contact with Jewish courtiers in North Africa, Egypt and France, which helped further spread his novel, Sufi-inspired ideas.

Halevi affected the direction of Jewish spirituality through his masterpiece, *Sefer ha-Kuzari*. This book was a fictionalized account of the true story of how the Khazars of the Black Sea region had become converted to Judaism in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. His stated purpose was to provide an “apologia” for the primacy of the Jewish religion over that of Christianity and Islam. Threaded in with his claims, however, was much material borrowed from the Sufis!

Halevi based important aspects of this defense of Judaism on the teachings of the *Sufi* master al-Ghazali. In fact, the Jew Halevi is said to be one of the first of *any* religion to accept that master’s teachings. Not wanting to misrepresent the great Sufi thinker, Halevi quoted directly from his texts, “borrowing” verbatim a story which al-Ghazali had included in his *Ihya’ulum al-Din*, summarizing the doctrinal bases of his dogma.

Halevi’s *Kuzari* borrowed other Sufi ideas from various sources, including defining cleaving to God as a “a mystic light projected by God into the heart of His chosen.” He also made all the same distinctions between the ideas of illumination (leading to prophecy) and mystical inspiration that were standard fare for Islamic mystics. Halevi’s influence long outlasted him – even the 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mystic Abraham Isaac Kook (d. 1935) saw in Halevi’s works “the most faithful description of the particular qualities of the Jewish religion.”