

THE TWENTY-EIGHTH GATE OF
JUDAH AL HARIZI'S TAHKEMONI
JERUSALEM

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VICTOR E. REICHERT

"IN PRAISE OF ZION AND JERUSALEM
AND A PRAYER THAT HER HEIGHT MAY
TOUCH HEAVEN'S HEM."

The Twenty-eight Gate of Judah Al-Harizi's thirteenth century Hebrew masterpiece, The Tahkemoni, meaning the "Wise Instructor," bears the terse Arabic title, "Jerusalem." (1)

The laconic Arabic title of this Makama, - this Chapter or Gate, - hardly prepares those who are too starry-eyed about the ancient glories of this sacred city for the shock of the sordid realities our wandering Spanish Jewish minstrel actually encounters and honestly relates. The Hebrew title of the Twenty-eight Gate is a touching prayer of longing. It is a rhymed couplet in pious petition for the return of a vanished, hallowed past. It reads:

"In praise of Zion and Jerusalem
And a prayer that her height may touch
Heaven's hem."

We will soon see that Harizi, with his deep passion for truth, will not hide from us his dismay on finding that the city which he approached with such loving reverence and longing, should be torn with ugly internal family feud.

We may conjecture that the burning strife the poet Harizi describes was set afire by polemical sparks and fed by theological fuel. It may have been basically the warfare between the two religious parties, the Rabbanites and the Karaites. The Rabbanites relied on an oral as well as a written Revelation. They accepted the Talmud as well as the Torah of Moses as authoritative. But the Karaites insisted that only the written Torah, the Pentateuch of Moses, was divine. These bitter tensions may have started all the trouble.

But what a blow for Harizi to discover that the holy city, whose very name, Jerusalem, suggests peace, should be the abode of family rancor and fraternal discord.

The Twenty-eighth Gate is but one of the Fifty Chapters or Gates that comprise Judah Al-Harizi's famed, but still in-^accessible in English, poetic masterpiece. That is not quite accurate for I have been able to publish a translation of the Introductory and the First Fifteen Gates and in 1966 the Thirty-third Gate. Now, tonight, for The Literary Club, for the first time in English, so far as I know, we shall hear the Twenty-eighth Gate.

In its total sweep, the Tahkemoni gives us a marvellous panoramic view of the poet's wanderings and wonderings during a lifetime. In the course of his wanderings from his native land of Spain, early in the thirteenth century, we find him in the Provence of Southern France. From there he goes to Egypt, then north to Jerusalem in 1216. He visits other places in Palestine, Syria, Damascus, 1220, Aleppo, Mosul, Bagdad. He makes a pilgrimage to the grave of the Prophet Ezekiel, sees the ruins of Babylon, visits Susa (Shushan), the grave of Ezra and then comes to Basra. There are unforgettable chapters in this unique poetic work that carry with them the whole enchanted world of mystery where Harizi bravely wanders. The spice-laden aromas of that, civilization that flourished from the Nile to the Tigris and Euphrates still breathe their perfume from the parchment Harizi has bequeathed to us.

Elsewhere I have described the genius of this man, an ardent disciple of Moses Maimonides and the gifted translator of Maimonides's "Guide for the Perplexed." Harizi translated this philosophic work from the original Arabic into Hebrew so that the Jews in France and Italy, who knew no Arabic, could read it.

Where did Harizi learn his amazing art of turning some sober biblical incident into some mischievous or satiric invention of his own! The

Twenty-eighth will not reveal this , but with the entire Tahkemoni before us, we soon discover that Harizi is no solemn theologian, tramping from place to place with only dusty sermons in his knapsack. Rather this philosopher-poet carries a happy assortment of literary ribbons and laces, songs of wine and love and friendship, tales of satire and of irony, a potpourri of literary miscellanies. In truth the Tahkemoni is a rich medley of life, the life of the early thirteenth century as Harizi sees it, and without pomp and pretense, vigorously describes it.

The Twenty-eighth Gate is focussed on Harizi's visit in the year 1216 to Jerusalem, famed holy city, sacred for centuries to three great living faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

As is his wont, Harizi uses the familiar artifice of a Narrator, called Heman, the Ezrahite. The naughty rogue, usually a thin disguise for Harizi himself, who has the adventure, is called Heber, the Kenite.

Would it be far-fetched to say that our contemporary interest in Harizi's account of what he saw and experienced in Jerusalem after journeying from Egypt should be enormously heightened because of the miraculous reconquest of the Old City of Jerusalem by the Israelis in that incredibly brilliant six-day war of June 1967. For the first time in a millenium, the descendants of King David were again in possession of the city that Israel's ancient poet-warrior-king had wrested from the Jebusites a thousand years before the Christian era.

Harizi's account of his visit to Jerusalem in 1216 should help us understand the inner mood and complexities of the Jewish soul with regard to the emotional hold that Jerusalem has upon Jews to this day. The western world well knows that passionate love of the Jewish people for the city of David and the Temple of Solomon from the unknown poet of the Babylonian Exile who sang:

"If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
 Let my right hand forget her cunning.
 Let my tongue cleave to the roof of
 my mouth,
 If I remember thee not;
 If I set not Jerusalem
 Above my chiefest joy." (Ps. 137:5-6)

What the world does not well know is the continuing hold that Jerusalem has had through all the light and shadow of the centuries. Harizi's Twenty-eighth Gate will show us that despite the disappointment with the ugly undercurrent of family feud, there is a deep national and religious loyalty and an unquenchable hope for a brighter future.

As Robert Taft, Jr., wrote after visiting Jerusalem a few weeks following the June 1967 war:

"Twenty years of a split city and deprivation of their Holy places have ingrained in the minds even of the many nonreligious Israelis a commitment that is not to be reversed. It is a strong mixture of religion, nationalism, and symbolism that is involved. It has even been balladized in the emotional song, 'Jerusalem the Golden.'" (2)

The Twenty-eighth Gate claims our attention also as a historical document. The reconquest of Jerusalem from the Crusaders by Saladin is a well-known fact of world history. We see a flash of its significance from the Jewish point of view through the eyes of this keen observer, Al-Harizi.

Stanley Lane-Poole (3) tells us: "The articles of capitulation (of Jerusalem) were signed on Friday the 2nd of October, the Feast of St. Leger. (1187) By a strange coincidence, it was the 27th of Rejeb, the anniversary of the blessed Leylat el-Miraj, when the prophet of Islam dreamed his wonderful dream, and visited in his sleep the Holy City which his followers had now recovered after ninety years of Christian occupation...."

Harizi will tell us how Saladin threw wide the gates of Jerusalem to the Jews, hitherto

shut to them.

Stanley Lane-Poole, after describing in detail Saladin's mercy to the fallen city, makes this comment:

"One recalls the savage conquest by the first Crusaders in 1099, when Godfrey and Tancred rode through streets choked with the dead and dying, when defenseless Moslems were tortured, burnt, and shot down in cold blood on the towers and roof of the Temple, when the blood of wanton massacre defiled the honour of Christendom and stained the scene where once the gospel of love and mercy had been preached. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy' was a forgotten beatitude when the Christians made shambles of the Holy City, Fortunate were the merciless, for they obtained mercy at the hands of the Moslem Sultan.

'The greatest attribute of heaven is Mercy:
And 'tis the crown of justice, and the
glory,
Where it may kill with right, to save
with pity.'

"If the taking of Jerusalem were the only fact known about Saladin, it were enough to prove him the most chivalrous and great-hearted conqueror of his own, and perhaps of any age."

Thus Stanley Lane-Poole ends his moving chapter XIV of his life of Saladin, a chapter called "Jerusalem Regained" 1187.

Harizi, we shall see, shares the same friendly feeling for the immortal Saracen warrior.

From the theological point of view, the Twenty-eighth Gate is of absorbing interest. Harizi, like other Jewish poets and thinkers before him, holds tenaciously to the hope that Jerusalem will yet be restored to Israel. He regards the Exile as the consequence of a sinful nation. Like the Hebrew prophets, from Amos to Ezekiel, Harizi accepts their moral teaching that God had no choice

but to exile Israel because of her spiritual apostacy.

But like these great prophets, he remains a prisoner of hope, firmly believing that in the sorrow of the Exile, the Jewish people will learn the hard way to purify its inner life. God will again gather in his people and bring the desolate home. The Rock will yet restore Israel as bride to the palanquin treasure.

In the first long poem in this Twenty-eighth Gate, we hear these echoes from the Hebrew prophets. The metaphor of God as bridegroom and Israel as bride recall the words of Hosea and of the Song of Songs, which were allegorically interpreted in rabbinic literature and by the Jewish thinkers and mystics.

Harizi also bluntly speaks of the sorrows visited upon the Jewish people because of the Christian accusation of deicide - a charge still clings to this day although the Church now at last, since Pope John XXIII, has begun to wipe it from the page of history.

Those familiar with Harizi's masterpiece, the Tahkemoni, already know that our poet consistently employs rhymed prose interspersed with ordered poetry as his literary style. In the other Makamas that I have translated, I did not dare to try to imitate his style in English. I always felt that the risk was too great and that what the reader, unfamiliar with Hebrew, would hear would only be doggerel. This is not the way Harizi sounds in my ears.

However, as a bold experiment, for the first time, I now attempt a greater fidelity to Harizi in this version of the Twenty-eighth Gate. I well know that in any translation, especially of poetry, as Robert Frost has said, it is the poetry always that gets left behind.

Nevertheless, since Harizi in some ways is an expert jingler, like Samuel Butler in his 17th Century, mock-heroic tetrameter couplets, the Hudibras, it may be a joyous risk to try to echo

the rhyming sounds of the original.

To me, Harizi's music does not have the dreary metronomic beat of a dull rimester. Rather within his cadence, there is always the delight of his satire and wit and his amazing resourcefulness in taking sober biblical sentences and weaving them, often with mischievous glee and brilliant felicity into the fabric of his themes. Much of this is lost in English translation. But I hope that for those who know the Scripture, say, in the glorious King James version, these enduring echoes of the Bible will be heard. And now, let us turn to Harizi's revealing Twenty-eighth Gate.

THE TWENTY-EIGHTH GATE

THE JERUSALEM MAKAMA

"In Praise of Zion and Jerusalem
And a Prayer That Her Height May Touch
Heaven's Hem."

HEMAN THE EZRAHITE SPEAKS:

"I journeyed from Memphis in Egypt land
to Jerusalem's heights that are fair and grand.
Pate tossed and whirled me like a ball from its hand.

I thought to myself:

"Too long among sheepfolds you have lain
dwelling near oven and kitchen drain. I will
bring you up from Egyptian pain a view of Jerusalem's
goodness to gain.

"So I set out eagerly for the mountain
of the Lord, the city chosen by the Lord, wherein
formerly dwelt men of integrity without strain, who
saw the King's face and sat first in his domain.

"Now when I came to her borders feeling
I must and through her thinned-out palaces my path
I had thrust then I kissed her ruins covered like
rust and fondly embraced her dust.

I said:

"How goodly your tents are, your dwellings, Mount Zion, by far, your lands and your habitations, how pleasant they are. Now that I have seen your face, I willingly death embrace.

Then I took up my theme, and said:

When I to Zion from Spanish exile went
 My soul from depths to heaven made ascent
 Greatly rejoicing that day God's hill
 to see
 The day for which I longed since I had
 come to be.
 How many saints yearned this to see in
 vain,
 And yet my sin-stained soul, what merit
 thus to gain?
 The Rock strengthened my body in Zion
 when years full brim
 Had natural force abated, and made my
 eyes grow dim.
 In limits of the West, deemed as one who
 had died
 Until in Zion, the Lord's city, I revived.
 Zion! Though many cities of their charm
 make bold
 Yet the like of her loveliness no human
 eye will behold.
 I know not if the heights before her bowed
 Or whether she it is who climbs to heaven's
 cloud,
 The city where the Shekinah, God's
 Presence does hover
 And to the eyes of men her glory uncover.
 Her spirit came upon the children as a
 mighty tide
 And before they called to prophesy, she
 replied.
 The eye that saw not her form of splendor
 bright
 Did not lack for darkness and never saw
 the light.
 She is lovely, and though of glory
 stripped bare
 Without jewels, like a graceful doe,
 how fair!
 When my heart grows hot for her sighings

and fears
My eyes draw from my inmost wellwaters
of tears.
Where is God's Shekinah aid where its
/plendor's ray?
How has the sun of glory set at high
noonday!
How has the hill of frankincense to
depths been brought down
After she had risen, the lofty heights
to crown!
Her congregation is exiled from her
glorious abode, for
She disobeyed the bidding of the Rock,
her Creator,
She forsook the husband of her youth and
sighed
For another lover and under him went aside,
The spirit of jealousy cut through him
like a knife
She had to drink the bitter, curse-
causing waters, like a wanton
wife!
She became a curse midst where her people
dwell,
Her thigh dropt speedily away, her body
did swell.
She hopes to be made pure in Exile's
waters drear,
But till now she is not pure, and as yet
is not clear.
A thousand years, a century two-score
eight we trace (i.e., 1216)
Since she was exiled from her dwelling
place.
From midst of Zion's dwelling she is
driven away
And Zion until now her Sabbaths did repay.
She hopes for Time's favor, her eyes from
waiting dim
Her soul is worn and weary, wasted in
every limb.
She weeps when she beholds the brood of
strangers who
Go up to God's House, but she may not go
too.
God's hand is not shortened to save her,

wherever she may roam,
To gather in His people, and bring the
desolate home.
The Rock will yet restore her as bride
to the palanquin treasure
And though she has grown old, she will
yet return to pleasure.

"Now when I had finished my poem and
prayer, before my King in array of words fair, I
arose from kneeling on my knees there to roam round
the City while the fire of my sighs kindled in me
with pity and my burning grief set my innards
ablaze and tears streamed from my eyes in amaze.

"I saw the Temple site and the Court as
I lifted my head where because of our iniquities
the pure lampstand had fled and fires of strange
worship burned in its stead.

"Now while in dejected mood I was walking
and with tears streaming like a wady overflowing
I saw confronting me one of the inhabitants of the
city.

He said to me:

"I imagine that you are one of our
distant Exile's band and from a far-offland".

I said:

"That is true. And now I would like to
ask a word of you."

He said to me:

"I am ready for you. Ask, and I will
tell you."

I said to him:

"When did the Jews come back to this city?"

He said:

"Prom the day that the Arabs conquered

it under Saladin, the Israelites dwelt therein."

I said:

"And why did they not dwell therein when it was in the hand of the Crusaders?"

He said:

"Because they say their god we did slay and brought shame to them to this day. And were they to find us within it then they would sawllow us alive in a minute. Lo! we sacrifice their abominations before their eyes, and should they not stone us likewise?"

I said:

"What was the cause of your coming to this place?"

He said:

"Because God was zealous for His name, and pitied His people's shame."

And he said:

"It is not good that Esau's sons should inherit My holy fane, while Jacob's sons are driven for Jh from there amain, lest in envy the nations should say, God in hatred for His son, His first-born, has turned His face away. He has raised the rank of the divorced son to the married son's place that He may not set the son of the beloved, the first-born, before the son of the hated, in His grace.

Then God stirred up the spirit of Saladin in the year four thousand, nine hundred and fifty since Creation had been (1190 - more exactly, October 2, 1137) he for whom the spirit of counsel and might rested within.

Then he and all his troops went up from Egypt land and besieged Jerusalem and the Lord gave it unto his hand.

Then he commanded that in every city there sound a call to both great and small, saying:

"Bid Jerusalem take heart in rebirth that all the seed of Ephraim who desire may return in mirth who are left in Mosul and Egypt's dearth and those dispersed to the uttermost ends of the earth. Prom all sides let them gather unto her and settle within her border."

And now we dwell within the shadow of sweet sloth. May it surely be shaken up and broken off! For we are afraid because of the evil deeds which are done in it and of the violence and the wickedness that are within it, And the fire of hatred and of factional strife that in it is rife and divides the hearts of its inhabitants like a knife. They all want to be head and are hard, cruel tyrants instead. Each man seeks with malice to make his fellow man forlorn. The father hates his son, his first-born, and the son holds his father in scorn. The sons gather the wood (cf. Jer. 7:18 - the fire of controversy here) And the fathers would set them afire if they could. All the deeds of their heart are done in duplicity, and there is none that does anything for the sake of Heaven, or in sincerity. Every day they increase quarrels and divisions and all hearts are cleft by derisions so that I nicknamed the city: "The Rock of Divisions." The leaders appointed over them are as thorns in their eyes to them. One leader turns to injure the other. And the other opposing, thrashes his hide. Each one to his fellow is as thorns in his side.

Moreover, there are among them, inciters and seducers, and those who divide brothers, being slanderers. One sets his snare and his taut bow triumphs there (cf. Gen. 49:24, lit. his bow abode firm or "his bow stayed taut" - cf. Comm., he triumphed over his adversaries). Another piles high the pyre then sets it afire. Therefore to God we offer up our prayer to destroy the thorns from among us here and that His salvation, eye to eye, we may see only from this death may He set us free.

Then he took uphis theme, sna said:

The fire of strife flames day and night
 Sundering the hearts of friends as blight
 If pure and upright men don't put it out
 God's wrath will burn against us without
 doubt.

For every ill men find a cure to make
 them well

But jealousy breaks and shatters one to
 hell.

All transgressions God «an bear, even
 rage forbear,

But divisiveness He cannot, cannot bear.

Said the Narrator:

"Now when he had finished his lay I asked:
 "Your name, tell me, pray?" Then he laughed at my
 plight and said: "Don't you know your boon companion,
 [16*^ Heber, the Kjifite?" Then my heart rejoiced at
 finding him, 'and I was knit with the cords of
 fellowship to him, and I delighted to be near
 him all the days that I stayed in his land with him."

Notes:

1. See, for example, the Lagarde Edition, Gottingen, 1883, page 119.
2. From paper by Robert Taft, Jr., Ohio Congressman from Cincinnati, entitled "The Bear and the Pit," read to The Literary Club, Cincinnati, Ohio, December 18, 1967.
3. Cf. his "Saladin and the Fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem" - G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1898, pp. 230-234.

Victor E. Reichert
