

*Has the season swapped rags for riches?
The earth is decked in gold-shot silk.
The seeded banks of the Nile are a chequered quilt
While the fields of Goshen resemble straps
of a breastplate. The oasis towns of Ramses
and Faytum are like shining fligree.
Girls on the corniche, a troupe of fawns,
loiter, wrists heavy with bangles, anklets
clipping their gait.*

*The heart enticed
forgets its age, remembers boys or girls
in gardens running to the river's edge
in Eden, in Egypt, along the Pishon,
the wheat fields are copper-green
swathed in cloth-of-gold richly embroidered,
bending to the whim of the sea breeze
as though bowing and giving thanks to God.*

Alexandri

These verses are the opening section of a qasida replying to a letter from Halevi's friend in Cairo, Nathan Ibn Samuel (court secretary to the Egyptian Nagid Samuel). Thanks to the extensive documentation uncovered in the Cairo Geniza concerning Halevi's activities during his sojourn in Egypt, we know this lyric to have been composed between October and December 1140.

Line 4: Goshen may stand for Egypt or the Northern Delta area. Genesis 45:10: "And thou shalt dwell in the land of Goshen, and thou shalt be near unto me, thou, and thy children, and thy children's children, and thy flocks, and thy herds, and all that thou hast."

Line 5: Exodus 28:8: "And the curious girdle of the ephod (breastplate), which is upon it, shall be of the same, according to the work thereof; even of gold, of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen."

Line 13: The Nile was frequently referred to as the Pishon. Genesis 2:11: "And the name of the first is Pishon: that it is which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold."

Line 15: Psalm 45:14-15: "The king's daughter is all glorious within: her clothing is of wrought gold. She shall be brought unto the king in raiment of needlework: the virgins her companions that follow her shall be brought unto thee."

Yehuda Halevi is one of the best known medieval Jewish poets and philosophers. He wrote in both Hebrew and Arabic and travelled from his home in al-Andalus throughout the Mediterranean world. He died in 1141.