CHAPTER FOUR

‘AS AN EWE BEFORE HER SHEARERS’:
THE HEBREW ELEGIES

Introduction

The Moroccan Hebrew texts are part of the rabbinic literary and theological tradition. While the prose genres, the chronicle, ma’aseh and midrash expressed elements of this tradition, it is the qinot, the poetic laments that represent it most fully. In these texts the martyrdom tale achieved its fullest expression and its highest aesthetic values. The elegies for Sol are examples of this narrative. All of them have the same thematic structure: description of the beauty of the virgin maiden, the attempts to seduce her, polemical exchanges contrasting her religion with that of her captors, her martyrdom and its meaning for Judaism and the Jewish People. They all conclude with an appeal to God to avenge the suffering of His people, to end the exile and begin the Messianic Age of redemption. They make use of Hebrew biblical quotes and rabbinic literature creating a rich polysemic layer of meaning and connotations for readers who were, like the poets, well educated in Scripture and the classical rabbinic tradition. They also draw on the poetic tradition inherited from Muslim Spain and classical Arabic poetry. In addition, given the subject of these qinot, they engage in gendered discourse at a number of levels. In terms of content this discourse exists in the exchanges between the heroine and her captors and in the description of her beauty, which is often infused with religious connotations in metaphoric conceptions of divine beauty and metonymic references to the Temple sacrifices. The treatment of sexual relations in these texts and their intersection with religious concepts are important themes. Finally, there are the sociolinguistic divisions between women’s discourse and education and men’s, which become apparent when evaluating the verisimilitude of the dialogue written for Sol in these qinot.
The qinot discussed in this chapter continue the poetic tradition of Andalusia with modifications made after the Expulsion from Spain. In the pre-Expulsion period this tradition was embedded in both the classical rabbinic piyyut and the Arabic poetic tradition. From the piyyut was derived rabbinic hermeneutics such as gematria and the notarikon, systems of kabbalistic interpretation of sacred Hebrew texts, the use of acronyms to make connections between different words and ideas, in particular the dialectic of exile and redemption, which created a whole series of antitheses for these poets. Antithesis țibâq, also plays an important role in Arabic poetics, in particular in the ʿilm al-badiʿ, the science of Arabic prosody, where it was one of its five elements, along with metaphor, paranomasia, ṭajnīs, the use of internal repetitions within lines of poetry, and the use of theological speculation, or al-madhhab al-kalamî; the later showing that the close connection between poetry and theology is another area of commonality between the two traditions. These elements were also used in Moroccan Hebrew poetry, particularly in the qinot. Both poetic traditions showed what Haim Zafrani described as a “preoccupation with style seen in the unusual frequency of certain types of expressions and linguistic signs, in the significant recurrence of thematic unities and lexical and syntactical models, and sometimes excessive use of homophony, alliteration, assonance and antithesis.” These techniques were used in both religious and secular Hebrew poetry in its Golden Age in Spain. After the Expulsion secular poetry was repudiated, but its themes and forms were incorporated into religious poetic genres. At the level of form

1 Ibid., 271, 73.
2 Gematria is an exegetic technique based on the assigned numerical value of each Hebrew letter and involves deriving connections between those words that have the same value when their letters are added. Notarikon is a method of finding new interpretations by taking the beginning, middle or end letters of Biblical words and using them to construct other words.
3 Ibid.
5 Zafrani, Two thousand years of Jewish life in Morocco, 271.