CHAPTER FIVE

THE FALLEN GAZELLE

Introduction

In addition to the Moroccan Hebrew works, Sol’s story was rendered in Judeo-Arabic. Unlike the works discussed in the previous chapter, most of these texts were never published. While there was a Judeo-Arabic press functioning in Tunisia and Algeria,¹ much of the traditional religious literary output in poetic form remains in manuscript.² The fate of this press and its dialect was determined, like so much else in the lives of North African Jewry, by the French colonization of the region. After a brief summary of the history of this dialect I will discuss two Judeo-Arabic texts—one redacted in the region of Taroudant at the end of the 19th century, but bearing the title date of 1835 and signed Moshe Ben Sa’adon Ben Avraham, the other by David Pinto from Oran and dated around the turn of the 20th century. The date and place of this latter manuscript is significant given the upheavals experienced by the Jewish community in Oran and the rest of Algeria at the end of the 19th century. The crisis the community faced and the lost status of its local rabbinic leadership is reflected in the text itself, where the thematic structure established by the Hebrew texts and rabbinic tradition was torn apart.

The Judeo-Arabic dialects have a long history going back to the Middle Ages. They were characterized by being written in the Hebrew alphabet and often contained Hebrew and Aramaic in their lexicon. Classical Judeo-Arabic was used by Sa’adah Goan (d. 942) in his translation of the Hebrew Bible, and in his polemical and philosophical works, such as his Book of Opinions and Beliefs (kitab al-amānāt wal-i’tiqādāt),

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as well as by Maimonides (d. 1204) in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (dalālat al-hā’irīn). These works were written in an elevated language that was close to classical Arabic and served as the literary language for Jews in Arab lands. In North Africa this dialect lost ground from the time of the Almohad persecution.³ From then on local and regional dialects of Judeo-Arabic have gained dominance. These also have their linguistic register levels, with *sharḥ*, the language of translation and commentary on the Bible, serving as the most elevated. This can be contrasted with the Judeo-Arabic of everyday speech, which is further divided based on its users and their educational levels. Writers of liturgy and poetic works for formal occasions were usually men who were bilingual in Hebrew and their regional dialect of Judeo-Arabic.⁴ There were also popular songs by women that were often borrowings from their Muslim neighbors and contained references to Islam.⁵ While texts in Judeo-Arabic were published, including in Europe, in Amsterdam and Livorno,⁶ much of the literature in Moroccan Judeo-Arabic remained in manuscript form and no complete diwan has survived even in that form.⁷ In addition, little is known about the authors of these texts beyond what is contained in the works themselves. There are *qinot* for Tisha B’Av that survive from the 18th century, and researchers have reported possessing manuscripts with *qinot* for Sol. Some of these contain Hebrew elements while others contain references to Islam, particularly in the dialogues between Sol and her captors.⁸ Such references were not the result of direct knowledge of the Quran or Islamic written sources, but were acquired through the everyday colloquial language used by Muslims and Jews, particularly in their interfaith interactions.⁹ Terms


⁸ Meir M. Bar-Asher, “Vestiges islamiques dans le parler judéo-arabe du Maroc.”

⁹ Ibid., 371.