CHAPTER SIX

SHABAZIAN EROTICISM, KABBALAH AND DOR DE’AH

The Spring and the Snake

The “Mawza’ exile” of 1679–1680 had far-reaching effects on the Jews of Yemen. Many Jews perished traveling to Mawza’; others died from the abysmal conditions there. After a year, the Imām rescinded his order of expulsion because he could not find any place to send them. Jews were allowed to leave Mawza’, but they had to settle in new neighborhoods outside of the major towns, having lost much of their property, including their manuscripts.

The poetry of R. Sālim al-Shabazī expressed many of the sentiments of this community, especially its desire for messianic redemption. His poetry quickly spread from circles of Lower Yemeni Jews to all of Yemeni Jewry, in part through the newly developed dīwān, an anthology of poems, many of which al-Shabazī wrote. Some scholars have drawn the plausible conclusion that Jews distanced themselves from all things Arabic against the background of their newly exacerbated relations with the Muslim population. Jewish residents of the larger towns of the North, like Šān’āʾ, now living in the new Qā’ al-yahūd (“the sunken area of the Jews”) outside the city walls, probably also took a less tolerant view towards Jews and Muslims mingling socially than did their brethren in the villages of the South. Due to one or both of these factors, the “Arabness” of Shabazian poetry became a recurring topic of controversy from the eighteenth to the twentieth century.

As we have seen, al-Shabazī’s Arabic and bilingual verse often makes use of the erotic themes and imagery of love poetry. Therefore, many Jewish scholars saw the problem of the poetry’s Arabness linked to the problem of its sensuality. What distinguished the poetry of the great sage and mystic al-Shabazī from popular love songs that came from the coffeehouses and sitting rooms of Muslim Yemenis? In answering

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1 Haykel, Revival and Reform in Islam, 120.
this question, most commentators had recourse to a theory of strict allegorical interpretation. According to the allegorical interpretation, sensual images did not have two levels of meaning—one corporeal and one transcendent; rather, the image only expressed a theological truth. To think that it was sensual in a literal sense, even for a moment, was a grievous error with potentially disastrous implications for an individual and for the community.

In *Sefer Even Sapir*, a popular travelogue among Eastern European Jews in the nineteenth century, R. Ya’akov Sapir describes the process by which a sick person sought healing at R. Sālim al-Shabazi’s tomb in Ta’izz:

If the sick man fears God and believes in the wonder-working Rabbi, then after he has prayed by the grave he should go into the cave to wash in the *mikveh* and take some of the water. If he deserves to recover, he will find the spring flowing, and an amulet written on a leaf bobbing in the water, which he must take and then he will recover. But if he is not a God-fearing man and does not deserve to recover, then he will find the spring dry and a snake curled in the doorway…

This description of al-Shabazi’s power as a life-saving cure to the pious and a mortal danger to the impious, is also an appropriate metaphor for his poetry. Its “outspoken reticence,” to borrow a phrase from Jon Whitman, tempted later generations of Jewish scholars to lay bare the secrets of al-Shabazi’s poetry. This temptation was as great as that posed by its sensuous imagery. In Whitman’s formulation, allegorical writing is by nature at odds with itself; it simultaneously proclaims both the distance and the proximity between language and meaning. Whereas al-Shabazi seems to have thought that hinting about the mystical symbolism of his verse would suffice, a series of nineteenth-century exegesis, unsatisfied with these mere hints, took it upon themselves to decipher al-Shabazi’s symbols systematically and at great length.

Whether they intended it or not, these scholars, the most prominent of whom, in my estimation, was R. Yaḥyā Qorah (1840–1881), managed to harmonize (or at least integrate) the imagery of Yemeni *humayni* poetry with kabbalistic theosophy. In order to show this process at work, I will discuss in this chapter the comments on the Arabic lyric

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