Islam: Scholarship and Existential Attitude

As I partially demonstrated in the previous chapter, Islam and Judaism are close not only theologically but also structurally. Both religious cultures emphasize a legal system for the regulation of everyday life. They have the commonalities of circumcision, dietary laws, and daily prayer. Yet, we have not had systematic discussion about the similarities and differences in the role of legal regulations, legal systems, scriptural narrative, philosophy, and lived ritual life of the two faiths. If the two faiths of Judaism and Islam are as similar as stated in the last chapter, then can the two faiths be brought closer together through what they share? Jews have not seriously begun to ask the questions that will lead to a Jewish-Muslim rapprochement.

Despite the fact that Jews have often found it easier to relate to Islam than to Christianity, Jews and Muslims do not affirm a common theological covenant—an affirmation that some thinkers have formulated to bring together Jews and Christians. There are no Jewish versions of Louis Massignon or Kenneth Craig who approached Islam in a theological manner, and there was no rapprochement during the twentieth century, excepting Trude Weiss-Rosmarin. The Jewish-Muslim encounter is now beginning more than a half century behind both the Jewish-Christian and the Muslim-Christian encounter, and the way Jews see Muslims remains colored by the history of Jewish scholarship.

This chapter will start with the basic Jewish academic work on Islam that sought the origins of Islam in Judaism. This approach was typified in the nineteenth century by Abraham Geiger and in the twentieth century by Abraham Katsh. From there we move to consider the regnant historical approaches to the Judeo-Islamic synthesis as presented by Steve Wasserstrom and David Nierenberg. I then look at the fundamentally opposite existential positions of Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, Franz Rosenzweig, and Avi Elqayam. I will capstone that discussion with the existential openness and naturalistic pluralism of Reuven Firestone, which seeks Jewish-Muslim dialogue.

I then deal with the diverse political positions of Eliezer Melamed, Bat Yeor, and other exclusivists, which are informed by contemporary politics, contrasting...
them with the contemporary open positions that look to find a home for Islam within Judaism—Menachem Forman, Eric Yoffie, and Haim Ovadiah. I conclude by discussing advocates of dialogue and the notion of Abrahamic faiths.

- Koranic scholarship—Abraham Geiger, Abraham Katsh
- Historians—Steven Wasserstrom, David Nierenberg
- Theologians—Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, Franz Rosenzweig, Avi Elqayam, Reuven Firestone
- Twentieth Century Politics—Against Islam
- Twentieth Century Politics—Peace with Islam

### Identification with Muslims

The academic affinity of Jews for Islam was part of a much broader cultural trend. The nineteenth-century Jewish vision of connectedness with Islam jettisoned Jews from an environment of Christian persecution and into an era when they imagined Jews were treated with respect. They depicted the Golden Age in Spain as a highpoint for both Muslims and Jews, and the study of medieval Islam was a means of presenting a purified image of Judaism at its peak. The myth of the Golden Age in Spain and the vision of an ideal Jewish existence during those years started in the eighteenth century when the winds of the Enlightenment inspired the lay leaders of the Jewish community in Western Europe to envision a more refined Jewish society. They switched to a Sefardic pronunciation of Hebrew and glorified Maimonides and other Golden Age figures.

In 1821, Heinrich Heine wrote his tragedy *Almansor*. It is set in Alhambra and deals with the adjustment of Muslims to the Christianization of Spain in the sixteenth century. The protagonist, displaying a sensitivity still rare in European circles, decries the burning of a Koran in a public fire in reconquered Spain. "Nearly every literary analysis of the play and the poem has read them as allegories to the predicament of nineteenth-century German Jewry. But *Almansor* also displays a profound empathy for the Muslims themselves, about whom Heine troubled to learn a great deal."

This identification between Jews and Muslims is quite pronounced in the work of British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81), who himself was a Jewish convert to Anglicanism. He wrote in his *Tancred* (1847), that the Arabs of the desert were "Jews upon horseback," and that Jews were "Mosaic Arabs," bound by ties of race to "Mohammedan Arabs."

In 1831, Abraham Geiger wrote his award-winning work on Islam (see below), showing the similarities between Judaism and Islam and attributing Muhammad’s persecution of some Jews to his disappointment at the Jews not following him. Just as he sought a Jewish context for Jesus, he sought a Jewish context for Islam.

Ignatz Goldziher (1850–1921), Hungarian orientalist and Orthodox Jew, is certainly the strongest and most unusual advocate for Jewish-Muslim understanding in the scholarly history; he regarded Judaism and Islam as kindred religions. Despite his status as an orientalist and a Jew, he was allowed to study with Muslim