



Jewish Ritual Baths

Immersion and Spiritual Renewal
in the Medieval City

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And it has been passed down to me from my teacher, our Rabbi Simcha of blessed memory, that all those who are repentant (*ba'alei teshuvah*) need immersion.¹

Isaac son of Moses of Vienna, *Sefer Or Zaru'a*, Ashkenaz, thirteenth century

This thirteenth-century text instructs Jewish penitents to complete their internal contrition by executing an external action, namely, immersion. In Jewish tradition, ritual immersion involves full bodily submersion in water that has not been drawn by human effort. Such immersion, which is performed in the nude, is usually associated with specific biblical categories of impurity, outlined in Leviticus (chaps. 11-15). These biblical sections lay out certain rules of purity and purification, some of which later became obligatory in Jewish rabbinic law (*halakhah*).

¹ Isaac son of Moses of Vienna, *Sefer Or Zaru'a* (Zhitomir, 1862), 1:40, §112.



Fig. 1. Speyer ritual bath, view into the shaft from the ante chamber. Speyer, Germany, twelfth century. Photograph by Ido Noy.

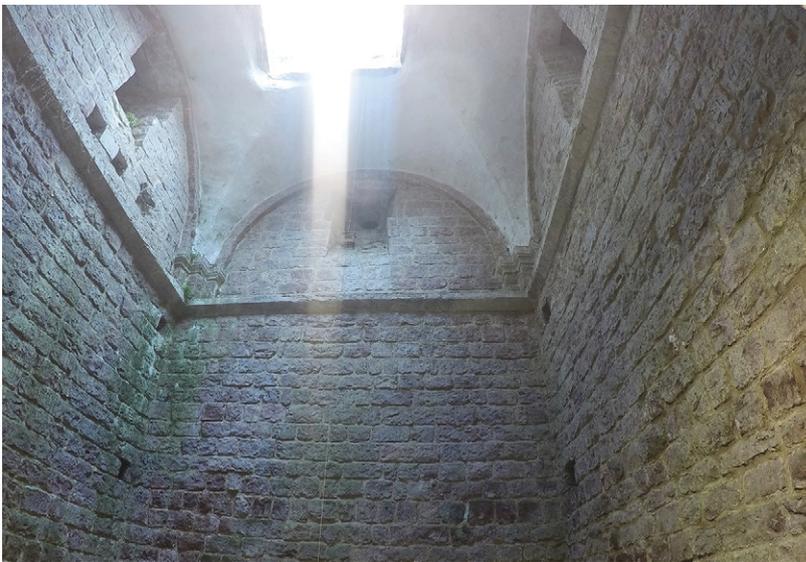


Fig. 2. Speyer ritual bath, view upwards into the shaft. Speyer, Germany, twelfth century. Photograph by Ido Noy.

They include various types of washing of people and of objects, and in some cases also full ritual immersion. By the Middle Ages, however, most of the biblical directives regarding purity were no longer in effect, considered either impossible or irrelevant following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.

A major exception, which remains in effect today among some Jews, was the immersion of married women following menstruation, childbirth, or miscarriage.



Fig. 3. Friedberg ritual bath, view upwards from water-side into the shaft. Friedberg (Hesse), Germany 1260. Photograph by Ido Noy.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, both men and women in Germany and France practiced a range of other immersions. The source that opens this article mentions one of these types – the immersion of a penitent. Another is the somewhat overlapping immersion in preparation for the Day of Atonement, highly attested in written sources from the end of the eleventh century and onwards.² New immersion ceremonies were devised to meet the specific needs of Jews living in medieval western Europe, such as the immersion of a Jew who had been baptized (whether forcibly or willingly) and later wished to return to his/her faith of origin.³

These practices were showcased by a new type of space, monumental ritual baths (*mikva'ot* plural, *mikveh* singular). Medieval ritual baths found in certain areas of Germany, France, and northern Spain have unique architectural characteristics that are incomparable with earlier models. While many *mikva'ot* dating from the Second Temple period in the Land of Israel have been discovered, these were often small and rarely



Fig. 4: Friedberg ritual bath, view downwards towards the immersion pool. Friedberg (Hesse), Germany 1260. Photograph by Ido Noy.

2 Neta Bodner and Ariella Lehmann, "So that a Person Sees Himself as if He was Created that Very Same Hour": Ritual Immersion of Men, Utensils and the Public in Jewish Ritual Baths in Germany in the Middle Ages," *Chidushim: Studies in the History of German and Central European Jewry* (2019): 47–83 (Hebrew).

3 Paola Tartakoff, *Conversion, Circumcision and Ritual Murder in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 99–103 and 117–120, Ephraim Kanarfogel, *Brothers from Afar: Rabbinic Approaches to Apostasy and Reversion in Medieval Europe* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021), 27–66.

decorated. The medieval *mikva'ot* in Worms, Speyer (fig. 1-2), Cologne, Friedberg (fig. 3-4), Montpellier, Besalú, and Offenburg differ dramatically.

Unlike Second Temple *mikva'ot*, medieval ones were not filled with rainwater but rather ground water, and they were not private but public, situated near the community's synagogue. Perhaps most saliently, they were monumental undertakings built on a grand scale. These deep-dug baths included large halls and decorative elements such as elbow capitals (Speyer), flying buttresses (Friedberg), and polychrome masonry blocks (Worms and Cologne). Unlike the earlier ones, the medieval *mikva'ot* were dug deep underground to reach natural springs that welled into the pools from below.

Clear ground water still fills the deep-water pools in Friedberg, Speyer, and Worms today. Besides being dug deep underground the medieval ritual baths were lit from above with openings to the sky, connecting earth below the immerser and heaven above. These *mikvaot* featured the most updated architectural solutions of their day, such as groin and barrel vaults with a wide opening at their summit.

In their use of ground water, these ritual baths were defined not only as *mikva'ot* but also as springs (*ma'ayan*) or living waters (*mayim hayim*) This was the highest grade of water stipulated for immersion, as noted in tractate *Mikva'ot* (Mishnah 1:1-7). The latter term is also rich with symbolic potential. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, alludes to God as the source of living waters (*makor mayim hayim*): "For my people have done two evils. They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water" (Jeremiah 2:13).

Immersing in these baths in medieval Europe must have been an extraordinary experience, as they looked and functioned like no other public monument in Europe at that time. Descending the long staircase towards the water, the immerser wore little or no clothing, and was presumably alone in the narrow semi-circular corridors (Worms, Speyer, Cologne). The full-body dunk occurring in unheated water under a massive shaft open to the sky was ripe with possible associations for the immerser, such as "from the depth I called thee o God" (Psalm 1:130). Such unique experiential potentialities of the spaces could echo the symbolism of immersion as a means for repentance and spiritual renewal.

Another recurring characteristic of the medieval *mikveh* was the element of surprise for the immerser. S/he would not have glimpsed the pool until they were a fair way down, bringing an element of surprise to the meeting with the water. Only at the water's edge could two things become visible for the first time – the opening from which the light shone above, and the water below. The revelation of the underground rooms, and especially the glistening pool, would have been particularly spectacular during the day, when dim and glowing natural light glimmered underground as one descended towards it. Immersing at night, a flame- or moon-lit descent would have held its own unique ambiance, walking downwards in the subterranean corridors with the flickering glow of the flame in the shadowy underground halls. The steps – unusually high – would have slowed down the visitor, necessitating careful walking and therefore taking note of the descent. A ray of light from the oculus guided the entire walk, leading the user to the water and potentially drawing the gaze up to the sky when reaching it.

Such innovation in the design of the architectural setting of the *mikveh*, unique to the High Middle Ages in western Europe, influenced the atmosphere during immersion ceremonies that took place in the space. In these ritual baths, immersion occurred in a spectacular architectural setting, vast in size and beautifully designed. Since all immersions, whatever their purpose,



Fig. 5. Cologne Cathedral, view eastwards to the altar. Cologne, Germany, erected in the twelfth century (additions fourteenth century, completed nineteenth century). Photograph by Ido Noy.

shared this common setting, the immerser always enjoyed the experiential benefits such a space afforded. One might even speculate that the development of spectacular sites for purification was a factor in the expansion of immersion practices beyond set biblical and mandatory religious categories. The connective theme amongst the various types of immersion is transformation: be it persons making the shift from impure to pure, vessels crossing over from a Christian maker to a Jewish user, someone converting from a different faith to Judaism or a Jew returning to the faith after apostasy. For those following the advice offered in *Sefer Or Zaru'a* quoted above and immersing as part of a repentance process, the immersion was meant for the spiritual goal of return from sin. Having the immersion occur in such a spectacular space could have heightened the sense of change, of the soul or self being cleansed with the washed body. Immersion spaces, then, may have impacted on the resurgence of immersion ceremonies.

Such use of architecture was hardly a Jewish invention. It was also characteristic of Christian architecture in the same areas and at the same time (fig. 5). The excessive size of immersion spaces meant for a straightforward and intimate ceremony was akin to the excessive size of Romanesque naves in the churches of the same cities, such as the exceedingly large cathedrals of Speyer, Worms, and Cologne. As European cities competed for the highest steeples, longest church naves, widest cloisters, and most ornate sculpture, the Jewish ritual baths were also built deeper and wider, with sophisticated construction solutions and ornate capitals and architectural ornament. The monumentality of the Jewish ritual baths invites examination of them, like

their Christian counterparts, as buildings designed to communicate the fortitude and religious commitment of the community that founded them. At the same time, their design strengthens significant elements of the ceremony, like the processional axis in contemporaneous churches. The great construction effort – logistic and financial – communicated the political power of the community and its ability to spend significant funds on public building, traits associated with Christian Gothic and Romanesque tendencies. The Christian involvement in these monumental constructions seems to have included masons, some of whom perhaps on the churches in the same cities.⁴ Such cultural interaction in my opinion went beyond the identity of the workmen, however, and shows inherently shared assumptions about what architecture could contribute to religious space and ritual.

Further Reading

- ❖ Yonatan Adler, "Rabbinic Literary Evidence on the Mikveh in Medieval Germany: A Work in Progress." In *Jewish Architecture: New Sources and Approaches*, edited by Katrin Keßler and Alexander von Kienlin, 78–82. Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2016.
- ❖ Neta Bodner and Ariella Lehmann, "So that a Person Sees Himself as if He was Created that Very Same Hour': Ritual Immersion of Men, Utensils and the Public in Jewish Ritual Baths in Germany in the Middle Ages," *Chidushim: Studies in the History of German and Central European Jewry* (2019): 47–83 (Hebrew).
- ❖ Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Purity, Piety, and Polemic: Medieval Rabbinic Denunciations of 'Incorrect' Purification Practices." In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel Wasserfall, 82–100. Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999.
- ❖ Stefanie Fuchs, "Die Mikwen von Speyer und Worms: Aktueller Forschungsstand." In *Die jüdische Gemeinde von Erfurt und die SchUM-Gemeinden: Kulturelles Erbe und Vernetzung*, edited by Frank Bussert, 1: 61–69. Jena and Quedlinburg: Bussert & Stadeler, 2012.
- ❖ Joseph Shatzmiller, "Les bains juifs aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles," *Médiévales* 21(2002): 83–89.

⁴ For a discussion of the identity of the workmen based on stylistic comparison and analysis of the mason's marks see: Stefanie Fuchs, "Die Friedberger Mikwe im kunsthistorischen Vergleich," *Insitut Zeitschrift für Architekturgeschichte* 9, no. 1 (2017): 5–14.