



# Jews and Urban Water Systems in Northern Europe

Tzafrir Barzilay

The decree regarding a male or a female gentile [Christian] servant who draws water from a water hole located in the public sphere, and brings it to a house of a Jew [on Sabbath]: As long as the hole is in the private sphere, and is ten [*amot*] long and four wide [about 1.8 by 4.5 meters], our rabbi, Rabbenu Tam permits one to drink [the drawn water], since the Jew could have gone there and drunk from it. And it is all the more permissible if the gentile brings the water from the river, as the Jew could have drunk there easily.<sup>1</sup>

Barukh son of Isaac (text included in *Mahzor Vitry*), North-Eastern France twelfth century

---

<sup>1</sup> Simhah son of Shmuel of Vitry, *Mahzor Vitry*, ed. Simon Hurwitz (Nürnberg: J. Bulka, 1923), 139.



Fig. 1. A medieval bronze Romanesque fountain, The Marktbrunnen, Goslar, Germany, early thirteenth century. Public Domain. Photograph by Ursula Roseau.

of water was accessible for the Jew in a way that he could theoretically drink from it himself without breaking halakhic decrees related to the Sabbath. If the source required one to draw the water using a mechanism forbidden for use on the Sabbath, for example a rope and pulley often used in wells, then the Jews could not use the water, even if a non-Jew drew it for them.

This short passage sheds light on the routine task of accessing water in the world of the Jews of northern Europe. R. Simhah, R. Barukh and Rabbenu Tam lived in the twelfth century in north-eastern France.<sup>3</sup> At the time, this was one of the most urbanized areas of Europe, flourishing with the famous Champagne fairs. Economic prosperity allowed for the development of new public infrastructure, including public water sources. Many of the municipal authorities ordered the digging of water channels and moats for defense and industry, as well as wells, pools, and even fountains which supplied the population with drinking water. As cities became more prosperous

This passage, taken from a twelfth-century halakhic commentary by R. Barukh son of Isaac, and incorporated into a collection of liturgical texts by R. Simhah of Vitry, reflects on the possibility of sending a Christian servant to draw water from public water sources on the Sabbath.<sup>2</sup> It refers to a halakhic decree stating that it is forbidden to carry water (or objects in general) through the public space on the Sabbath. This type of carrying is, however, permitted within one's own house or yard, i.e., in the private sphere. But what if a non-Jewish servant draws and carries the water for a Jew? Is the Jew allowed to benefit from the work of his or her Christian servant on the Sabbath, and drink water brought from the public sphere? Based on the position of the great Rabbenu Tam (Jacob son of Meir, c. 1100-1171), R. Barukh decreed that it was permissible, as long as the relevant source

2 *Mahzor Vitry* rephrases, with a slightly different emphasis: Barukh son of Isaac, *Sefer haTerumah* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute, 1979), 153, §252.

3 R. Simhah lived in Vitry, Rabbenu Tam in Ramerupt and Troyes, all in Champagne. For R. Barukh: Simcha Emanuel, "Biographical Data on R. Baruch son of Isaac," *Tarbiz* 69 (2000): 423-40 (Hebrew).

and populated, old solutions for obtaining water became less feasible. In the earlier Middle Ages, private wells or the river supplied the urban population with water, but growing urbanization rendered these sources insufficient. The river was often polluted in late medieval cities, as it was used as a drinking source for livestock and also for bathing, laundry, and urban industries. Additionally, urban sewage tended to flow into the river, making it unsafe for drinking. In this new reality, municipal authorities had to build public water systems to provide their citizens with potable water, which individuals relied upon for their daily needs (figs. 1-5).<sup>4</sup> Jews, who often dwelt in the cities, were no exception. When they turned from using their own private water sources to relying on the public ones, halakhic questions arose, like the one presented in the passage above. Drawing water



Fig. 2. A late medieval well, Riquewihr, Alsace, France. Photograph by Tzafrir Barzilay.

from one's private well would have circumvented the need to send a servant to the public water sources, but this text indicates that such a solution was not a commonly available one.

Moreover, this passage tells us about the ways in which Jews accessed these public sources. Buckets of water would be brought from the public well or a fountain once or twice a day and stored in a large vessel at home, to be used for drinking, cooking, and washing of hands. This involved intensive labor, and families who had servants sent them to perform this task. In some places, there were people employed as public water carriers, who would carry water to the home of anyone willing to pay. Less well-off Jews had to carry the water themselves. As the wells and fountains were public, they often met their Jewish and Christian neighbors there. In cities that also had public pools for laundry or other uses, people, and women in particular, spent many hours near the water. In short, these water sources became urban meeting places, hubs of

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Pierre Leguay, *L'eau dans la ville au Moyen Âge* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2002); Carole Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013).



Fig. 3. Drawing water from a fountain – Second Nürnberg Haggadah, Franconia, 1470-80. Courtesy of David Sofer Collection, London, fol. 2. Photograph by Shalom Sabar.

symbolic reenactment of the Crucifixion, traditional for Christians during Holy Week, the man assumed that local Jews were trying to recreate this event.<sup>5</sup> In our context, that of local water sources, it is notable that an everyday encounter involving a mundane activity like watering horses could spiral into a major interreligious conflict.

The Blois affair reminds us that in addition to being a daily necessity, water carried cultural and religious meanings. It played a major role in both Jewish and Christian rites, and the fact that Jews had to share water sources with their Christian neighbors raised halakhic questions. For example, the early thirteenth-century *Book of the Pious* (*Sefer Hasidim*) mentions a certain town in which Jews wished to live but faced a problem as there was only one major water source available there. Christians used that water source for performing ordeals, legal rituals designed to determine the guilt or innocence of criminals by placing them within water.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the water ordeal was also performed

information, gossip, and interaction, especially for the lower classes. As urbanization processes expanded during the High and Late Middle Ages, so did the reliance on public water sources, with the social exchange this entailed.

Jews and Christians usually shared their water sources peacefully, as they regularly shared other urban spaces. Sometimes, however, interactions around water use deteriorated into violence. In 1171, in the city of Blois, in central France, 31 Jews were executed after being accused of the ritual murder of a Christian boy. The affair developed from a random meeting between R. Isaac son of Eleazar of Blois and a local Christian horseman. Both were watering their horses in the Loire River, on the night before Passover, which was also three days before Easter. Apparently, the Christian thought a piece of leather which R. Isaac was carrying was the body of a male child. Perhaps due to the sym-

5 Abraham M. Habermann, *Sefer Gzeirot Ashkenaz veTsarfat* (Jerusalem: Tarshish, 1946), 133–34, 142–46; Ephraim of Bonn, *Sefer Zekhirah*, ed. Abraham M. Habermann (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik 1970), 30–33.

6 Judah son of Samuel, *Sefer Hasidim*, ed. Judah Wistenetzki (Frankfurt am Main: Wahrman, 1924), §1369.

in Blois to establish the aforementioned claims brought against the Jews. As part of this process, priests blessed the water in the name of Christ, so that the water would reveal the divine truth regarding the criminals.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the author of *Sefer Hasidim* advised, Jewish women should not use this water for ritual immersion, and Jews should not immerse their vessels there and recite the relevant traditional blessings. Sharing water for everyday use, then, was deemed an acceptable reality, but water used for ritual purposes required a separate source.<sup>8</sup>

Visual sources complement this picture. Illustrations from the *Second Nürnberg Haggadah* and the *Yahuda Haggadah*, both created in mid-fifteenth-century Franconia, probably in Nürnberg itself, show Jews drawing water from public water fountains for another ritual: baking matzah for Passover.<sup>9</sup> Such images reflect an everyday reality, as municipal records

from Nürnberg show that Jews regularly relied on the local public water system for their daily water supply. They had to do so when drawing water for baking matzah as well, despite the halakhic strictures regarding the cleanliness and coolness of the water used for this purpose. This stimulated halakhic discussion, as an image in the *Yahuda Haggadah* reveals. Still, by the end of the Middle Ages, private water systems had become so rare and public water systems so common in major northern European cities that Jews were left with no alternative but to partake of the public amenities, even



Fig. 4. Medieval urban fountain – Second Nürnberg Haggadah, Franconia, 1470-80. Courtesy of David Sofer Collection, London, fol 22. Photograph by Shalom Sabar.

- 7 Robert Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Margaret H. Kerr, Richard D. Forsyth, and Michael J. Pyley, "Cold Water and Hot Iron: Trial by Ordeal in England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 22 (1992): 573–95.
- 8 Shlomo Eidelberg, "Trial by Ordeal in Medieval Jewish History: Laws, Customs and Attitudes," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 46-47 (1978-1979): 105-120; Elisheva Baumgarten, "Seeking Signs? Jews, Christians, and Proof by Fire in Medieval Germany and Northern France," in *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations*, eds. Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schacter (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 205–25.
- 9 *Yahuda Haggadah* (Jerusalem, Israel Museum, Ms. 180/50) ff. 1v-2r; *Second Nürnberg Haggadah* (London, David Sofer Collection - formerly: Jerusalem, Schocken Institute Library, 24087) ff. 1v-2r; Steven Fine, "The Halakhic Motif in Jewish Iconography: The Matzah-Baking Cycles of the Yahuda and Second Nürnberg Haggadahs," in *A Crown for a King: Studies in Jewish Art, History and Archaeology in Memory of Stephen S. Kayser*, eds. Shalom Sabar et al. (Berkeley: Magnes Museum, 2000), 105–24; Katrin Kogman-Appel, *Die zweite Nürnberger und die Jehuda Haggada: Jüdische Illustratoren zwischen Tradition und Fortschritt* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999).



Fig. 5. Medieval well - Second Nürnberg Haggadah, Franconia, 1470-80. Courtesy of David Sofer Collection, London, fol 12. Photograph by Shalom Sabar.

if they would have preferred to use private supervised sources for ritual uses.

These processes of urbanization and the growing reliance on public water sources shaped the practical reality of Jews and the ways they practiced their rituals, as well as their connections with their Christian neighbors. Northern European Jews, who were primarily city dwellers, lived at the nodal point of these processes.

## Further Reading

- ❖ Tzafrir Barzilay, "Ancient Waters from New Fountains: Municipal Water Sources in Fifteenth-Century Haggadot from Nürnberg," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 28 (2021).
- ❖ Susan L. Einbinder, *Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom in Medieval France*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- ❖ André Guillerme, *The Age of Water: The Urban Environment in the North of France, A.D. 300-1800*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1988.
- ❖ Florian Ruhland, "Power, Pleasure, and Pollution: Water Use in Pre-Industrial Nürnberg and Prague," *Klaudyán* 4 (2007): 5–18.
- ❖ Paolo Squatrit, ed. *Working with Water in Medieval Europe: Technology and Resource-Use*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2000.
- ❖ Israel J. Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, translated by Barbara Harshav. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.