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Between Domestic and Urban Spaces: Preparing for Shabbat in Ashkenazic Communities, 13th–15th Centuries*

Abstract: In 13th to 15th-century Ashkenazi Jewish communities, preparing candles and food not only created a sanctified domestic space for Shabbat, but also required Jews to interact with urban spaces, often shared with Christians. The preparation of Shabbat candles demonstrates the porous boundaries between synagogue and home. The physical, ritual and symbolic aspects of Shabbat candles emphasized their domesticity, especially when viewed against Christian ritual uses of candles. However, Shabbat candles were also present in synagogues symbolically through liturgy and in the reckoning of candle-lighting time. The need to keep food warm over Shabbat without kindling fire demonstrates the importance of urban settings. Jews used urban or communal ovens to insulate food, even when they were able to do so at home. The urban settings of Shabbat preparations reveal how the entire community, regardless of age, gender, and status, fashioned a temporal – but tangible – “Jewish space” between homes, synagogues, streets and ovens.

Key words: Shabbat candles, Shabbat meals, domesticity, *hatmanah*, synagogue.

Introduction: “The Lamp Burning and the Table Set and the Bed Made”

The sole extant image of a medieval Erev Shabbat (Friday night) to have survived from the Middle Ages appears in a tiny German mahzor from circa 1300.¹ It depicts two scenes: on the left, a woman lighting a hanging lamp, and on the right, a couple – presumably the same woman as in the first scene – sitting around a trestle table. There are two loaves of bread clearly visible between two tablecloths on the table, a hanging lamp over

* Research for this article was supported by the European Research Council (ERC) project “Beyond the Elite: Jewish Daily Life in Medieval Europe,” led by Elisheva Baumgarten, under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Program (grant agreement no. 681507). I thank Elisheva Baumgarten for her guidance and support, as well as the members of the project for numerous insights and helpful comments along the way.

1 Therese and Mendel Metzger, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages: Illuminated Hebrew Manuscripts of the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Centuries* (New York: Fine Art Books, 1982) 240–241.