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## Jewish Widows' Homes in Ashkenaz in the 12th and 13th Centuries\*

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the plight of several Jewish women living in 12th and 13th-century Ashkenaz, and the situations they faced as widows, with regard to their accommodations. Responsa reveal that, despite halakhic regulations regarding provision for them, widows were highly vulnerable to eviction from the homes that had belonged to their late husbands and encountered threatening and precarious living situations. This issue sheds light on the social and financial possibilities and unique challenges faced by medieval Jewish women after becoming widows.

**Key words:** Ketubah, household, rent, inheritance.

### Introduction

The heirs could remove the widow whenever they wish to, and those 40 silver marks<sup>1</sup> they have given her to leave (their home) are unnecessary, since her husband has not assigned her as a legal guardian (*apotropus*) ... undeniably he has given her nothing.<sup>2</sup>

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\* 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 Eyal Levinson, Aviya Doron, Andreas Lehnertz and the rest of my team members for discussing and reviewing this work.

1 In a 14th-century German moneylending charter, a Hebrew note translated *zekukim* as "silver marks"; see E. Brugger and B. Wiedl, *Regesten zur Geschichte der Juden in Österreich im Mittelalter*, vol. 2: 1339–1365 (Innsbruck, Wien, Bozen: Studienverlag, 2010) 88.

2 Meir b. Baruch of Rothenburg (Maharam, d.1293), *Sefer She'elot Uteshuvot Maharam b. R. Barukh* (*Sefer Shut Maharam*), Prague ed. (M. A. Bloch [Budapest, 1895]) #243. Unless otherwise noted, references are to this edition. The full responsum states: "[The husband] did not write that all his assets were to be hers upon his death and after her death his sons and daughter will inherit, but he wrote that the day after his death (his) daughter will inherit, like (his) sons. Undeniably, he has given her nothing. She was not (the assets') guardian, and even if he appointed her as a guardian, they could still request her removal, since I sensed from your [letter] that she squandered and abused the assets." Parallel versions of this responsum appear in Cremona ed. (V. Conti, ed., *Sefer She'elot U-Teshuvot Maharam* [Cremona, 1557]) 30; and Berlin ed. (M. A. Bloch, *Sefer Sha'arei Teshuvot Maharam Bar Barukh* [Berlin, 1891]) 50.