



And There Was a Wedding in Town

Everyday Family Life in Medieval Ashkenaz

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Reuben laid charges against Simeon: "My wife and I were guests in your house, because there was a wedding in town. And you had an unmarried daughter [*bat betulah*], and you convinced my wife to lend gold earrings worth three *zekukim* to your daughter to wear at the wedding, and so she did, and she [your daughter] went to the wedding, and when she returned she went to sleep in the winter room, and slept. And [while she was asleep] the gentile maidservant stole the earrings from her [your daughter's] ears and went away. Therefore, I demand that you pay me their worth." Simeon replied: "It is true that your wife did me a favor, but she took in return [for the stolen earrings] the earrings of my daughter, and your wife still has them. I will abide with whatever the court decides." Reuben replied: "But your earrings worth only half a *zakuk*.... therefore, Simeon is not to be blamed [for the loss] because this is a question of ownership and although she

[the daughter] was wrong as she didn't put them in a safe place [mekom shmirah], she is not to be blamed ... and because he [the father] is not expected to pay for these [stolen] earrings, Reuben has to return to him [to Simeon] those earrings [which were substituted for the golden earrings]."¹

Eliezer son of Nathan, *Sefer Ra'avan. Sefer Even ha'Ezer*, Mainz, Germany, twelfth century

Sometime during the twelfth century, a wedding was held in one of the Jewish communities along the Rhine river, possibly in Mainz, and guests came from afar to celebrate with the young couple and their families. In one household, a family hosted a man and his wife, out-of-town guests who came to participate in the celebration. The host, Simeon, convinced his guest to lend her gold earrings to his daughter. We know of the story because something went awry and necessitated the intervention of a rabbinic court – the earrings were stolen.

This story appears in a halakhic discussion, originating in Mainz and reported by R. Eliezer son of Nathan (1090–1170). As is often the case in halakhic literature, the male protagonists have generic names, Reuben and Simeon, and the women remain nameless. Moreover, there is neither mention of the place where the incident occurred nor an exact date. The story reappears, with only minor variations, in halakhic literature from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries, as an example of the laws related to borrowing (*dinei sho'el*). This is, however, a valuable source not only for scholars interested in the history of halakhah but also for social/cultural historians, and particularly for those studying everyday life in medieval Ashkenaz. My aim in this article is to demonstrate what the source reveals about medieval Jewish culture, and especially about wedding celebrations and Jewish family life.

Jewish weddings in Ashkenaz during the High and Late Middle Ages were festive occasions attracting community members as well as out-of-town guests. These Jewish communities were relatively small (a large one, like the Cologne community, consisted in the mid-fourteenth century of approximately 75 households), and oftentimes a suitable match could only be found in another community. We do not know why Reuben and his wife decided to stay with Simeon's family. We do know that in Germany during the Late Middle Ages, hundreds of celebrants could gather for such an occasion. This happened, for example, at the wedding of the son of R. Haim, the brother of R. Asher son of Yehiel (1250–1327), whose wedding was attended by more than five hundred people.² During the twelfth century, when the communities were smaller, weddings probably attracted fewer participants, but even then, people like Reuben and his wife had to be lodged and fed when they came from out of town. In the early thirteenth century, the author of *Sefer Hasidim* warned people who invited out-of-town guests to attend their weddings and expected their guests to be hosted by the local Jewish community, that they must feed their guests and not expect others to do so.³

1 Eliezer son of Nathan, *Sefer Ra'avan hu Sefer Even ha'Ezer*, ed. David Deblitzky (Bene Beraq: 2012), 3:172.

2 Israel Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1926), 189.

3 Judah son of Samuel, *Sefer Hasidim*, ed. Judah Wistenetzki (Frankfurt am Main: Wahrman, 1924), §1178.

Young women and men particularly favored wedding celebrations. These festivities were always good opportunities to dance in mixed-gender company and to court future spouses.⁴ Some young women and men, like Simeon's daughter, borrowed special jewels, belts, and clothes to beautify themselves for these occasions. The sources also attest to groups of young men who traveled, sometimes long distances, to attend weddings of friends and relatives.⁵ Sometimes, these young men stole chickens and other goods from the local Jews. The communal ordinances (*Takkanot ShUM*) issued for the first time in Mainz in 1220 prohibited such delinquent behavior, but apparently with little success.⁶ Three years later, a similar prohibition appeared in the ordinances enacted in Speyer.

In addition to gaining some knowledge about wedding celebrations, the story allows us to draw, in broad strokes, a picture of daily life during this period. We are told, for instance, that the father had to convince Reuben's wife to lend her earrings to his daughter (Reuben's wife did not voluntarily offer them), and that the daughter went to the wedding, came back and went to sleep. There is no mention of the parents rebuking her for forgetting to put the earrings in a secure place (*mekom shmirah*) before she retired to bed. It rather appears that the parents not only allowed their daughter to go to the wedding but also made sure she looked her best, wearing a pair of gold earrings.

A Christian maidservant, who was part of this Jewish household, was accused of stealing the earrings at night – while the daughter was asleep – and then running away with them. Hebrew, Latin, and vernacular sources from medieval Ashkenaz attest that having Christian servants, both male and female, was not a rarity in affluent Jewish households during the High and Late Middle Ages.⁷ Some of them, like the one in our story, also slept in Jewish houses, despite strong opposition from church authorities. This type of inter-religious interaction was part of a wider social phenomenon in which Christians and Jews frequented each other's homes.⁸ In several towns, documentation shows that there were Jews and Christians who lived in close proximity; some of these individuals shared yards and even had joint latrines.⁹

The brief halakhic discussion does not reveal much about the dwelling itself. It does, however, mention that after returning from the wedding, the daughter of the family went to sleep in a room called "the winter room [*beit hahoref*]," the room with the fireplace, mainly used during the long winter months. Mentions of this room appear in numerous halakhic stipulations originating in medieval Ashkenaz, including discussions regarding whether it was permitted according to Jewish law to enjoy the warmth generated from a fire lit by Christian servants on the Sabbath.¹⁰

4 Eyal Levinson, "Youth and Masculinities in Medieval Ashkenaz" (PhD diss., Bar Ilan University, 2018), 72 (Hebrew).

5 Irving A. Agus, ed., *Teshuvot Ba'alei haTosafot* (New York: Talpith, 1954), 208–09.

6 Louis Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1924), 240.

7 Elliot Horowitz, "Between Masters and Maidservants in the Jewish Society of Europe in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Times," in *Sexuality and the Family in History: Collected Essays*, eds. Israel Bartal and Isaiah Gafni (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1998), 193–212 (Hebrew).

8 Andreas Lehnertz, "Christen im öffentlichen und privaten Raum der mittelalterlichen Judenviertel," *Münchner Beiträge zur jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur* 14 (2020): 29–44.

9 Benjamin Laqua, "Aborte in Nachbarschaftsräumen – Konflikte und Kompromisse in deutschen Städten des Spätmittelalters," *Aborte im Mittelalter und der Frühen Neuzeit: Bauforschung – Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte*, ed. Olaf Wagener (Petersberg: Michael Imhof, 2014), 178–85.

10 See, for example, Alexander Zusslin haCohen, *Sefer HaAgudah Helek Rishon miSeder Mo'ed*, ed. Eleazar Brizel (Jerusalem, 1966), 9.

This story came to our attention because a dispute broke out between the host and his guests. The intention of Rabbi Eliezer son of Nathan, who reported this incident, was not to disclose for future generations aspects of everyday life. Nevertheless, this terse source allows us a glimpse into medieval Jewish daily life, the domestic spaces these Jews inhabited, and the social interactions that occurred therein. It also holds some information about hospitality, youth culture, and gender constructs. Although we may not be able to draw general conclusions from this one source, by piecing together sources holding similar and additional information, we can draw a rich picture of everyday life in medieval Ashkenaz.

Further Reading

- ❖ Judith R. Baskin, "Mobility and Marriage in Two Medieval Jewish Societies," *Jewish History* (2008): 223–43.
- ❖ Georges Duby, *Medieval Marriage: Two Models from Twelfth-Century France*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.
- ❖ Elliott Horowitz and Esther Cohen, "In Search of the Sacred, Jews, Christians, and Rituals of Marriage in the Later Middle Ages," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (1990): 225–49.
- ❖ Jacob Katz, "Marriage and Sexual Relations at the Close of the Middle Ages," *Zion* 10 (1945): 21–54 (Hebrew).
- ❖ Joseph Shatzmiller, "Violence, chantage et mariage: Arles, 1387," *Provence Historique* 37 (1987): 589–600.