

JEWISH DAILY LIFE IN MEDIEVAL NORTHERN EUROPE, 1080–1350

A Sourcebook

edited by
Tzafrir Barzilay, Eyal Levinson, and
Elisheva Baumgarten

TEAMS

Jewish Everyday Life in Medieval Northern Europe, 1080–1350

TEAMS

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Introduction: Jewish Life in Medieval Europe

Tzafrir Barzilay, Eyal Levinson, and Elisheva Baumgarten



Figure 1: Worms cemetery, © Neta Bodner

STROLLING DOWN THE NARROW paths of the *Heiliger Sand* (lit. holy sand, meaning holy ground),[1] the Jewish cemetery in Worms, Germany, numerous tombstones dot the grassy terrain, the earliest of which dates to the mid-eleventh century. They are a reminder of the vibrant Jewish community that was once an integral part of this bustling Upper Rhine urban center during the high and late Middle Ages. A few sport the names of well-known medieval Jewish scholars, others those of respected men and women who held important communal roles, but the vast major-

[1] Photos of the cemetery can be seen in the official site of the city of Worms https://www.worms-erleben.de/erleben/entdecken-und-staunen/sehenswuerdigkeiten/heiliger-sand.php.

ity of the tombstones commemorate "ordinary people"; children, women, and men whose stories are forever lost to us. Although there are those who reached a ripe old age, living well into their seventies and even eighties, many died in their youth. Their tombstones, usually erected by their loved ones, reveal scant information—family ties, age, occasionally the reason for their death (usually in cases where the deceased had been murdered or martyred), sometimes a profession is mentioned, a communal position or other personal details emerge from the short inscriptions. Their names may sound familiar to us, as many are popular Jewish names still in use today, such as Abigail, Hannah, Moshe, Rebecca, Meir, Jacob, Isaac, and Nathan. These tantalizing bits of information leave us hungry for more. Who were these people? What can we learn about their lives, their homes, families, and communities?

The historical study of daily life—the quotidian practices, norms, and beliefs of people of past generations—has become an increasing focus of research over the past three decades. It is tempting to imagine oneself within past circumstances and to contemplate the similarities and differences between past and present. The obvious danger, of course, is anachronism. We often assume that people were essentially the same in every period and culture, and that they thought and behaved as we do, but in truth we can only speculate as to how the personal experiences of other individuals matches our own. This volume seeks to provide a glimpse into the life of the Jews of northern Europe in the medieval period by presenting primary sources: documents, literature, and visual material created by the people who lived there.

As one leading historian of everyday life has argued, it is crucial to realize "that the distance between 'us' and the 'others' is not something self-evident and given, but problematical; it may be possible to bridge the gulf, but it cannot be eliminated."[2] How, then, can we bridge this gap between "us," in the present, and "them," in the past? How can we familiarize ourselves with their lives? While the personal stories of most of the people buried in the *Heiliger Sand* remain unknown to us, this volume presents sources that will help us piece together various aspects of their lives, illuminating features of their material culture, the spaces they frequented, and their quotidian routines.

[2] Alf Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 8.



Figure 2: Ashkenazi script: alphabet copied in a *Mahzor Vitry* manuscript. New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, MS 8092, fol. 165v

The current volume focuses specifically on the Jews of Ashkenaz over the period 1080–1350. Ashkenaz is the name given to the geographical area that incorporated the German Empire, northern France, England and parts of Italy. These Jews shared customs. Later, these customs spread east, eventually reaching Poland as well. These lands of the European northwest had a similar climate and geography, which shaped and determined their patterns of agriculture and economy. It is thus not surprising that they also shared many social institutions during this period. Similarly, the Jewish communities of this geographical unit also shared numerous cultural traits which served to differentiate them in many respects from the Jews in Spain and those living along the European shores of the Mediterranean to the south of this geographic area.[3] These include unique customs and worldviews, a particular Hebrew script (called Ashkenazi script), and close and ongoing ties between the rabbinic authorities of the region. Most importantly, these medieval Jews often saw Ashkenaz as a distinct unit within the wider Jewish world. That being said, it was not a homogeneous society and there were important local differences between

[3] The Jews of north European descent are still known as Askenazim, those of Spain as Sepharadim (Spain is called Sepharad in Hebrew), and those of north Africa as Mizraḥim (from the Hebrew word for East, Mizraḥ).

the communities, some of which will emerge clearly in the sources we present.

The majority of Ashkenazi Jews lived in relatively small urban communities, which often included dozens of families, with the larger ones comprising hundreds of individuals. While overall the Jews numbered 1 to 5 percent of the northern European population (as far as the limited demographic information available allows us to estimate), in many of the towns of the period they were a significant minority. In each town they tended to live close to each other, often in the center of the city near the palace of the local ruler who often protected them. In some towns there were streets, usually those on which the local synagogue, the *mikveh*, and other communal buildings stood, which were named *Judengasse* (Jews' street, German) or *Rue des juifs* (the Jews' alley, French). During this period Jews were not usually forced to live in walled-off areas (that were later to be called ghettoes), so Jews and Christians could mingle freely and traverse the urban space as they wished, and Jews were not usually limited in where they could purchase real estate. In this environment, in which Jews and Christians were neighbors, acquaintances, and business partners, some even formed close friendships. They surely knew each other well and sometimes shared political interests and cultural ideas. At the same time, relations were not always amicable, and violence at the hands of their Christian neighbors was a recurring threat for medieval Jews. These complex relationships between Jews and Christians shaped medieval urban daily life.

Little is known about the communities of the region prior to the eleventh century, beyond the existence of a few small Jewish settlements. Unfortunately, very little source material has survived from this earlier period, and this paucity has determined our start date of the year 1080. The latest sources in this collection are dated to the mid-fourteenth century, specifically 1347–1350, when the Black Death, a plague, swept the continent, killing about a third of the population, and resulting in significant political, social, and cultural upheaval. During these years the Jewish communities suffered not only the horrors of the plague itself, as non-Jews did, but were also subjected to murderous persecutions as a result of accusations that they caused the plague by poisoning wells. Over three hundred Jewish communities were decimated around the first outbreak of the plague, many completely destroyed. As a result, in the aftermath of the Black Death the size, organizational structure, and political status of the surviving communities were significantly changed. Even before the

plague, however, Jewish existence in Ashkenaz faced major challenges. Jews were expelled from one location after the other. The Jews of England were expelled, not to return for centuries, in 1290. The Jews of France were expelled in 1182, and were then readmitted only to be expelled again, with the process being repeated in 1306 before the final expulsion in 1394. In Germany starting from the late thirteenth century, the Jewish communities were subjected to several waves of severe persecution before the Black Death, especially in 1298 and 1336, significantly more brutal and widespread than the occasional local violence of earlier centuries (with the exception of the massacres of 1096). The plague, therefore, marked the peak of a crisis that had been ongoing for several decades, at the end of which many of the Jewish communities of Ashkenaz were either completely destroyed or profoundly changed. The period of 1080–1350 therefore stands as a distinct political, social, and cultural period in the history of the Jews of northern Europe.

There are other sourcebooks that present documents written by Jews and about Jews—among them, *The Jew in the Medieval World, A Source Book: 315–1791*,[4] compiled by Jacob R. Marcus, is notable. However, none of these collections covers as defined a period of time and geographical area as does this volume, and none focuses on Jewish everyday life. Marcus's book, for example, spans a period of almost fifteen hundred years, from the Christianization of the Roman Empire to the French Revolution, and a vast geographical area that includes Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East, and focuses on theology, politics, law, and ideology rather than on lived experience. The documents collected in this volume, on the other hand, relate in some way or another to "ordinary people": women and children, craftsmen, and paupers. It is true that many of the documents in this sourcebook either refer to Jews associated with the learned or economical elite or were themselves written by male scholars, because this is the nature of the vast majority of surviving sources. Our goal as social historians, however, is to use these documents to illuminate Jewish society at large. This is possible due to the multiple

[4] First edition: Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World, A Source Book: 315–1791* (Cincinnati: Sinai Press, 1938). Also see: Solomon Grayzel, ed., *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century* (New York: Hermon, 1966); Amnon Linder, ed., *The Jews in the Legal Sources of the Early Middle Ages* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997); Olivia Remie Constable and Damian Zurro, eds., *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

ongoing social interactions between all segments of society reflected in the documents. Rich and poor, learned and less learned, women, men, and children, youth and adults—all saw and were in daily contact with one another. They met each other within their shared communal spaces: the synagogues, *mikvaot* (ritual baths), and the dance halls, during funerals, on the street and in the markets, or within each other's homes. Thus, a careful reading of these documents, even if written by and for the elite, can shed light on the everyday life of other sectors of the community.

What exactly do we mean by the term *everyday life*? Scholars have suggested several definitions, as during the twentieth century everyday life became a methodological concept used in such academic disciplines as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and, from the late 1970s on, also in historical research, where it was particularly popular in Germany. In the context of this sourcebook, the term *everyday life* refers to the ways in which people habitually act, think, and feel. It is about subjectivity and experience, about bringing to the fore those voices and experiences that were overlooked and undervalued by previous generations of historians. As historian Alf Lüdtke wrote, at the center of the history of everyday life "are the lives and sufferings of those who are frequently labeled, suggestively but imprecisely, as the 'small people.' It involves their work and non-work.[5] The picture includes housing and homelessness, clothing and nakedness; eating and hunger, love and hate." Lüdtke points out the connection of this definition with the (relatively) new academic focus on the history of non-elite people: "Beyond this, certain thematic emphases have emerged, such as the history of work, of gender relations, of the family, and especially of popular cultures. The attention is no longer focused on the deeds (and misdeeds) and pageantry of the great, the masters of church and state."[6] In short, the study of everyday life focuses on recurring practices and common spaces, especially in relation to the existence of the "ordinary people."

This volume offers students a sense of the spaces frequented by the Jews of Ashkenaz, their daily practices and rituals, and how they thought about all three. There are sources that discuss culinary preferences or details of intimate sexual relations, while others deal with clothes, objects,

[5] That is, regular activities not relating or involving paid work.

[6] Alf Lüdtke, "'Alltagsgeschichte': Verführung oder Chance? Zur Erforschung der Praxis historischer Subjekte," unpublished paper, cited by Geoff Eley in Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life*, ix.

or communal buildings. Some documents testify to how Jews observed Sabbaths and holidays, and held weddings and funerals, celebrated births, and other life cycle events. Others focus on the relationships with Christian neighbors, local authorities, and the Church. Still others offer details regarding daily economic activities, professions, and trade. All these different perspectives together provide answers to questions regarding medieval daily life directly from the words of the Jews themselves, albeit through the filters of translation and editing.

Our sourcebook is divided into five sections. The first, *From Birth to Death and Throughout the Year: Life Cycle and Rituals*, contains sources dealing with turning points in the life of a particular individual or family, such as births, coming of age, weddings, and deaths; as well as those relating to the cycle of the year in the community: holidays, fast days, and special communal events, such as the dedication of a synagogue. The focus in this section is on events that were regular occurrences in every community but that nonetheless carried deep emotional, social, and religious significance for those who participated in them. They thus represent central features of Jewish daily life.

The second part, *Living Arrangements: Family, Household, and the Home*, highlights the everyday activities that took place within Jewish households. The sources focus on where medieval Jews slept, what they ate, and the kinds of relationships they sustained with their family members. They deal more with common experiences and behaviors than with events.

In *Making a Living: Money, Markets, and Professions*, we present sources pertaining to the economics of medieval Jewish life. The Jews of Europe are often described as usurers, who made a living offering interest loans to their Christian neighbors (indeed, this notion often justified the violence and persecution carried out against them throughout this and later periods). While there were those who dealt in credit supply (as did many Christians), Jews also worked as traders, craftsmen, and service providers. The sources on the subject reveal the negative image that Christians often held regarding Jews in this context, but also the complex reality of their economic life and daily social interactions.

Law and Order, Disruption and Crisis focuses on select legal sources involving Jews, such as incidents in which Jews faced legal sanctions or suffered as a result of the violation of legal protections accorded them by rulers and local authorities. The documents include statutes and regulations from secular and Church law as well as court records, and shed light

on the legal status of medieval Jews within Christian society: ranging from protected on the one hand, to marginalization on the other, with many alternatives in between. Also included are internal legal discussions of the Jewish communities. These reveal the highly legalistic nature of medieval Jewish society, in which Jewish law (*halakhah*) formed the basis for a variety of social norms and practices. These Hebrew sources, in conjunction with Latin and vernacular sources, allow a better understanding of medieval society.

The final section, *Jews and Christians: Neighbors, Partners, and Adversaries*, focuses on sources attesting to the connections between Jews and their Christian neighbors. Although this subject comes up often in other sections as well, it was such a central feature of medieval Jewish life that we felt it necessitated a separate section. Jews and Christians shared numerous business ties and exchanged cultural ideas and beliefs as well as having personal relationships. They also had a mutual distrust and animosity, and Jews were sometimes the victims of discrimination and horrifying violence at the hands of their Christian neighbors. Although there was a wide range of attitudes characterizing the relationship between the two communities within medieval society, the one constant was the fact that Jews were a minority within the cities and towns of northern Europe, and this dictated that, for better or worse, their relations with their Christian neighbors shaped much of their daily experience.

* * *

First developed as a distinct academic field in the mid-nineteenth century, the study of Jewish life in medieval Europe tended to focus on the broad strokes and major turning points of Jewish history: from the heights of intellectual innovation, sophisticated communal organization, and religious devotion to nadirs of marginalization, discrimination, and persecution. For many scholars, the high points were marked by the internal development of Jewish culture, while the lows evolved from challenges forced upon the Jews by the surrounding Christian society. The Jews were therefore often portrayed as a society within a society, and their tendency towards isolationism was overemphasized and even applauded. Enmity between Jews and Christians was considered the norm and cooperation and sharing of culture were seen as coincidental at best and shameful at worst. These scholars thus developed the basic outlines of the field under the assumption that Jews and Christians lived completely separate lives and maintained their distance when possible.

Their attitude was not completely far-fetched. In fact, according to available sources medieval Jews were indeed a marginalized, and sometimes persecuted, minority in northern Europe, and evidence of Christian enmity towards them is abundant (as the selection of sources in the following pages makes clear). However, in the 1920s Salo Wittmayer Baron, one of the great scholars of Jewish history, underlined a basic methodological problem with this attitude: its tendency to focus on major political events and prominent men. He noted, for example, that while the horrific persecutions of 1096 and 1348 had been the focus of much scholarship, periods of peace and prosperity merited little discussion. While medieval scholars and communal leaders such as Rashi and Meir of Rothenburg were (justifiably) portrayed as highly innovative and influential, the ordinary lives of the majority of Jews, who were not part of the rabbinic elite, were almost entirely overlooked. Baron made it his mission to write a conclusive history of the Jews that would go beyond lachrymose descriptions of Christian violence and internal intellectual developments of Judaism. The result was *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, an eighteen-volume opus that took over thirty years to complete.[7]

Baron's work is a *tour de force* but, as several scholars have pointed out, because it sought to cover the entire history of the Jewish people—a history that spans over three millennia and the globe—it necessarily had to adopt a bird's-eye view on the development of Jewish culture. Major political events, influential intellectual movements, and elite men were thus still often the focus of attention. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, several historians have attempted to address other facets of Jewish existence, as Baron had originally intended, and although significant progress has been made in broadening the scope to include Jewish women and the Jewish family, none has successfully devised a practical way to deal with the issues that Baron's work raised.[8]

The work of Elisheva Baumgarten and the *Beyond the Elite* group (2016–2022) has offered a change in perspective, seeking to focus on the importance of routine everyday life, and on Jews who were not part of the

[7] Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 18 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952–1983). The work of Israel Abrahams, the first to systematically discuss issues of everyday history of medieval Jews, should also be mentioned in this context: Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1896).

[8] For relevant bibliography, see bibliography section at the end of this volume.