THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF
JEWISH DAILY LIFE IN ROMAN PALESTINE

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CHAPTER 32

BATHHOUSES AS PLACES OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INTERACTION

YARON Z. ELIAV

1. INTRODUCTION: HISTORY, TECHNOLOGY, AND CULTURE

The Roman public bathhouse was an impressive architectural complex, featuring both hot and cold water installations as well as a wide range of other services—a sauna and massage parlours, swimming pools, gardens, meeting rooms, food and oil stands, open courts for recreation and sports, and at times even libraries and brothels (Nielsen 1990; Yegül 1992; Fagan 1999; Dix/Houston 2006). The forerunner of this institution may be seen in the bathing facilities of the Greeks, mainly those incorporated into the gymnasiwm (Ginouvès 1962; DeLaine 1988: 14–17). But washing the body in the gymnasiwm was a secondary undertaking, inferior to athletic and intellectual activities, and limited to the privileged few who attended this place. Early Greek public baths also existed in the Hellenistic period, but on a much smaller scale and with limited attendance compared with the later Roman establishments. The Roman baths emerged almost concurrently in Asia Minor and
southern Italy in the second century BCE, spread throughout the empire by the end of the first century BCE, and reached their peak in the first few centuries of the common era.

In ancient times, maintaining a regular supply of water required remarkable effort and resources. Throughout the Mediterranean world, people accumulated rain in cisterns, dug wells, and drew on natural springs and rivers, but water was generally used sparingly, for essential practices like drinking. Washing and keeping clean were neither a top priority nor a frequent undertaking. Therefore, in the centuries before Roman arrival, it would have been unimaginable that practically everyone in the known world would attend a public bath on nearly a daily basis and immerse one's body in warm water. Such was the enormity of the Roman transformation.

Roman engineers and architects refined and disseminated various technological advances over the centuries, including the development of cement and concrete as cohesive substances and the growing employment of the arch. These facilitated a crucial, and relatively easy-to-build, system for water transportation—the aqueduct (from the Latin *aqua*, water, and the verb *ducere*, to lead or to bring forward; Adam 1994: 73–87, 158–95, 235–63; Hodge 1992). Large and small, implemented in multiple variations, the aqueducts made possible the growing popularity of the baths by providing an abundant water supply to cities, towns, and military camps. By the second century CE, thousands of bathhouses dotted the Mediterranean world, in cities, towns, and even small villages. In the fourth century CE, the city of Rome alone offered over 800 baths (856 is the number cited in the *Curiosum urbis regionum XIV* and the *Notitia Regionum urbis XIV*, ed. Jordan, 573; but cf. Fagan 1999: 357). Using taxes and contributions from the upper strata of society, municipal authorities erected bathhouses for public use, usually free of charge. Other privately owned baths charged the masses entrance fees; groups and associations built semi-public baths and limited their access to members only; the military added their own, as did the rich who wished to bathe in the private confines of their villas and mansions. Attending the baths, usually in the late hours of the afternoon before dinner, became a standard component of everyday life (Fagan 1999: 22, and the sources listed in n. 28).

In addition to bathing, the bathhouse embodied many cultural facets of the Roman realm. Its space was suffused with sculpture and mosaics, representing local and imperial power as well as the mythological ethos of the time (Manderscheid 1981; *idem* 2004: 23–24; more below). Magic and medicine were frequently carried out there (see below), along with an array of hedonistic experiences that cherished the human body—from athletics to nudity, and from sex to massages and the anointment with oils and perfumes (e.g. Ovid, Ars 3.638–640; CIL 4.10677–8). As it catered to people from all walks of life, the bathhouse became a social arena, a unique environment where social hierarchy was both determined and blurred, and where the governing class and the elite blended with the lower strata of society,
including the poor, women, and slaves (Fagan 1999: 189–219; more below). Over

time, the emergence of the Roman bath would significantly alter daily habits and
would foster far-reaching cultural consequences. Ultimately, it came to encapsulate
Romanitas: the Roman experience of life.

2. Architecture and Function

A typical bathhouse may have included a changing variety of facilities, but ulti-
mately it consisted of water and heat (on the following see Lucian, Hippias; Nielsen
1990; Yegül 1992). Warming the water became relatively easy with another techno-
logical innovation, ingenious in its simplicity—the hypocaust system (from the
Greek hypokauston, ‘heating from underneath’). Builders would suspend the bath-
house floor (thus named suspensura) on numerous small pillars (pilae) made of
layered tiles. A furnace in a side chamber (praefurnium) channelled hot air into the
void under the raised floors, heating them and the water above—before flowing
outside through vertical canals at the sides of the room (see Vitruvius, De Archi-
tectura 5.10). This hot chamber (known as the caldarium) usually included a
communal pool (alveus), a basin (labrum) for cold water, and at times benches
around the walls. In addition to the heated nucleus, two other rooms offered
engagement with varying temperatures—the frigidarium, a valued room with
cold water pools (known as piscinae), and the tepidarium, a mediating room
between the cold and the warm. Other standard bathhouse chambers included
the changing room (apodyterium), which provided niches and shelves for the
storage of clothing, a sauna for both dry and wet sweat (laconicum and sudatorium,
respectively), and a latrine. Outside the main building an open court (palaestra)—
often surrounded by porticos—accommodated sports and exercise and frequently
included an open-air swimming pool (natatio).

These basic components of the baths were designed in numerous shapes and sizes.
Some were built on a circular plan where you walked in a specific direction from
room to room, others were more linear in their contours, and many others main-
tained their own unique look. The huge, imperial baths of Rome (usually called
thermae) could house thousands of attendants at once. The large urban facilities all
over the empire (normally called balaneia) could host hundreds of bathers, and
numerous others were smaller. Over time, bathing routines evolved, and people
typically attended the bathhouse during the afternoon, before dinner. A standard
procedure involved working out in the palaestra, followed by alternating between hot
and cold baths, attending the sauna, and if they had the means, ending (or begin-
ning) with a massage, and by applying oil and then scrapping it off with a strigil.
3. JEWS IN THE BATHS: SCHOLARLY DEBATES

Some modern scholars suggest that Jews in the ancient world were hostile toward the baths, arguing that many avoided this institution and renounced its pagan connotations. Ronny Reich, for example, substantiates such a claim for Jews of the early Roman era by citing the lack of archaeological findings of baths in Jewish settlements from the Second Temple period, as well as with numerous halakhic ‘problems’ that early rabbinic sources associate with this institution (Reich 1988; for others who adhere, although without elaboration, to such a model, see Eliav 2000: 422, n. 10). Other scholars simply characterize the baths as an ‘idolatrous venue’ (Friedheim 2002), which by its very definition entails resentment and repudiation. In fact, the opposite is true (Eliav 1995a, 2000, 2003). Jews—just like their fellow residents of the Roman Mediterranean—were quite enthusiastic about the benefits of the baths and frequented this establishment with almost no reservations. Reservations that they did voice were not unique to them as Jews, but rather part of the broad cultural discourse about the baths that were shared by their fellow citizens of the Roman world. As a result, the baths became a remarkable intersection of culture, a locus of disagreements, contests, and evolving social traditions.

The divergent views among scholars emanate from general methodological and conceptual disagreements regarding the position of the Jews within the cultural milieu of their time. Until recently, modern scholars have tended to examine the relationship between Judaism and Graeco-Roman culture in terms of the conflicts and tensions that purportedly divided them. Most textbooks portrayed Judaism throughout its ancient history as a coherent (if not homogeneous) unity, a culture that, despite internal conflicts, disputes, and differences over both minor and major issues, arraigned itself steadfastly against the outside world in its Greek, and then Roman, guise. This contrast prevailed in all areas of life, from daily behaviour to language and literature, and legal and governing institutions. Consequently, by making Roman culture and Judaism two distinct, separate, and to a large extent hostile categories, these modern writers went on to define the connection between them in terms of ‘influence’, a category usually carrying a negative connotation of assimilation. Some Jews willingly and consciously ‘Hellenized’—that is, they adopted some aspects of the ‘bad’ Graeco-Roman culture, whether language or personal name, or, even worse, they abandoned their original way of life entirely and went to graze in foreign fields.

Only in the last generation have these scholarly assumptions come under question, as new models of the cultural dynamics that defined Jewish life have emerged. The understanding of the Jewish engagement with bathhouses—an institution that seems to exemplify the essence of Graeco-Roman culture—has evolved within the contours of this scholarly debate. Unlike the traditional view espoused and applied to the study of the baths by Reich, Friedheim, and others,
Eliav has argued that the traditional ‘cultural strife’ model cannot inclusively define the essence of the encounter between Judaism and the Graeco-Roman way of life (Eliav 2000). He suggested an alternative model, which can be termed ‘filtered absorption’ or ‘controlled incorporation.’ The argument at the foundation of this thesis is that many foreign elements—components of the pagan-Gentile civilization adjacent to the Jewish domain in Palestine—were gradually absorbed by the Jewish population in a controlled manner, omitting or neutralizing those aspects which offended their traditional practices. This process was not uniform, and there was no authoritative power enforcing it. Such a never-ending meeting of cultures resulted in a diverse and porous Jewish society, embedded in the cultural textures of its surroundings and carving its identity and ways of life from inside this broader sphere. The establishment of the Roman bathhouse in Jewish society, and its role(s) therein, provides a good example of this process.

### 4. Dissemination, Acquaintance, and Adaptation

The wide dissemination of the Roman baths in the East did not occur until the first century CE. But already in the early Roman and Hellenistic periods, archaeological data indicates that wealthy Jews were fast to incorporate Roman-style bathing into their dwellings, as can be seen in the Hasmonean palaces in Jericho (Small 1987; Netzer 2001: 100–14), or the estate in south Judaea called ‘the palace of Hilkiyah’ (Damati 1972). In the early Roman period, Josephus records the existence of bathhouses in Herod’s fortified palaces at Jerusalem (Josephus, Bell. 5.168, 241). Similarly, archaeological excavations add evidence for baths in Herod’s strongholds at Jericho, Cyprus (on the hilltop west of Jericho), Herodium, Masada, and Machaerus (Netzer 2006). The excavations in Ein Zur at Ramat ha-Nadiv, north-east of Caesarea, have uncovered a semi-public bathhouse in a large Jewish estate, dating to before the destruction of the Second Temple (Hirschfeld 2000: 311–29).

All of the above are private baths built by the affluent in their estates. But even regular Jewish towns from the late Second Temple period seem to include this establishment. One of the attempts to assassinate Herod took place while the king was entering the inner rooms of a public bath at Isana, a Jewish village some twenty kilometres north of Jerusalem (Josephus, Bell. 1.340–341; Ant. 14.462–464). Remnants of another bath were unearthed in the Jewish village of Artas, not far from ‘Solomon’s pools’, south of Jerusalem (Amit 1994: 12–15 and n. 38). From the era subsequent to the destruction of the Second Temple, bathhouses were found in Jewish towns such as Ein Gedi on the shores of the Dead Sea (although scholars
have misidentified this as a military bath; Stern 1993: 404–405), and in Rama in the Upper Galilee (Tzaferis 1980). From the end of the second century CE onwards, bathhouses became a regular fixture in every city and town of Roman Palestine, the prime examples of which can be seen in Bet Shean/Scythopolis (Mazor 1999), Tiberias, Sephoris, and Caesarea Maritima (see the relevant entries in Stern 1993).

Hardly surprisingly, Jews were quite aware of the bathhouse and its various facilities. In a statement attributed to second century CE rabbinic scholars, the construction of bathhouses is listed among the ‘fine [or: corrupt, according to another view] works’ of the Roman nation (b. Shab. 33b). Other rabbinic sources show an intimate and detailed acquaintance with the architectural structure of the bathhouse. The building’s interior, consisting of a series of rooms, each designed for a different function in the bathing cycle, is the setting for the halakhic three-fold division of the bath into ‘a place where people stand dressed’, ‘a place where people stand naked’, and ‘a place where people stand both naked and dressed’ (T. Ber. 2:20). Another source designates the various parts of the bath as the ‘inner rooms’, ‘outer rooms’, ‘the furnaces room’, ‘the cloakroom’ (or perhaps the massage room, depending on the interpretation of the transliterated Graeco-Latin term ‘olyarin’, the ‘storage room for the woods’ and the ‘pools’ (T. B.B. 3:3). The heating technique of the hypocaust system, and its various architectural elements—the pillars, the raised floor, and the perils associated with them—provided a talmudic author with the raw material for the legendary anecdote concerning the miraculous adventures of the fourth century CE R. Abbahu in the bathhouse of Tiberias (y. Betsa 1:6, 60c; b. Ket. 62a). The scene in which the bathhouse floor collapses and a random pillar happens to be in the path of R. Abbahu’s fall, although fantastic in its very nature, is modelled on a common hazard of the bathhouse heating system, namely the crumpling floors of the hypocaust (Eliav 2002a: 235–252).

Early rabbinic legal traditions refer to the bathhouse in the most neutral terms, testifying to the flawless integration of this institution into Jewish life. One such discussion revolves around the usage of a bath on the Sabbath (M. Makh. 2:5; T. Shab. 17:18). The need to continuously preserve the bath’s furnace seems to conflict with the rabbinic halakhah that prohibits maintaining a fire on the Sabbath. And indeed, rabbinic law eventually ruled that one may not use the bath on the Sabbath. But in a good example of the faulty presumptions of scholarship, Reich concluded that such dilemmas meant that rabbis and Jews avoided the baths altogether (Reich 1988).

Such an understanding is problematic on a few levels. First, in the case of baths on the Sabbath, early legal traditions provide ways to deal with the problem of burning wood, and thus allowing Jews to attend even on the Sabbath (y. Shab. 31:1, 6a; Eliav 1995b). Further, the rabbinic discussions of the halakhic practicalities associated with the baths, such as how to comply with the laws of the Sabbath, can only occur because they accept the legitimacy of this establishment, and perceive it as a habitual tenet of Jewish life. In contrast, rabbis refuse to devote their intellectual energy to
technical questions related to pagan temples (beyond simply prohibiting them), since in their minds it is inconceivable that a Jew would enter such a place. Admittedly, many rabbinic traditions present ideal institutions that do not exist in reality (such as the Jewish high court known as the Sanhedrin, or the many traditions about the long-gone Temple in Jerusalem), or focus on theoretical legal problems that are not grounded in actuality. But the Roman bathhouse, unlike the Sanhedrin or the Jerusalem Temple, occupies no prestigious status in Jewish memory that would justify heightened attention, and thus detailed legal discussions about it must emerge from the experiences of daily life.

Similar conclusions regarding the neutral, uncontested status of public bathhouses emerge from the halakhic traditions relating to ritual purity. A halakhah in the Tosefta relating the procedures of a niddah (menstruating woman)—the most common form of impurity in post-Second Temple Jewish society—refers to ‘women’s [public] baths’ (T. Nid. 6:15), and the same passage in the Mishnah applies the term ‘house of the impure women’, thus at least hinting at the existence of separate facilities for menstruating women (M. Nid. 7:4, according to the reading of the better manuscripts). Similar to documented practices in the miqvah (a purifying immersion pool), it may be possible that in the bathhouse, too, Jews took measures to separate the impure and the pure (Eliav 1995a: 21 n. 82). Other rabbinic sources refer to miqva’ot that function in public bathhouses, and such were also found in archaeological excavations (Grossberg 2001). If certain halakhic prescriptions were met, the rabbis seem to even approve the performance of ritual purification in the cold water pools of the baths (e.g. T. Miqv. 6:4). Sources that voice uneasiness with this practice have nothing to do with negative attitudes toward the baths but rather with stipulations regarding the usage of miqva’ot outside the borders of the Land of Israel (T. Miqv. 6:3; clearly understood by Grossberg 2001:179; pace Oppenheimer 2008: 55).

Moving from legal formulations to more explicit views about the bathhouse, rabbinic sources by and large voice a very positive tone. In one of many such examples, a rabbinic statement equates the biblical description of the ‘luxuries of common people’ (Qoh. 2:8) with the contemporary bathhouse (Qoh. R. 2:8). Rabbis seem infatuated, like everyone else, with the effortless opportunity to immerse one’s body in warm water (Lam. R. 3:18 [based on Geniza fragment Taylor Schechter Collection 6.62]; b. Shab. 25b). All in all, the Jews, as far as we can tell, had no objections to the bathhouse as an institution, not even in the early stages of its absorption in the region. This conclusion goes beyond the physical evidence that bathhouses existed. A priori, there could have been bathhouses that Jews strongly resented. But despite the interpretations of some scholars, close examination reveals that the sources do not voice such objections, neither during the last century of the Second Temple period nor in the centuries thereafter. On the contrary, exhaustive examination of rabbinic texts shows that the bathhouse was an integral and legitimate component of Jewish life in those times.
5. **Statuary of the Baths**

Statues adorned Roman public bathhouses, constituting an indispensable part of every visitor’s encounter (Manderscheid 1981; *idem* 2004: 23–24; see also DeLaine 1988: 25–27). Chiselled on the pediment, or standing full size on its tip (*acroteron*), or placed on the cornice, figurative art welcomed the bather at the building’s facade. Inside, sculptured pieces populated almost every possible spot—reliefs engraved on friezes, busts (*protomai*) carved out of the *abaci* (the square slabs at the top of the column’s capital), life-sized three-dimensional images arranged on beams spanning the columns, in special niches in the wall or scattered around on pedestals. The subject repertoire offered a diverse mix: emperors, benefactors, gods, mythological scenes, and important personalities memorialized for various reasons.

As elsewhere in the Roman urban landscape, the function of these artefacts extended beyond their decorative value. Public sculptures were the ‘mass media’ of the Roman world. They occupied urban centres throughout the empire, serving what art historians call a ‘plastic language’ that communicated political, religious, and social messages. Sculptural displays evoked a complex spectrum of emotions—from fear and loathing to aesthetic admiration—and of ideas, from reflections on the nature of the divine to the implications of social hierarchy, patronage, and power (Eliav et al. 2008). How then, could Jews partake in a scene seemingly full of precisely the kind of idolatry that was forbidden to them?

This profusion of images in the baths has led Friedheim to characterize the place as ‘idolatrous’ (Friedheim 2002). But such a claim does not capture the complex nature of the bathhouse or its statues. On the one hand, in the minds of the people who used it, as testified by numerous literary and epigraphic references, the place registered as totally secular, a non-consecrated establishment (*locus profanus*). On the other hand, this designation can be quite misleading when applied to the ancient world, in which one’s entire reality was perceived through what we today would call ‘religious lenses’ (Eliav 2003). In a cultural environment saturated with religion, it is reasonable to assume that a statue of a god, even if not within the religious context of a temple, was still perceived as a religious figure. The many inscriptions unearthed in bathhouses throughout the empire demonstrate the abundant spirituality that was intrinsic to the baths. First, the steps of the bathhouse were personified as gods and goddesses; nymphs were housed there as well. Rooms and sometimes entire bath complexes were named after gods (Dunbabin 1989). Some bathhouses, admittedly only relatively few, operated in the sanctuary compounds of various gods, and this is probably the meaning behind the mishnaic idiom ‘A bathhouse of idolatry’ (M. A.Z. 4:3). Secondly, the ‘Emperor’s cult’, which commingled religion with *Realpolitik*, was practised at the baths (DeLaine 1997: 77–84). Thirdly, ceremonial aspects of religion were unquestionably practised at the thermal
baths, which, like other medicinal establishments (such as the Asclepieion), were patronized by the curative gods, and the healing process included a ceremonial thanksgiving offer to the god in charge, as well as other rituals.

Jewish sources too express this complex, multifaceted situation. One rabbinic view considers the statues at the bath to be idols (avodah zarah), and consequently it even prohibits construction of the ‘vault’ (kiphal; niche?) where they stand (M. A.Z. 1:7). This position coincides with the rabbinic view that negates the entire sculptural environment of the Roman world under the pretense that ‘all statues are [to be perceived as] being worshipped [whether they actually are or not]’ (M. A.Z. 3:1; Eliav 2002b). Such perceptions of bathhouse statues also inform the question that the rabbinic author places in the mouth of Proklos who, according to a famous anecdote, challenged Rabban Gamaliel when the latter attended the bath of Aphrodite in Acco (M. A.Z. 3:4, see also Schwartz 1998 and Yadin 2006 on this story; Stemberger in this volume). Rabban Gamaliel’s response to Proklos introduces the other side of the coin. In his opinion, the presence of Aphrodite in the context of the bath is not considered idolatry. Many rabbis shared this view.

Adjacent to the above-mentioned halakhah that prohibits all statues in the Roman world, the Mishnah presents an opposing view—‘[a statue] is not forbidden except one that has a stick or a bird or a ball’ (M. A.Z. 3:1). This perspective should be understood in the light of remarks such as Cicero’s (in De Natura Deorum 1.29.81), about the ability of people to identify divine sculpture and to differentiate it from the many statues that surrounded it. The ancients were able to do this by ‘reading’ the widely known attributes and iconography that the artists assigned to the figures. Here we see the shared ‘plastic language’ that informed the interaction of ancient people with sculptured artefacts, and allowed them to distinguish between a divine statue—one infused with the divine spirit (the pneuma) and considered a sacred object (res sacra)—and a statue that was not. The items listed by the rabbis in the Mishnah—the stick, the bird, and the ball—were, at least in their eyes, such identifying signs of a deity. In the Tosefta other elements are added to the list, such as a sword, a crown, a ring, and a snake (T. A.Z. 5:1). In other words, we can see the rabbis utilizing the common ‘plastic language’ in order to create their own differentiation between worshipped, sacred statues (res sacra) and not worshipped, profane (profanus) objects.

Rabban Gamaliel’s position takes the distinction of the rabbis a step further, adding the practical function—what may be called the ‘identifying context’ of a statue—to the plastic language criterion of the previous rabbis. Aphrodite was surely a ‘worshipped deity’ (in the sense defined by the rabbis above) along with other sculptured pieces of her kind that received rituals, were worshipped at temples, and so on. Nevertheless, Rabban Gamaliel maintains that a statue in a given location is forbidden only if that particular one is used in ritual worship, and therefore Aphrodite in the baths is permitted.
Another tradition in the Palestinian Talmud can be explained along similar lines. In this passage, the third-century R. Simeon b. Lakish encountered a group of people sprinkling liquids in honour of an Aphrodite statue in the bathhouse of Bostra (y. Shebi. 8:11, 38b). According to the talmudic account, after relating this incident to his colleague and teacher R. Yohanan, the latter permitted it retroactively (i.e. he ruled that the act did not turn the statue into an idol and consequently the bath into a prohibited location), and asserted, ‘A thing of the public is not forbidden’ (ibid.).

This anecdote further elaborates the halakhic principle developed in the Rabban Gamaliel story above. According to the position presented by the Talmud, not only is a statue of a deity standing outside of a ritual context not considered a forbidden idol (R. Gamaliel’s position), but even the actual performance of an informal ritual deed in its honour (known in Roman terminology as dedicatio) does not revoke its previous non-idolatrous status. The explanation provided for this ruling—‘A thing of the public is not forbidden’—conveys the reasoning behind R. Yohanan’s interdiction. According to his view, if a statue of a god stands in a public, non-cultic context and is considered non-idolatrous (profanus), the unofficial devotion of individuals cannot change its unsanctioned status.

To conclude this discussion, it seems that rabbinic differentiation between various statues, based on whether they were worshipped or not, is anchored in the conceptual framework of the Roman world. These are not some peculiar classifications of the rabbis that would have sounded ridiculous to the people of the time, whether Jewish or not, rather they are halakhic formulations of accepted, widespread conceptions stemming from the common ways of ‘viewing’ statuary in the Roman world. When applied to the bathhouse, these rabbinic rulings allowed those Jews who wished to follow them to engage this space peacefully, and with the comfort that they were not violating their religious principles. Others, of course, may have followed stricter views, recorded, for example, in a tradition about the shattering of bathhouse statues (y. A.Z. 4:4, 43d). Finally, bathhouses lacking three-dimensional ornamentation were not unheard of (e.g. Sidonius, Epistulae 2.2.4–7). Although the record from Palestine does not provide evidence for such, one may not rule out the possibility that some may have existed in Jewish towns as well.

6. Social Encounters

By their very nature, public bathing facilities in the Roman world attracted people from all walks of life. These establishments relied on a spatial layout in which hierarchal, communal, and cultural boundaries were—if only for a short while—blurred, and
even erased. Similar to the situation that anthropologists describe in the cafés of nineteenth-century Paris, bathhouses drew people together and eliminated the various and more obvious status marks that differentiated them in the outside world: in the baths a person was separated from his clothes and jewellery, without the identifying signs of career or home, stripped of most symbols of his social status. Many sources illustrate the colourful social tapestry of the baths, as the higher echelons of society rubbed shoulders with people of the lowest strata. Such mixings obscured certain designations of the social order. Unlike theatres and stadiums, where reserved seats and segregated sections delineated social rank and stature, in the bath (despite some notable exceptions) people shared the space quite evenly. At the same time, the close proximity with ‘others’ provided an ideal venue to demarcate and reaffirm social lines, whether communal, political, or religious (Fagan 1999: 206–219).

Rabbinic stories and anecdotes associated with the public baths, both real and fictional, if analysed in a historical-critical way, may provide illuminating snapshots of the social dynamics that took shape in this institution, in the provincial setting of Palestine (for a discussion of bathhouse stories in the Talmud Yerushalmi see Jacobs 1998). Many of the elements featured in these texts resemble typical bathhouse life throughout the empire. Such are the beggars and thieves who crowd the place in some rabbinic stories (e.g. y. Ber. 2:8, 5c; y. Peah 8:9, 21b), and are known to have been a constant annoyance to bathers all over the Mediterranean (Fagan 1999: 36–38). In another example, when R. Abbahu, a fourth-century rabbinic scholar and a local dignitary in Caesarea, visits the bathhouse of Tiberias, the Talmudic story assigns Gothic slaves to accompany him, accentuating his (perhaps imagined) political distinction (y. Betsa 1:6, 60c). Here too, many non-Jewish sources speak of the role of slaves in the shared social environment of the public baths—keeping the populace away from their masters, thus carving an elevated arena within the shared space, guarding the clothes from thieves, and providing extra services such as drying their owners with towels or anointing and massaging them with oil (many of these references are collected in Fagan 1999). Rabbinic sources operate in the same social milieu and depict the slaves in the baths in similar ways (e.g. Sifre Num. 115; T. Qid. 1:5).

Other bath stories depict rabbinic figures coming into contact and conversing with a variety of characters who normally would be outside their circles. The famous mishnaic tradition mentioned above portrays a pagan philosopher challenging Rabban Gamaliel’s attendance in an Acco bathhouse due to the presence of a nude statue of Aphrodite (M. A. Z. 3:4). Another source narrates a clash between rabbinic sages and a Christian ‘heretic’, who met them at the baths, defied them with his magic skills, and eventually challenged the biblical tradition about God’s violent miracles against the Egyptians at the Red Sea with the ‘new’ Jesus narrative of a pacifistic walk on the Sea of Galilee (y. Sanh. 7:19, 25d). Needless to say, the
rabbinic authors normally depict their own as emerging with the upper hand. But for the social historian the very fact that these authors chose the bathhouse as the backdrop for their tales illustrates the social mechanisms that evolved in this establishment. How did Jews react to this relatively borderless social setting? Did some rabbis worry about mixing with women, heretics, socially inferior people in the baths, while others thought it normal, or even beneficial? Our sources do not provide a clear answer; all we have, as discussed above, is a general lack of reservation about the bathhouse in rabbinic references. It seems that rabbis, and other Jews for that matter, were quite enthusiastic about attending this institution.

7. **Nudity**

Men and women throughout the Roman world normally bathed together, usually with their bodies fully exposed (Ward 1992). Questions about this habit’s exclusivity (did everyone bathe in the nude?), chronological scope (did people always bathe in the nude? and if not, when did this phenomenon begin or end?), and geography (was nude bathing practised everywhere?), are a more complicated matter, which has not always received sufficient attention. Centuries of Christian and Jewish piety since the Middle Ages, typically endorsing a suppression of the body, have distorted our vision of Roman times. It was a much more revealing landscape, in the physical sense of the word, than ours. People urinated into buckets in the middle of the street (and the urine was then used as detergent), men and women shared open toilets at the public latrines. Overall, in this pre-underwear age, body parts that we today tend to conceal were much more on display.

Although some bathing establishments implemented partial segregation between the sexes (the Stabian baths in Pompeii are the most documented example), and some emperors legislated against the sexual licentiousness that transpired at the baths (e.g. Scriptores Historiae Augustae. Vita Hadriani 18.10), only a few of the numerous structures that archaeologists have uncovered throughout the Mediterranean basin contain a double bathing arrangement that could accommodate the separate and simultaneous usage by men and women (Nielsen 1990: 146–8; Ward 1992: 128–39). Here and there we hear of different hours for men and women (the best known source is CIL 2, suppl. 5181), but on the whole people engaged in this institution together, and even if some (perhaps members of the upper strata of society) utilized certain bathing garments (see in detail Eliav 2000: 444–8), many, if not most, did not.

References to nude people in the baths resonate in several rabbinic passages. For example, a previously cited tradition specifically mentions ‘a place where people stand naked’ in the bath (T. Ber. 2.20), although it does not speak of the presence of
women at the same place. A later source which cites this tradition labelled the bath as a ‘house [room?] of the nude’ (‘Teffilin 17, ed. Higger, 47–8). People engaging in nude bathing are in the background of the mentioned tale about R. Gamaliel visiting the bathhouse of Aphrodite (M. A.Z. 3:4). Their bare flesh led to R. Gamaliel’s refusal to respond to Proklos’ question inside the bath, since rabbinic law prohibits ‘holy’ activity—such as prayer or discussing halakhah—in the presence of undressed bodies (e.g. M. Ber. 3:5). Mixed bathing also figures in the proscription dealing with a woman who ‘washes and bathes in the public bath with just anyone’ (T. Ket. 7:6). A story preserved by the fourth-century Church Father Epiphanius tells of the misconduct of a Jewish patriarch’s son with a beautiful woman he met at the hot room of the thermal baths in Gadara (Adversus Haereses [Panarion] 30.7.5–6, ed. Holl, 342).

Some Jews may have had reservations about the nudity and licentious atmosphere that pervaded the mixed baths (Testament Reuven 3:11; T. Ber. 2:14, 20–21; Epiphanius, Adversus Haereses [Panarion] 30.7.5–6), just as others, including the Romans themselves (chief among them more than a few emperors) and the Church Fathers (Zellinger 1928; Berger 1982), voiced similar disdain. Indeed, some sources allude to separated bathing in Jewish and Christian circles. In the course of warning against mixed bathing, a Syriac Christian guidebook instructs that, ‘When there is a bath of women (bahn’a denasha)’ in the town or in the village, a believing woman shall not bathe in a bath with a man’ (Didascalia Apostolorum 3). An identical designation appears in a rabbinic tradition regarding a niddah, that is, a menstruating woman (T. Nid. 6:15), and a parallel passage calls the same place ‘a house of impure women’ (M. Nid. 7:4; Eliav 2000: 444). In a similar vein, a Christian story relates that Symeon the ‘fool’ thoughtlessly rushed into the women’s baths in the Syrian city of Emesa (modern Homs), describing it as ‘two baths next to each other, one for men and one for women’ (Leontius Neapolitanus, Vita Symeonis Sali 35, PG 93,1713). A rabbinic tradition dealing with the disclosure of a woman’s physical defects before marriage also indirectly proves at least the theoretical possibility of sexual segregation at the baths. Among the various possibilities, the Mishnah states: And if there was a bathhouse in that town he may not make complaints even of secret defects, since he can inquire about her from his women kinsfolk’ (M. Ket. 7:8). The vague mention of ‘a bath’ apparently means that there may have been only one bathhouse, and segregation between men and women could have been based on different hours of bathing.

It is clear that mixed, nude bathing existed and was well known among the Jews of Roman Palestine. But there were also ways to avoid such an experience, either by arranging separate hours for men and women or by creating different facilities altogether. The scarcity of the sources does not allow firm conclusions as to the extent of these alternatives.
8. Magic and the Perils of the Baths

One important aspect of public bathhouses has gone relatively unnoticed in recent scholarship—the notion of the bathhouse as what anthropologists label a ‘scary place’ (Low/Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 225–7; Eliav 2009). On the most rudimentary, sensual level, the enclosed, dim space of the bathhouse may have intimidated some attendants, who were more accustomed to stroll the open, urban landscape of Mediterranean cities. The bathhouse also featured many hazards that endangered its clientele—water and humidity resulted in slippery floors; the hot steam in the ceramic and copper pipes that ran the walls could scorch the bare flesh that piled into the crowded halls, and so could the boiling water in the tubs and pools. Even more daunting were the frequent collapses of the floors. As mentioned before, the heart of the ingenious, water-warming hypocaust system were the raised floors of the hot rooms, which allowed for hot air to be channelled underneath. Its one weakness lay in its vulnerability: the combination of water and humidity with the weight of the bathers, together with inefficient building practices, resulted in the frequent disintegration of these suspended floors. It was not uncommon that a person would come to relax in the baths and find himself or herself falling into the searing vacuums underneath the floors. As in much of the ancient world, danger—and the unease and anxiety that accompanied it—were present even in places of leisure.

On a psychological level, the intermingling of the sexes in an environment that did not preclude physical exposure may have contributed to a different kind of unrest. The spectrum of reactions that nudity provoked in the mind of the ancients could contain anything from agitation to a sense of exigency. The uncontrolled reactions of the body—from sweating to the intense pulsing of the blood, and from bodily odours to involuntary erections—all could result in uneasiness, tension, and trepidation. Finally, the mixing of cultures and classes in the public baths, as discussed above, took away the security mechanisms that social boundaries provide. People exposed not only their hidden body parts but also their beliefs and cultural assumptions. This situation could have many effects, but on its most basic level it could be quite daunting. All in all, the bathhouse—with its huge, dark, sweaty and slippery halls, a place of possible physical danger and infused with sexual intimidation, as well as its boundary-transgressing cultural mixture—seems to fit quite well the anthropological model of a ‘scary place’.

Various rabbinic sources refer to the perils of the baths. The collapsing floors of the hypocaust were discussed previously in the story about R. Abbahu. The Talmud relates that another rabbi, R. Mana, used to deposit his will prior to attending a heated bath (y. Ber. 4:4, 8b). A later (medieval) rabbinic collection enumerates numerous safety measures that developed over the years, geared to cope with the risks of the baths: for example, one should not bring one’s oil in a glass vessel
because it 'endangers life' (if someone slips and the glass shatters), spit on the floors, or greet one's fellow (probably a superstitious precaution). Also mentioned is the life-threatening danger of jumping into a shallow pool (Derekh Eretz Rabbah 10:2–3, ed. Higger, 301–303; Kallah Rabbah 9.15–17, ed. Higger, 338–339).

As an existential tool in the world of the ancients, magic pervaded every corner of life and acquired numerous manifestations. In one of its most popular expressions, magical techniques supplied remedy for anxiety (analogous to what some drugs offer today), a means of coping with the realm of fear. This aspect of magic applied to the Roman bathhouse as well, as testified by the many magical sources, as well as references to spirits and demons that relate to this place (e.g. Preisendanz, Papyri Graecae Magicae 2.50, 36.69–77, 127.3–4; Bonner 1932; Dunbabin 1989).

Rabbinic material, largely unnoticed by scholars dealing with this topic, adds significant information to the study of magic in the public bathhouse. Illustrating the richness of the sources is a Palestinian story about the encounter between the Jewish patriarch, R. Yudan Nesia, his companion Shmuel bar Nahman, and the emperor Diocletian (y. Ter. 8:10, 46b–c; Gen. R. 63). The plot evolves around the space of two bathhouses, a safe one in Tiberias and a hostile one in Paneas. The protagonist in charge of mediating between the rabbis and the various dangers they need to overcome is a miraculous creature named Angitaris (and in some versions Antigras/Agentin). The rabbinic narrator's efforts to 'convert' the Angitaris by placing the right views in his mouth ('bathe yourself and your creator will perform miracles') does not detract from his true nature—he is the demon of the baths, in charge of neutralizing the hazards of the fire (thus his name, which apparently stems from the Latin ignis—fire) and the consequential steaming waters.

Similar spirits are well known from Graeco–Roman sources and so are the many ways to appease them, the most popular of which was tossing a magical bowl into the furnace of the baths prior to entering (Bonner 1932: 208). In Sefer ha-Razim, a Jewish magical recipe book from late antiquity that was found in the Cairo Genizah, we find: 'if you wish to extinguish a bath so its blaze does not grow and burn . . .' (ed. Margaliot, 93), followed by a page-long list of magical devices that one can apply in order to overcome this risk. Two of the angels mentioned in that same passage of Sefer ha-Razim (although their role is admittedly unclear) are Agra and Gentes, and the similar phonetics with the rabbinic Angitaris is self-evident. Similarly, the rabbis formulated a special prayer, a sort of magical enchantment, for entering the baths, meant to guard Jews from its various hazards—everything from slipping to getting scorched, and from an unwanted erection to being harmed by a collapsing hypocaust (and not the roofs or the walls, as medieval commentators, as well as nineteenth-century scholars, both unfamiliar with the mechanisms of Roman baths, wrongly thought; T. Ber. 6:17; y. Ber. 9:6, 14b; Derekh Eretz Rabbah 101, ed. Higger, 295–6).

Magic also helped bathers to confront the social difficulties experienced in the 'wild' world of the baths. Another rabbinic story discussed above (y. Sanh. 7:19,
25d) locates in the bathhouse a confrontation between a Christian heretic and three leading rabbis, R. Eliezer, R. Yehoshua, and R. Aqiva. Here it is worth highlighting the magical practices that both sides implement in the debate. The heretic, upon recognizing the three sages, declares ('amar ma demar 'he said what he said')—a typical talmudic phrase to indicate the use of a magic formula. He is then able to use the cavity under the dome of the bathhouse—a known region of spirits and demons—to capture the rabbis; they in turn must apply their own magical strengths to strike back. In short, magic functions here as a tool that copes with the socially threatening aspects of the baths.

Altogether then, the rabbis do not appear to have been mere outside observers of the magical landscape that transpired in Roman bathhouses. Rather, they are presented as regular practitioners of magic, part and parcel of the cultural landscape in the Graeco-Roman milieu, and habitual participants in its daily mechanisms. They attended the bathhouses as frequently as any other inhabitant of Roman towns and cities, and they coped with its challenges using the same means available to all, namely magical techniques and formulas. Like so many others, rabbis tried to put a Jewish spin on these magical practices, especially by relating the source of its power to the God of Israel. By doing so, they were no different from other ethnic and religious groups in the Roman Mediterranean. Each group—from the Egyptians and the many other adherers of Serapis to the Persians and the numerous other believers in Mithras (who had a very prominent presence in the baths), and from Christians to Syrians, from Phoenicians to Arabs—all ascribed their magical abilities in the baths to the power of their particular deity. The Jews of the ancient world proved no exception to this rule. Like so many of their far-flung brethren in the Roman world, they were captivated and unnerved, intrigued and dubious, and ultimately unable to resist the bathhouse.

**List of Abbreviations**

CIL = Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum.

**Suggested Reading**

The study of Roman bathhouses has flourished in the last two decades, with a series of detailed monographs providing easy access to various aspects of the subject, from material evidence, both physical remains and inscriptions, to the vast amount of information about this establishment embedded in Graeco-Roman literature (most notably Nielsen 1990; Yegül 1992; Fagan 1999). A good updated bibliography
is Manderscheid 2004. Unfortunately, these general studies do not pay much
textual attention to the ancient Jewish aspects of this topic, and when they refer to it
they present idiosyncratic views on the interaction of Jews with the Roman culture
and way of life. Recent work by Judaic studies scholars strives to amend this
situation (Jacobs 1998; Eliav 2000), but a comprehensive study of the engagement
of Jews with the Roman public bath, exhausting the numerous references scattered
in rabbinic literature and applying updated methodology, remains a desideratum.

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