

Article

Furnishing Piety: Beds in High Medieval Jewish Domestic Devotion

Albert Kohn

Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 9190501, Israel; Albert.Kohn@mail.huji.ac.il

Received: 9 July 2019; Accepted: 1 August 2019; Published: 7 August 2019



Abstract: In recent years, pre-modern beds have generated extensive scholarly interest. Their social, religious, and economic importance has been rightfully highlighted in the study of domestic piety. Yet, concern has primarily focused on beds in late medieval English homes. This essay uses Hebrew texts from thirteenth-century Southern Germany, primarily *Sefer Hasidim*, to further this analysis of the role of the bed in shaping medieval domestic devotion. Jewish notions about the social, moral, and sexual significance of the bed reflect those identified in late medieval Christian culture. These ideas inspired numerous rituals practiced in Jewish homes. Yet, the bed and the remnants of sex assumed to be found in it also frustrated Jewish attempts to perform domestic devotion. These findings highlight the complicated nature of the home and how medieval people had to navigate both its opportunities and challenges in order to foster a rich culture of domestic devotion.

Keywords: domestic piety; medieval Ashkenaz; beds; *Sefer Hasidim*; bedtime prayers; family life

1. Introduction

For those interested in pre-modern domestic life, the bed has rightfully generated intrigue. As a central domestic furnishing and one of the most expensive items in the medieval home, the bed demands attention. Focused primarily on England during the Later Middle Ages, recent scholarship has explored the symbolic significance of the bed as a sign of one's wealth, status, and moral worth (French et al. 2016; Gilchrist 2017). Others have taken up the embodied experience of the bed by examining its role in transforming the home into a ritual space (Brundin et al. 2018; Morgan 2017). Building upon these previous studies, this essay will explore the role the bed played in Jewish domestic piety in thirteenth-century Southern Germany. Unsurprisingly, there is general continuity between Christian and Jewish ideas about the bed. The bed was a sign of one's status and character, which at the same time represented sexuality. In the Jewish community, these ideas inspired several rituals that were organized around the domestic furnishing. While most scholarly discussion of the bed and domestic piety has highlighted the comfort and privacy available to devotees in their beds, the Jewish sources reveal an interest in engaging ritually with the domestic furnishing itself. The bed, though, was not always receptive to the pious intentions of its owner. Thirteenth-century Hebrew sources imagined the bed as a hub for domestic impurity, and some consequentially sought to distance sacred objects and activities from it. Jewish discussions of the bed in *Sefer Hasidim* and contemporaneous literature provide a case study of how medieval people navigated the simultaneous opportunities for and challenges to piety embedded in their homes.

In everyday life, Jews and Christians would have used their beds very similarly. The most basic use of the bed was, of course, for sleeping. Like their Christian neighbors, most Jewish households would have had multiple family members sharing beds. The suffocation of children during the night that resulted from sharing beds inspired rabbis, like their neighboring Christian leaders, to advocate against the practice (Orme 2001, p. 78). The author of one Hebrew responsum wrote that “[i]f at

all possible, it would be good if children would not sleep next to them [their mothers] once it appears to them [their mothers] that they no longer need to sleep with them [their mothers] in the bed" (Emanuel 2012, vol. 2, p. 744; Baumgarten 2004, pp. 176–78). The author's inclusion of the phrase "if at all possible" (בכל היכולת) highlights that sharing a bed in many homes was a result of the economic impossibility of having multiple beds. Some texts suggest that the norm was for gendered sleeping arrangements, with newborns staying with their mothers in the women's bed (Yacovavitz and Eliezeri 1936, p. 114). In more financially prosperous homes, however, there would have been more than enough beds for everyone to sleep comfortably alone. Sleeping, though, was not the only practical use of beds. Beds were an enshrined space for intimacy between spouses. In addition to sexual intimacy, which both Jewish and Christian norms only permitted in bed, Hollie L.S. Morgan has highlighted how beds and bedrooms facilitated verbal intimacy between spouses (Morgan 2017, pp. 77–84). One exemplum from *Sefer Hasidim* describes, in a similar vein, a "scholar who would speak with his wife in bed about matters until his wife mentioned attractive men and he did not want to have sex until she spoke of other matters" (Sefer Hasidim Project 2015, Parma 3280H, 1908). While this exemplum is framed as a warning about appropriate thoughts to have before sex, it reveals how the bed was a place for intimate and substantive conversation between spouses.

More than these practical uses, recent work on the bed has emphasized the sheer variety of cultural values tied up with it. French, Smith, and Stanbury, for example, describe the "range of familial, emotional, and spiritual valences that accrued to this item of furniture" (French et al. 2016, p. 84). Such associations have been revealed through the close reading of literary, visual, and economic sources. They come out most clearly in various lifecycle events—such as birth, marriage, and death—in which the bed played an important role. Yet, because the focus has been on late medieval beds in a Christian context, a study of the Hebrew sources can supplement and nuance our understanding of this domestic object. The overlap of ideas about the bed serves as a reminder that notions sometimes linked to Christianity were, in fact, more ubiquitous in medieval Europe.

The texts to be discussed come primarily from *Sefer Hasidim*, a thirteenth-century collection of Jewish law and lore attributed to Judah the Pious (1150–1217), who lived in Regensburg in Southern Germany. Long considered to be the classical work of the Hasidei Ashkenaz, this work includes scores of exempla that describe the realia of Jewish life in medieval Europe. While earlier scholarship saw *Sefer Hasidim* as representative of an isolated school of Jewish thought and practice, more recent scholarship has highlighted its importance for understanding the everyday lives and practices of Jews in medieval Germany (Baumgarten 2014, pp. 214–19; Shyovitz 2017, pp. 4–7). Though *Sefer Hasidim* contributes little to our understanding of the material make-up of Jewish beds, it frequently includes them in exempla describing the conduct of pious individuals. As Elisheva Baumgarten argues, we should read these sources not as expressions of a unique pietistic worldview of an independent sect but, rather, "as a window onto the repertoire of Ashkenazic Jews who wished to elevate the practice of piety in their lives", specifically, in this context, through the use of their beds (Baumgarten 2014, p. 216). The appearances of the bed in *Sefer Hasidim* thus reveal the diverse range of cultural significances and uses of beds in the domestic life and piety of medieval German Jews. Unsurprisingly, though, these Jewish notions about the bed reflect those already attributed by scholars to late medieval Christian culture.

2. Jewish Beds: Ideas and Rituals

Likely the most consistent theme in the explorations of the bed has been its power to convey to both domestic residents and visitors the prestige of its users. French, Smith, and Stanbury explain that the "kind of bed one slept in reflected one's identity and household position" (French et al. 2016, p. 63). Servants, who generally either slept on cheap mats or crowded mattresses, would have been reminded of their diminutive status each time they helped prepare their employer's well-built bed. Laying eyes upon their beds, visitors would similarly be forced to confront the prestige of their hosts. This signaling was a natural outgrowth of the fact that the bed was generally one of the most expensive objects in the

pre-modern home and was frequently included in dowries. A householder's luxurious bed revealed access to stores of wealth and/or valuable family connections. Penelope Eames has written about how canopied beds specifically were "inseparably associated with prestige, honour, power, wealth and privilege" (Eames 1977, p. 86). This would have been highlighted by the expensive fabrics and bedding with which affluent medieval people decorated their beds.

Such a social impact of the bed is similarly reflected in *Sefer Hasidim*. One exemplum highlights how the bed and its decorations signaled status to those both inside and outside of the home:

There was a story of a man who was a repairer of combs who became rich and the town leader gave his daughter to this man's son. [This man, though,] hung the tools of his profession over his table and his bed and even though the town leader requested that he remove these tools of his profession, he refused . . . The [newly] rich man explained "I hang the tools of my previous profession before me so to remember the kindness that the Holy Blessed One He did for me and I thank and praise God for the fact that He did good for me and gave me wealth so that my heart will not grow haughty upon me. (Sefer Hasidim Project 2015, Parma 3280H, 1030)

This exemplum depicts the bed—along with the table—as a domestic site with a special ability to impart social status to both residents and visitors. Because of its importance, attaching symbols of a humble past to the bed was simultaneously helpful to the newly rich man, who was fearful of pride, and deeply troubling to his well-established in-laws, who were trying to maintain the public perception of their status. An identical fear of lavish beds fostering arrogance was voiced a century later by Christine de Pizan (1364–1430) in her instructions to noble women (Fresco 2003, p. 191). The personal experience of this newly rich householder in bed reflects Glenn Burger's assessment that the bed was an "at once privileged and anxious location for self-identification" (Burger 2018, p. 114). Even though the pious man most likely slept on a lavish bed like other wealthy individuals, this householder's bedroom was where he struggled to clarify for himself and his guests the contrast between his humble origins and his new identity as an elite.

The bed's function as a signal of status and wealth inspired certain pious practices to be organized around the bed in Jewish communities. As part of the weekly preparations for the observance of the Sabbath, medieval Jews made-up their beds as a way of honoring the holy day. In *Sefer Hasidim*, distinguished bedroom items are the first ones mentioned in a long list of one pious man's special Shabbat decorations. The exemplum describes the "beautiful bed, chair, sheets and room" prepared and designated specifically for the Sabbath (Sefer Hasidim Project 2015, Parma 3280H, 628). It was these domestic objects that showcased the home as appropriately prepared and adorned for the holy day. This interest in preparing the bed stemmed from a popular Talmudic teaching:

Rabbi Yossi bar Yehuda said: Two angels accompany a person from the synagogue to his home, one good and one bad. When they arrive to his home and find a lit candle, a set table and a made bed, the good angel pronounces, 'let it be this way on the next Sabbath' and the bad angel is compelled to respond 'Amen. (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 119b)

Building upon this myth, it was deemed important by some rabbinic voices for Jews to prepare their beds each Friday evening as the Sabbath approached. Eleazar of Worms (1176–1238) instructed that on Friday afternoon "close to the afternoon prayer, one should make-up the bed" (Elazar of Worms 1960, p. 37). While rooted in the Talmud, the specific focus on the bed fits within its medieval European context as well. Similar to late medieval householders who would decorate their bedrooms and beds when welcoming visitors, Jews did the same for the Sabbath and its accompanying angels. One teaching from *Sefer Hasidim* describes a man who, every Friday, would hurry "as one who heard that a queen is coming to stay at his home" and "say to his servants, 'Prepare the home, clear it and aggrandize it. Prepare the beds because an honored one is coming'" (Sefer Hasidim Project 2015, Bologna Print 1538, 149). Just like in the above-cited exemplum, in which the wealthy community member expected

his new in-laws to have an appropriately adorned bed, the bed's understood role as a signifier of prestige ascribed to its adornment a privileged status when preparing to welcome in the Sabbath and its accompanying angels. During somber lifecycle events, such as the death of a family member, this same idea was reversed, as those in mourning were known to—according to the comments of a student of Rabbi Yehiel of Paris (d. 1264)—“lie down on the ground and arrange their bedding and sheets upon straw on the ground” (Yacovavitz and Eliezeri 1936, p. 113). In this way, the bed was a means by which to ritually display the state and mood of the home.

Deeply linked to its importance for social status was the moral significance attributed to the bed during the Middle Ages. Particularly, literary sources reveal how the bed “affirm[ed] in a fundamental way status, standing, and reputation” (French et al. 2016, p. 63). Mary Carruthers explains that English sources frequently describe “honest beds” that were believed to reflect well upon the dignity of those who slept in them (Carruthers 2013, pp. 113–14). While not entirely independent of the physical construction and decoration of one's bed, the moral significance of the bed was rooted in the idea of it. Above all else, the domestic furnishing represented the sanctity of marriage and the honor of the entire household. This explains why, as Morgan notes, literary depictions of adultery generally take place in beds (Morgan 2017, p. 158). It is there that the dishonor directed at the wronged spouse and family is most emphatic. To impinge on a couple's bed is to discredit their marriage and (the husband's) character.

A similar notion appears in the rabbinic tradition in the hope for a *Mitah Shleimah* or a “complete bed”. This idea, which had its roots in the Talmud, was generally disconnected from the physical object and instead focused on the idea of the bed. In an anonymous work attributed to the students of Judah ben Samuel of Regensburg (1150–1217), one finds the term in use:

It is expounded in the Midrash: Why is the word “even also” (אף) used when describing Abraham and Isaac? As it is written [Then I will remember my covenant with Jacob] and even also my covenant with Isaac and even also my covenant with Abraham (Leviticus 26:42). It was written as such because the progeny of Abraham and Isaac angered the Holy Blessed One, yet Jacob had a complete bed. (Stal 2009, p. 98)

This teaching builds on the idea that the quality of one's offspring reflects the piety of their progenitors. Unlike Abraham and Isaac, who each begot one deviant child, Jacob's children were all deemed to be righteous; therefore, their father is said to have had a complete bed. In this way, the moral quality of a family—both parents and children—was wrapped up in perceptions of the bed. A contemporary elucidation of the famed Biblical commentary of Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040–1105), better known as Rashi, connects this idea to Jacob's physical bed. Discussing the scene in Genesis 28:11 in which an on-the-run Jacob collects stones upon which to sleep, Rashi suggests that God fused the plentitude stones together as Jacob slept. A thirteenth-century supercommentary explains that this was done to indicate to Jacob that, even though he would have four wives, all his children would be righteous. The commentator wrote that Jacob “took numerous stones and they became one as a hint that Jacob would have a complete bed.”¹ Here, we see this same idea of the bed representing honor, but it is rooted in Jacob's actual bed. The fused stones upon which Jacob slept are understood as an indicator of the righteousness of his future family. Similar to Christian scholars, Jews saw a respectable bed as a sign of honor and stability.

These moral implications of the bed inspired requests for this idealized “complete bed” at certain liturgical moments. While going to sleep each night, Jews prayed that their beds might be deemed “complete” before God (Goldshmidt 2004, vol. 1, p. 162). This request simultaneously carries the hope that not only will one be free of impurifying seminal emissions during the night but also—as

¹ Asher ben Jehiel and Samuel ha-Levi ibn Yuli. 1986. *Sefer Hadar Zek*. New York: ha-Makhon le-hafatsat perushe ba'ale ha-Tosafot 'al ha-Torah. p. 64

the broader context of the prayer suggests—that God will lead the devotee down the path of morals and piety. Though this aspiration grew out of the idea rather than the physical construction of the bed, it was verbalized in the actual bed and thus could not be separated from the domestic object. This phrase may have also been used to bless relationships. One Hebrew folktale describes how a father walked in on his daughter asleep in bed with a man. When he noticed a sword lying between the lovers though, he recognized that no misdeed had occurred and that the young man “acted solely out of their love”. Speaking to both parties asleep in bed together, the father declared “May your bed (מטתכם) be complete before the God of Israel” (Kushlevsky et al. 2017, pp. 294–95). While not a ritual per se, this was a blessing for the couple. The father referred to the bed both to note the honor of their relationship thus far and to give well-wishes for its future. Such notions were not foreign to Christian practice. Many Christian wedding ceremonies included blessings of the new couple’s marital bed in the hope of setting them off in the right direction (Rivard 2009, p. 14). These practices all show how the interlocking of ideas about honor with the bed generated ritual interaction with the physical beds residing in every home.

While these cultural associations with the bed are found in Hebrew literature, the most dominant idea linked with the bed by Jews of the High Middle Ages was sex. Such an association is unsurprising given its parallel pervasiveness in Christian culture. Morgan explains that “the concept of the bed in late medieval cultural imagination had inherent sexual meanings, even when sex was far from the bedfellows’ minds” (Morgan 2017, p. 146). This is a natural result of the bed being the only place deemed appropriate for sexual relations among both Jews and Christians. Looking at the bed, one could not but reflexively see sex (Duby 1988, pp. 62–63). This link manifested itself linguistically. In Hebrew sources, the primary means for referring to sex is the euphemism *Tashmish HaMittah*, or ‘service of the bed’. Particularly in *Sefer Hasidim*, a text abundantly concerned with sexuality, one is constantly confronting this linguistic overlap. A similar semantic link is evident in Middle English literature from the fourteenth century in which—like in modern English—the verb “to bedde” refers to having sex.

This association in Jewish thought contributed to several bedside pieties concerning sexual purity. As has been well documented, the Jewish ritual literature of medieval Ashkenaz encouraged anxiety about menstruating women (Koren 2011, pp. 43–62; Baumgarten 2014, pp. 21–50). These fears manifested themselves in precautions taken to maintain distance between a man and his menstruating wife. Because the most serious prohibition concerned having sex during the menstrual period, these fears reached fever pitch when spouses were together in bed. The sexualization of the bed generated an assumption that being together in bed could not but result in coitus. To prevent sin, some rabbis demanded that spouses deviate from the usual practice of sleeping in the nude and repose fully dressed during the period of impurity. Others went even farther and expected spouses to sleep in separate beds. An exemplum from *Sefer Hasidim* displays how these changes could be a form of domestic piety:

There was once a pious man who would not lie on his bed each night that his wife was a menstruant. Rather, he would either sit or recline and sleep. For he said, ‘If I lie on my bed comfortably, I will find myself sleeping a lot and perhaps I will have a seminal emission. Rather, I will sleep without a pillow and in discomfort so that I will not have an emission. (Sefer Hasidim Project 2015, Parma 3280H, 48)

In this exemplum, the protagonist’s adjusted conduct in bed was a form of piety. Because of the sexualization of the bed, he was hyper cognizant of his conduct in bed and deviated from normal domestic activity when sex was not permitted. By altering his sleeping position as well as his bedding, his sexual drive could be kept in check even when in bed. Such domestic precautions taken during the menstrual period made up an important portion of Jewish domestic piety (Baumgarten 2014, pp. 27, 33; Karras 2017, pp. 101–2).

In understanding the ideas and practices of the bed, the gendered aspects of the furnishing cannot be ignored. Much of the recent scholarship has emphasized that, in many contexts, the bed was gendered female (Duby 1988, pp. 62–63; Morgan 2017, pp. 181–88). This was a natural result of women frequently bringing the bed into the marriage as part of their dowry and maintaining it as

part of their domestic duties. According to the Talmud, one of the wife's numerous conjugal duties is to prepare the bed (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ketuvot 59b). Elazar of Worms praised the piety and character of his daughter by referencing how she "made my bed and removed my shoes each evening" (Haberman 1945, p. 166). The gendered nature of making the bed suggests that those piously preparing the bed before the Sabbath were almost certainly women. A sense of gendered ownership of the bed is also reflected in the above exemplum about the man who piously distanced himself from the bed while his wife was menstruating (Sefer Hasidim Project 2015, Parma 3280H, 48). In this case, the bed was understood to belong to the woman's domain. The woman's impurity extended itself onto the bed, and the man was expected to deviate his conduct relative to this female space. A similar sense of ownership was on display in Jewish rituals after the birth of a child, in which postpartum mothers were sequestered to their beds (Baumgarten 2004, pp. 101–2). Yet, this does not mean that beds held strictly female significance. The Hebrew folktale that references the idea of a 'complete bed' emphasizes with its use of the plural *Mitatkhem* that the bed belonged to both spouses (Kushlevsky et al. 2017, pp. 294–95). It was their shared future marriage that the father implicitly blessed. Similarly, in the exemplum about preparing for the Sabbath, it was the man who came in and called for the beds to be prepared in honor of the Sabbath (Sefer Hasidim Project 2015, Bologna Print 1538, 149). While women were almost certainly those who prepared the actual bed, men still had a stake in the practices organized around it. The man's investment, though, was primarily in the ideas that the bed represented. For him, a prepared bed signified a dignified marriage, family prestige, and a patriarchally organized domestic life. In both daily life and ritual, though, the women were the ones primarily engaged with the actual domestic furnishing.

3. Object of Filth: Jewish Perceptions of the Bed as Impure

While there is general continuity between Jewish and Christian perceptions of and practices relating to the bed, *Sefer Hasidim* assigns an impurity to the bed that is less pronounced in Christian sources. Because pietistic literature is known to be exceptionally concerned with purity, it is unsurprising that discussions about the impurities hiding in the bed are scattered throughout *Sefer Hasidim* (Shyovitz 2017, pp. 164–71). Some of the ideas are simple reformulations of notions originally stated in earlier rabbinic texts. One such teaching instructs that one should not store food under the bed, "because the spirit of impurity resides there" (Sefer Hasidim Project 2015, Parma 3280H, 376).² Yet, this idea is carried forward when the bed is compared to "an instrument of filthiness" (Sefer Hasidim Project 2015, Bologna Print 1538, 815). This association of the bed with impurity explains a unique rabbinic dictate about interior decoration: "Whoever resides in a town in which they are renting out a building in which to live, he should not establish a prayer space in a room in which there was previously the bed of a gentile" (Sefer Hasidim Project 2015, Parma 3280H, 535). While the main concern was almost certainly the bygone gentile residency in the home, the text focuses its anxiety on the bed out of all the potential domestic goods because of its association with impurity. The bed was deemed to be a hub and amplifier of domestic impurity.

This perception stemmed partially from the bed's varied cultural associations with the chief impurities: sex and death. It was already explored above how medieval people sexualized the bed, but both Christians and Jews also linked it to death (French et al. 2016, pp. 75–83). In *Sefer Hasidim* and other Hebrew texts, the same word, *Mittah*, is used to refer to both beds and to coffins. In this way, Jews—in a certain sense—entered their coffins each night and were placed in their beds upon their death. Because medieval people understood sleep as a quasi-form of death, that the coffin and the bed shared terminology was entirely natural. The association could only then be amplified by the commonality of dying while asleep in one's bed. With such ideas hovering in the background, it is unsurprising that both Jews and Christians felt some apprehensions about the bed.

² For the rabbinic formulation of this idea, see Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 112a and Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 58a.

Even more influential than these cultural associations, though, was the most common explanation for the impurity of the bed: the bodily fluids that were known to congregate there. Semen and flatulence were all believed to endanger one's purity and were assumed to be hiding in the bed. Worried about such residue, *Sefer Hasidim* describes a "pious one for whom it was accustomed that whenever he would sleep or cohabit, he would wear a particular cloak. For he would say lest some semen stick to it [my general cloak] when I go to synagogue" ([Sefer Hasidim Project 2015](#), Parma 3280H, 1063). This pious man was not concerned with the mere associations between the bed and sex but, rather, with the very tangible impurity, namely semen, which he assumed resided in the object. While especially emphatic in *Sefer Hasidim*, this concern with the impurity of semen in particular has a long history in Jewish culture and should not be understood as a unique pietistic concern ([Shyovitz 2017](#), pp. 173–74). This protagonist developed his own domestic piety by which to protect himself from the semen and other impurities hiding throughout his home in places such as the outhouse and the bed. Another ruling warns about the impurity of the bed, which stemmed from the fact that "there is semen and a person flatulates in bed" ([Sefer Hasidim Project 2015](#), Parma 3280H, 7). Because of the activities that happen there, namely sex and sleep, the bed in *Sefer Hasidim* was assumed to be infested with the fluids excreted during those bodily processes.

Beyond being a literary trope, the impurity of the bed impacted how domestic devotion was practiced in the medieval Jewish home. One exemplum from *Sefer Hasidim* displays the thirteenth-century perspective on the status of the bed and how it impacted domestic devotion:

Two people were removing books from a large chest. One placed the books on a bed on which man and women lie and the other placed them on the floor. The one who placed them on the bed said: "Why do you dishonor the books by putting them on the floor?" to which the other responded: "You disgrace the Torah by placing them on a bed where man and his wife cohabit. The ground is pure and I do not have a cloth to put on the ground." The first man said in response: "But don't people read the *Shema* [in bed] with his wife next to him? And words of Torah do not become impurified." The second man responded: "This is true while they have still not had sex, but if the remnant of semen is on his body or on his clothing or on the sheets upon which he lies, he will not read [the *Shema*]. Further, in reading there is not impurification—as it says: 'Are not these words like fire?'—but to place [books] on something that has semen without it being laundered, that is a disgrace." ([Sefer Hasidim Project 2015](#), Parma 3280H, 640)

This constructed dialogue about the status of the bed highlights the roots of medieval Jewish perceptions of its impurity. The voice critical of allowing presumably sacred books to touch the bed began by rooting such an opinion in the sexualization of the bed but quickly transitioned to the issue of the semen left behind after sex. As our sources have suggested, the bed's impurity was both a function of the activities and fluids one could find in it. Yet, the concluding claim that piety was acceptable only in recently laundered beds highlights that lingering bodily fluids were the root concern.

This exemplum, though, also highlights how domestic life could hamper attempts to bring the sacred into the home. The understanding that the bed was the natural home to both sex and its accompanying excretions meant that this central domestic furnishing could not interact with sacred objects. Other rulings emphasize this same point. One prohibits the placement of books on beds because of the semen and flatulence assumed to be present ([Sefer Hasidim Project 2015](#), Parma 3280H, 7). Another chastises a person for storing a bed right next to a Torah scroll ([Sefer Hasidim Project 2015](#), Parma 3280H, 1633a). While recent work on domestic piety has emphasized how books and sacred objects were brought into the homes to foster domestic devotion ([Brundin et al. 2018](#), p. 314), these rulings reveal how they could be deemed an unnatural fit with certain aspects of the medieval home. According to these teachings, beds were unreceptive to the sacred. This notion is integral to understanding pre-modern domestic piety, because unlike outhouses, which would have been segregated from domestic life, in most homes, the bed was a central and unavoidable domestic furnishing. Notable, as well, is that this inhospitality was not the result of some extenuating

circumstances but, rather, of the regular use of the bed for sex between spouses. Medieval Jews were not expected to be abstinent but, rather, to be aware of the hurdles that regular domestic life placed before their pious pursuits. Unless it was recently laundered, the bed was assumed to be a site of impurity that repelled the sacred objects with which medieval Jews practiced their domestic piety.

4. Bedtime Prayers in the Medieval Bed

Unlike books and Torah scrolls, which could simply be kept away from beds, the Jewish bedtime ritual was, by its nature, forced to actively confront the impurities emanating from the bed. As a devotional practice whose most natural home was the bed itself, this ritual provides a case study of the challenges high medieval Jews faced when bringing piety into the domestic space. Jewish bedtime rituals all reference back to Deuteronomy 6:6–7, which commands the following: “Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up.” These verses are understood to obligate the recitation of this very section of the Bible—known as, the *Shema*—at both the morning and evening services, as well as before bed each night. “Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Even though one recited the *Shema* in the synagogue, it is a commandment to do so on one’s bed” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 4b). Throughout the Talmud, this practice is understood variously: as a genuine ritual obligation, as an attempt to foster positive thoughts before bed, and as a form of protection during the night. These prayers—along with most other Ashkenazi prayers—were codified into the European Jewish liturgy via the writings of Amram Gaon (d. 875) and were accepted as normative in the Ashkenaz community throughout the Middle Ages (Israel Ta-Shma 1992, p. 311–14).

In the Talmud, it was recognized that reciting prayers in one’s bed could be complicated by the realities of domestic life. Due to the prohibition on reciting certain prayers in the presence of a naked body, the pre-modern practice of sleeping in the nude in shared beds endangered one’s ability to say the bedtime *Shema*. The Talmudic rabbis argued about whether one was permitted to recite this bedtime prayer when sharing a bed with a spouse, children, or others (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot, 24a). By the Middle Ages, it was agreed that one was permitted to do so as long as certain precautions were taken. A common instruction, here authored by the late thirteenth-century Rabbi Hayim Eliezer ben Yitzchak, concludes that:

Two people who are sleeping in one bed should not recite the *Shema* unless there is a sheet between them. And if his wife is sleeping in bed with him, he should turn his face away and recite; our teacher Eliezer of Worms required additionally the separation via a sheet with one’s wife. (Isaac ben Moses of Vienna and Hayyim ben Isaac 2010, vol. 1, p. 126)

These guidelines required that bedfellows separate themselves with bedding so as not to see one another’s genitalia when reciting their prayers. With one’s wife, one was encouraged to look away entirely. Though these practical precautions allowed bedfellows to circumvent the prohibition of reciting prayers in the presence of an uncovered body, a contemporary text from Italy still warns that one must be vigilant lest a spouse’s mere presence inspire sensual thoughts during one’s prayer. After listing nearly identical precautions to those cited above, the text explains that “it is appropriate for a fearer of heaven to be cautious when reciting the *Shema* on his bed if his wife is there with him lest he be taken by licentious fantasies” (Moshe ben Yekutiel 1973, p. 192). Clearly, the realities of sharing a bed were recognized to be a potential obstacle to the appropriate practice of piety.

The impurities believed to reside in the bed similarly impacted the performance of bedtime rituals. Starting in the Talmud, it was assumed by nearly every ritual text that bedtime prayers would be recited in one’s bed. In the oldest manuscripts of *Mahzor Vitry*, a foundation stone of Ashkenaz liturgy compiled at the start of the twelfth century, it is instructed that “when one enters one’s bed to sleep, one must recite the *Shema*” (Goldshmidt 2004, vol. 1, p. 162). Because it is a prayer that is believed to protect the devotee while he or she is asleep, its choreographical placement in one’s bed while falling asleep is entirely natural. Given the impurities associated with the bed, though, this generated some

tension. Some saw it as inappropriate to say prayers in a bed stained with semen or other bodily fluids. In the above-cited exemplum from *Sefer Hasidim*, one character explains that “if the remnant of semen is on his body or on his clothing or on the sheets upon which he lies, he should not read [the *Shema*]” ([Sefer Hasidim Project 2015](#), Parma 3280H, 640). Such a ruling is unsurprising given the frequent concern in pietistic literature about praying in cleanliness. This same concern about potential impurities found in the bed likely inspired the instruction found in *Mahzor Vitry* directing one to cleanse before reciting the bedtime prayer. Goldschmidt notes that nearly every manuscript opens the section for the bedtime *Shema* by instructing that “[w]hen one goes to sleep, one should cleanse and purify and then recite the *Shema*” ([Goldschmidt 2004](#), vol. 1, p. 162). Especially because one was likely to have sex before going to sleep, it was deemed important to wash off any potential contaminants accrued while in bed before reciting these prayers.

Some, though, went even further and deemed saying the prayer merely in the presence of one’s bed a problem. *Sefer HaTadir*, penned by the thirteenth-century Italian Rabbi Moses ben Yekutiel, deals extensively with the issues that arise when reciting prayers in one’s bed. Similar to many other ritual texts, he outlined how one can navigate properly reciting prayers even when surrounded by one’s naked spouse and children. Though, like others, he ultimately assumed that the prayer would be said in one’s bed, he included an exemplum that reflects a clear ideal that it not be. He wrote the following:

I saw that one of the scholars of the generation had in his home a synagogue and every night when he would want to go to sleep he would go specifically from the room of his bed (מחדר המיטה) to recite the *Shema* in the synagogue in order that he would recite it in purity and in cleanliness. Appropriate for him was the honor of having a synagogue to protect his home from demons. Who is such a great nation that has such righteous laws and statutes? Happy are the people who have it so! ([Moshe ben Yekutiel 1973](#), p. 192)

According to this text, the ideal was to not recite the bedtime prayer in one’s bedroom, being that it was assumed to be impossible to say it there in “purity and cleanliness”. That this was a function of the general association of the bed with impurity is made clear by the emphasis that this pious man ran away not from his generic bedroom but, from his “room of the bed” (מחדר המיטה). It was the bed that was at the heart of this concern for purity. He, like other Italian rabbinic figures, was likely influenced by pietistic teachings when formulating this ideal that understood the bed as impure.

Though not as clearly attributed to impurity, other texts codify a similar separation between prayers and the bed. In one manuscript of *Mahzor Vitry*, according to Goldschmidt’s apparatus, the Talmudic guidelines that bedtime prayers be said in the bed were replaced with instructions that the *Shema* be said when “one enters one’s home to sleep” ([Goldschmidt 2004](#), vol. 1, p. 162). This decentralizing of the bed is unexplained, and the language does not seem to have a precedent. In *Leket Yosher*, a work that collects the customs of Israel Isserlein (1390–1460), one finds a strict formulation by which the *Shema* is said outside of one’s bed: “Someone who forgot to recite the bedtime *Shema*, if he remembers before falling asleep he must arise from his bed and recite it” ([Joseph ben Moshe 2010](#), vol. 1, pp. 94, 95). According to this teaching, one should not say the *Shema* in one’s bed and must go so far as to actively extricate himself from it in order to recite the bedtime prayer. Though neither of these passages mentions the impurity of the bed, it is likely that the changes were inspired by the realities of the pre-modern bedroom, including bodily fluids and naked bedfellows. It is clear that the norm was for the *Shema* to be recited in bed, yet these sources—when taken in conjunction with the anxieties around the bed—may indicate an underlying desire to distance the ritual from the bed.

This idea that prayers should be kept away from the bed seems to be more prevalent in Hebrew texts from the High Middle Ages, but it was not entirely absent from Christian practice. Peter Damian (1007–1072) recorded two cautionary tales about a sick priest and a pilgrim who recited the Compline service—a form of bedtime prayer—while lying in their beds and were punished for such misconduct ([Damian 1983](#), vol. 3, p. 130–31). Similarly, high medieval works from both England and France encourage devotees to sprinkle holy water on the bed when reciting bedtime prayers, as if to purify

it before transforming it into a ritual space.³ Later, in the fifteenth century, Florentine Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98) explicitly warned about the polluted nature of the bedroom and advised against praying there (Trexler 1991, p. 160). Though not as explicit as in *Sefer Hasidim*, these Christian bedtime instructions point to a wider recognition of the potential devotional challenges posed by the bed.

5. Conclusions

The diverse ideas and practices with which high medieval Jews linked their beds further validates the recent work on the centrality of the bed to pre-modern culture and domestic piety. As full members of medieval European society, Jews shared their Christian neighbors' appreciation for the import of the bed and used it to inform their own domestic rituals. These Hebrew sources emphasize the previous observation of the sheer variety of meanings that the bed accrued in pre-modern culture. In Jewish homes, the bed simultaneously signified the wealth and dignity of a family while also representing sexuality and domestic impurity. This diversity of connotations also influenced how beds were used for piety. The domestic furnishing provided not just comfort but also the context for the observance of sexual norms and important liturgical ideas, as well as a canvas upon which to display one's reverence for holy days. Such multifunctionality of the bed with respect to piety extended to the entire home. The home was not merely a neutral space in which ritual was performed but, rather, an environment with which ritual actively engaged. Especially in the Jewish tradition, which mandated the observance of numerous rituals in the domestic sphere, ritual interacted in diverse ways with the various features of the home.

Yet, the Jewish concern with the potential impurities embedded within the bed highlights how domestic objects could pose a challenge to domestic devotion. Beds were not neutral objects; they were impacted by the activities performed in them and exerted influence over the environment in which they resided. The Jewish bed's ability to accumulate domestic impurity and project it outwards onto the rituals and objects with which it came into contact is an example of the agency of pre-modern objects explored by Roberta Gilchrist and others (Gilchrist 2017, p. 216–17). Although beds offered a private space in which householders could feel comfortable while practicing their domestic devotions, beds could also repulse residents who were all too aware of the contaminants that lay beneath their covers. This evidence serves as a useful counterpoint to some recent interpretations in the literature that have construed the bed as a "religious object with a similar function to a set of rosary beads" (Morgan 2017, p. 47). This observation, though, holds true for the entire home, as impurities similar to those found in the bed existed throughout the domestic sphere. David Shyovitz highlights this when he describes how pietistic literature was especially concerned with impurities that could be passed to devotees via their children (Shyovitz 2017, p. 165). Where is one more likely to interact with children than in one's home? When thinking about domestic piety, then, it is essential to remember that the home was not a blank slate upon which piety could simply be overlaid, as some understandings of domestic religion have suggested. It was a complicated maze whose contours had to be navigated so that ritual and the sacred could reside alongside the banalities and filth that characterized much of domestic life.

The potential disruptiveness of domestic life was already recognized in the eleventh century by Heloise when she warned Abelard about the impossibility of achieving their scholarly goals in a domestic context. She asks: "Scholars and nursemaids, writing desks and cradles, a book and a distaff, a pen and a spindle—what harmony can there be in that?" (Abelard and Héloïse 2007, p. 15). Recent work on domestic devotion makes clear that Heloise's concerns in no way prevented piety from taking root in the home. Nevertheless, the people, objects, and activities that made the home bustle provided opportunities as well as challenges to those who wanted to turn their homes into

³ See Bibliothèque nationale de France, Françaises, MS 1802, 85r; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Nouvelles acquisitions françaises, MS 5232, 182r. Hollie L.S. Morgan offers an alternative interpretation of this practice (Morgan 2017, pp. 96–97).

ritual spaces. It was this multidimensional character of the home that shaped how domestic devotion was performed. As a centerpiece of the pre-modern home, the bed exemplifies this complicated relationship between domestic life and piety. Their rich cultural significance inspired rituals, whereas their practical use occasionally repelled them. Further study of domestic piety requires a keen focus on how medieval people were able to synthesize their devotions with the potentially disruptive realities of their domestic life.

Funding: This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 681507), *Beyond the Elite: Jewish Daily Life in Medieval Europe*, directed by Elisheva Baumgarten.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank Elisheva Baumgarten for her support in this project.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Abelard, Peter, and Héloïse. 2007. *The Letters and Other Writings*. Translated by William Levitan. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub.
- Baumgarten, Elisheva. 2004. *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Baumgarten, Elisheva. 2014. *Practicing Piety in Medieval Ashkenaz: Men, Women, and Everyday Religious Observance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Brundin, Abigail, Deborah Howard, and Mary Laven. 2018. *The Sacred Home in Renaissance Italy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Burger, Glenn. 2018. *Conduct Becoming: Good Wives and Husbands in the Later Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Carruthers, Mary J. 2013. *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Damian, Peter. 1983. *Monumenta Germaniae historica Die Briefe der deutschen Kaiserzeit*. Edited by Kurt Reindel and Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani. 4 vols. München: Monumenta Germaniae Historica.
- Duby, Georges. 1988. The Aristocratic Households of Feudal France. In *A History of Private Life: Revelations of the Medieval World*. Edited by Georges Duby. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 33–85.
- Eames, Penelope. 1977. *Furniture in England, France and the Netherlands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century*. London: The Furniture History Society.
- Elazar of Worms. 1960. *Sefer HaRokeach HaGadol*. Jerusalem.
- Emanuel, Simcha, ed. 2012. *Teshuvot Maharam me-Rothenburgve-haverav*. 2 vols. Jerusalem: ha-Igud ha-‘Olami le-mada‘e ha-Yahadut.
- French, Katherine L., Kathryn A. Smith, and Sarah Stanbury. 2016. *An Honest Bed: The Scene of Life and Death in Late Medieval England*. *Fragments: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Ancient and Medieval Pasts* 5.
- Fresco, Karen L. 2003. Gendered Household Spaces in Christine de Pizan's *Livre des trois vertus*. In *The Medieval Household in Christian Europe*. Edited by Cordelia Beattie, Anna Maslakovic and Sarah Rees Jones. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 187–97.
- Gilchrist, Roberta. 2017. *Medieval life: archaeology and the life course*. Rochester: Boydell Press.
- Goldshmidt, Aryeh, ed. 2004. *Mahzor Vitry*. 3 vols. Jerusalem: Otzar HaPoskim.
- Haberman, Abraham M., ed. 1945. *Sefer Gezeirot Ashkenaz ve-Zarfat*. Jerusalem: Tarshish.
- Isaac ben Moses of Vienna and Hayyim ben Isaac. 2010. *Sefer Or Zarua*. Edited by Yacov Farbstein. 3 vols. Jerusalem: Mekhon Yerushalayim.
- Joseph ben Moshe. 2010. *Sefer Leket Yosher*. Edited by Amihai Kinarti. Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, vol. 1.
- Karras, Ruth Mazo. 2017. *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*, 3rd ed. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Koren, Sharon Faye. 2011. *Forsaken: The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*. Waltham: University Press of New England.
- Kushelevsky, Rella, Ruchie Avital, and Chaya Naor. 2017. *Tales in Context: Sefer Ha-Ma'asim in Medieval Northern France*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

- Morgan, Hollie L. S. 2017. *Beds and Chambers in Late Medieval England: Readings, Representations and Realities*. Woodbridge: York Medieval Press.
- Moshe ben Yekutiel. 1973. Sefer HaTadir. In *Shitat HaKadmonim*. Edited by Moshe Yahuda Blau. New York: Editor, pp. 179–318.
- Orme, Nicholas. 2001. *Medieval children*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Rivard, Derek A. 2009. *Blessing the World: Ritual and Lay Piety in Medieval Religion*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press.
- Sefer Hasidim Project. 2015. *Princeton University Sefer Hasidim Database*. Princeton: Princeton University. Available online: https://etc.princeton.edu/sefer_hasidim/manuscripts.php (accessed on 19 June 2019).
- Shyovitz, David I. 2017. *A Remembrance of His Wonders: Nature and the Supernatural in Medieval Ashkenaz*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Stal, Yacov Yisrael, ed. 2009. *Sode Humash ve-Shar*. Jerusalem.
- Ta-Shma, Israel M. 1992. *Minhag Ashkenaz ha-ḳadmon: ḥeḳer ve-‘iyun*. Yerushalayim: Hotsa’at sefarim ‘a. sh. Y.L. Magnes, ha-Universiṭah ha-‘Ivrit.
- Trexler, Richard C. 1991. *Public life in Renaissance Florence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Yacovavitz, Aharon, and Shmuel Eliezeri, eds. 1936. *Otzar Rishonim: Moed Katan*. Jerusalem: Machon Harry Fischel, pp. 1–116.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).