

Article

Reconsidering the Early Rabbinic “*Miqweh*”

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Abstract

This study reconsiders the meaning of the term “*miqweh*” in early rabbinic literature and challenges its common rendering as “immersion pool” or “ritual bath.” Surveying biblical and Second Temple texts, it demonstrates that “*miqweh*” originally indicated a general “gathering of water” and was not associated with purificatory bathing. Only in early rabbinic sources did the term acquire a specialized, legal-technical sense, referring to pooled water within the narrow context of ritual purification through immersion in water. This semantic shift likely derives from rabbinic interpretation of Leviticus 11:36 and reflects broader patterns of legal abstraction in rabbinic discourse. Crucially, the study shows that “*miqweh*” never referred to the physical installation or structure containing the water; instead, terms such as “*mā’ārā*” (“cave”) and “*bēt haṭṭābīlā*” (“place of immersion”) were used for such spaces. These two terms, the study tentatively suggests, likely emerged before the more abstract “*miqweh*” was coined.

Keywords: *miqweh*; rabbinic literature; purity; ritual; halakhah

1. Introduction

The term “*miqweh*” (מִקְוֶה), in the plural either “*miqwā’ōt*” (מִקְוֹאוֹת) or “*miqwōt*” (מִקְוֹת), appears over three hundred and fifty times throughout the Mishnah, Tosefta, Midrashei Halakhah, and the two Talmudim. The word has also lent its name to Tractate Miqwa’ot in both the Mishnah and the Tosefta. But what is the precise meaning of this relatively common word?¹

The question became acute for me about a decade ago, when I was tasked with contributing an English translation of Tractate Miqwa’ot to *The Oxford Annotated Mishnah* (Cohen et al. 2023). Unsurprisingly, the term “*miqweh*”/“*miqwā’ōt*”/“*miqwōt*” appears many times throughout the tractate, and from the outset I had to decide how to render the Hebrew word into English. Several choices presented themselves. One possibility was to follow the earlier Oxford edition of the Mishnah and adopt the term used by its translator, Herbert Danby: “Immersion-pool”² (Danby 1933). Considering other available translations, additional options included “ritual bath,” “ritual pool,” or “ritual immersion pool.” Alternatively, I could simply have transliterated the term wherever it appeared. Of course, I might have chosen to render the term in different ways throughout the tractate, depending on context.³ In the end, I chose to translate the term consistently as “pool.” In a sense, the present study serves as a detailed justification for this choice.

In what follows, I will argue that the term “*miqweh*” in early rabbinic literature consistently refers to *pooled water within the narrow context of the laws of ritual purification through immersion in water*. I will contend that this usage resulted from the rabbis’ borrowing part of the phrase “cistern of gathered water” (בּוֹר מְקוּהָ-מַיִם) in Lev 11:36 and using the term



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“*miqveh*” whenever discussing pooled water within the framework of purificatory immersion. The word, which originally had a concrete meaning entirely unrelated to Torah law, was transformed by the rabbis into a legal-technical term reserved for halakhic discussions about ritual purification. I will further argue that the term “*miqveh*” was never used to refer to the basin or installation within which the pooled water (i.e., the “*miqveh*”) itself was held; instead, the rabbis usually used the terms “*mā’ārā*” (מַעְרָה), meaning “cave,” or “*bēt haṭṭē-bīlā*” (בֵּית הַטְּבִילָה), meaning “place of immersion,” when referring to spaces where a facility containing water for immersion is located. These two terms, I will tentatively suggest, likely emerged before the more abstract “*miqveh*” was coined.

2. State of the Question

In recent decades, much of the scholarly discussion about the “*miqveh*” in antiquity has related to the stepped water installations uncovered in archaeological excavations throughout the Southern Levant. The first such facility to be identified as a “*miqveh*” was unearthed during excavations directed by Yigael Yadin at Masada in February 1964. In his popular book on the excavations, published soon afterward, Yadin explained how he immediately made the connection between the water installation he uncovered and the rabbinic “*miqveh*”:

This find immediately suggested to us that what we had discovered was a ritual immersion bath—Mikve in Hebrew—and this we announced at our routine press conference. The news that we had brought to light a mikve from the period of the Second Temple quickly spread throughout the country, arousing particular interest in orthodox religious quarters and Talmudic scholars; for the traditional Jewish laws of the Talmud relating to the ritual bath are quite complex, and no mikve has so far been discovered belonging to this very period, the period when much of the relevant traditional law governing the mikve was written and enacted. (Yadin 1966, p. 165)

Following the Masada expedition, dozens of stepped water installations were uncovered in the excavations conducted by Benjamin Mazar adjacent to the Temple Mount (1968–1978) and in those directed by Nahman Avigad in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem (1969–1982). Ronny Reich, then one of Avigad’s senior assistants, identified these installations as Jewish ritual baths, and followed Yadin in consistently referring to them as “*miqwa’ot*” (Reich 1990, 2013). Reich’s prolific work on the topic—a PhD dissertation later published as a monograph, along with over two dozen articles—has been foundational to the study of these installations.⁴ Although some scholars disagreed with Reich’s identification of many, if not all, of the stepped pools as ritual baths (e.g., Wright 1997; Eshel 1997, 2000; Wassén 2019, pp. 56–58)—almost no one questioned his rendering of the rabbinic term “*miqveh*” as “ritual bath”.

An exception is Stuart Miller, who argued that the term “*miqveh*” in rabbinic literature had several meanings and was not used in a “monolithic” way⁵ (Miller 2007, 2015, pp. 32–55; 2018). Although the word commonly refers to an artificially constructed ritual bath, Miller contended that sometimes “*miqveh*” was used to refer to various other kinds of water bodies: “In short, a ‘*miqveh*’ did not always function as a *miqveh*” (Miller 2007, p. 218). It was only in later rabbinic literature, from the medieval period onward, that the term “*miqveh*” came to be used consistently to refer to a man-made ritual bath (Miller 2007, p. 226; 2015, p. 50, n. 15).

While Miller was entirely correct in criticizing the common scholarly equation of “*miqveh*” with “ritual bath,” his claim that the word carried a variety of meanings—one of which was a man-made bath—is not borne out by the evidence. In what follows, I will argue that the term “*miqveh*” carried a consistent and narrow meaning, and that it was *never* used to refer to an artificial installation designed to hold water for ritual immersion.

3. Pre-Rabbinic Literature

Before examining the rabbinic data, we begin by surveying the ways the term “*miqweh*” was used in literature predating the rabbinic corpus: biblical texts and late Second Temple period literature.

3.1. Biblical Texts

The word “*miqweh*” appears three times in the Pentateuch in association with water:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקְוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל מְקוֹם אֶחָד וְתֵרָאָה הַיַּבֵּשָׁה [...] וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַיַּבֵּשָׁה אֶרֶץ
וְלַמִּקְוֹת הַמַּיִם קָרָא יַמִּים [...]

And God said: “**Let the water be gathered together**, that which is under the heavens, to one place, letting the dry land appear” [...]. And God called the dry land “Earth,” and **the gathered waters** he called “seas” [...]. (Gen 1:9–10)

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה אֶל אַהֲרֹן קַח מַטֶּה וּנְטֵה יָדְךָ עַל מִימֵי מִצְרַיִם עַל נְהָרֵתָם עַל יְאֻרֵיהֶם וְעַל אֲגַמֵּיהֶם
וְעַל כָּל מִקְוֵה מִימֵיהֶם וַיְהִיו דָּם [...]

And YHWH said to Moses: “Say to Aaron: ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over their rivers, canals, and ponds, and over all their **gathered waters**—and they shall become blood [...]’.” (Exod 7:19)

אֶךְ מַעְיָן וּבֹר מִקְוֵה-מַיִם יִהְיֶה טָהוֹר [...]

But a spring or a cistern of **gathered water** shall be pure [...] (Lev 11:36)

In the first two cases, the term “*miqweh*” appears in the construct form together with the word “water” as מִקְוֵה מַיִם (note that the *segol* before the final *heh* in the absolute מִקְוֵה lengthens to *tsere* in construct). In Lev 11:36, the term appears as part of a chain of construct forms: בֹּר מִקְוֵה-מַיִם (i.e., “a cistern-of-gathered-water”).⁶ In all these cases, the word is derived through a morphological pattern in which the root is *קו* and the pattern is *miqṭal*, a nominal pattern that typically denotes a place. Other examples of this pattern include מִזְרָח (“east”—the place where the sun rises) and מִשְׁכָּן (“dwelling”—a place where someone or something resides) (Nordheimer 1842, p. 222). The word “*miqweh*” follows the same pattern, except that, with a *yod* at the end of the root, the *qamets* vowel becomes a *segol*.⁷ Thus, “*miqweh*” denotes a “gathering place” of water.

A similar word, but in the feminine form “*miqwā*” (מִקְוֶה), appears in Isa 22:9–11:

וְאַתָּה בָּקִיעִי עִיר דָּוִד רְאִיתָם כִּי רַבּוּ. וַתִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת מֵי הַבְּרֶכָה הַמְּתוּנָה [...] וּמִקְוֶה עָשִׂיתָם בֵּין הַחֲמִשִּׁים לְמֵי
הַבְּרֶכָה הַיְשָׁנָה וְלֹא הִבַּטְתֶּם אֶל עֹשִׂיהָ וַיִּצְרָה מְרְחוּק לֹא רְאִיתָם.

And you saw that there were many breaches in the City of David, and you collected the waters of the lower pool. [...] And you made a **reservoir** between the two walls for the water of the old pool. But you did not look to its maker nor did you consider him who formed it long ago.

It is certainly possible that the word “*miqwā*” here, like the three occurrences of “*miqweh*” in the Pentateuch, refers to a gathering place of water in a general sense. However, since the verse speaks of the “making” and “forming” of a “*miqwā*,” it may refer to an artificial installation that has been hewn or constructed. This interpretation may be strengthened by the mention of “the lower pool” in verse 9 and “the old pool” in verse 11, assuming that these refer to artificial installations.

Among these four biblical sources, only Lev 11:36 bears any relation to matters of ritual purity. To properly understand the statement “But a spring or a cistern of gathered water shall remain pure,” one must consider the context of the larger pericope within which this verse appears (Lev 11:29–38)—the impurity caused by a dead creeping animal (שָׂרָץ). This passage establishes the following system of rules regarding how such an animal

conveys impurity: eight types of creeping animals are defined as impure (verses 29–30); a person who touches the carcass of one of these animals becomes impure (verse 31); articles of various materials upon which such a carcass falls become impure (verse 32); a pottery vessel into which the carcass falls becomes impure, and everything inside it also becomes impure (verse 33); any food that has been moistened with water, and any drink that comes into contact with the carcass, becomes impure (verse 34); and an oven or stove upon which the carcass falls becomes impure (verse 35). By contrast, “a spring or a cistern of gathered water” into which the carcass of a dead creeping animal falls does *not* become impure (verse 36). Similarly, seeds intended for sowing do not become impure if the carcass falls on them (verse 37), unless the seeds have been moistened with water (verse 38). Presumably, these last instructions would have made it more feasible for people to apply the laws of purity in their daily lives, since it was probably quite common to find dead creeping animals in water cisterns and in silos where grain and other seeds were stored. The Pentateuch here establishes that such water reservoirs, as well as dry seeds, are completely immune to impurity from dead creeping animals.

It is noteworthy that nowhere in the Bible is there any reference to a “*miqweh*” as a place where people or objects immerse or are immersed, or as something capable of purifying impure people or objects. The Pentateuch frequently requires bathing (verb: ר-ה-ל) in water for people who have become impure (Lev 14:8–9; 15:5–8, 10–11, 13, 16, 18, 21–22, 27; 16:26, 28; 17:15–16; 22:6; Num 19:7–8, 19; Deut 23:12), laundering (verb: כ-ב-ש) for garments that have become impure (Lev 11:25, 28, 40; 13:6, 34; 14:8–9, 47; 15:5–8, 10–11, 13, 17, 21–22, 27; 16:26, 28; 17:15–16; Num 8:7; 19:7–8, 10, 19, 21; 31:24), and bringing into (verb: א-ב-א) water, rinsing (verb: ש-ט-ף) in water, or passing through (verb: ע-ב-ר) water, for various vessels that have become impure (Lev 11:32; 15:12; Num 31:23). However, nowhere in the Bible is it specified *how* these bathings, launderings, and rinsings are to be performed, or *where* the water used for these acts of cleansing is to be held. Regarding a male with a genital discharge (זָבַח), the Pentateuch instructs that he must wash “in living water” (בְּמֵי חַיִּים) (Lev 15:13), but beyond this ambiguous instruction, no further specification of the nature of these waters or where they are located is ever provided.

3.2. Late Second Temple Period Literature

The term “*miqweh*” appears several times in Jewish literature composed in the late Second Temple period (from the second century BCE to the end of the first century CE) in ways similar to its uses in the Hebrew Bible, and can generally be rendered as a “gathering of water” or “reservoir.” Within this literature, the term is never used in relation to ritual purification.

In the Hebrew fragments of Ben Sira from the Cairo Geniza, the word “*miqweh*” appears in a poetic sense as a place where water gathers (Sir 10:13; 43:20).⁸ The word appears also in a paraphrase of Isa 22:9–11: “Hezekiah fortified his city, by diverting water into its midst. He hewed rock like bronze and blocked mountains [to form] a reservoir (מִקְוֵה)” (Sir 48:17).⁹ In another passage, the author writes about the digging of a “*miqweh*” in the days of his hero “Simon son of Johanan the High Priest”: “In whose generation a reservoir (מִקְוֵה) was dug” (Sir 50:3).¹⁰ From these latter two passages, it appears that the word “*miqweh*” (or perhaps “*miqwā*”) could refer not only to places where water gathers naturally, but also to an artificial pool. In any event, the word “*miqweh/miqwā*” is never mentioned in Ben Sira in connection with purification, or even in association with ritual purity more generally.

In the scrolls from the Qumran caves, the term “*miqweh*” appears several times in poetic language in connection with naturally occurring water sources (like springs, rivers, and streams), always in construct with another noun: “a reservoir of strength” (מִקְוֵה גְבוּרָה) (1QS xi, 6–7), “reservoirs of rivers” (מִקְוֵי נְהָרוֹת) (1QM x, 13), and “gathering of water” (מִקְוֵה)

מים) (4Q521 7+5 ii, 3).¹¹ Only in one text is the word mentioned in connection with “purity,” but here too the language is poetic and the context has nothing to do with *ritual* purity: “to Adam and to [his] son[s ... so]urce of purity (מִקְוֵה הַטְהָרָה), reservoirs of glory (מְקוֹי הַכְבוֹד), great in just[ice ...]” (4Q511 52, 54–55, 57–59, 2).

Various Hebrew and Greek sources from the late Second Temple period mention a Jewish practice of bathing in water to purify from ritual impurity, but none of these mention the term “*miqweh*.” In the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, several texts speak of ritual washing using either the verb “to bathe” (רָחַץ), “to immerse” (טָבַל), or “to enter” (בָּרַח) into water, and of ritual laundering using the verb “to launder” (כָּבַשׁ)—but none of these mention the term “*miqweh*.”¹² Greek texts that speak of ritual washing, usually using the verbs “bathe” (λούω) or “immerse” (βαπτίζω), also never describe the practice as taking place in a “gathering of water”—as a Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “*miqweh*.”¹³ The several sources that tell of a man called “John the Immerser” who practiced special ritual immersion rites describe these as taking place either in the Jordan River or else in “water” more generally; none describe these immersions as taking place in any sort of Greek equivalent to “*miqweh*.”¹⁴ Whereas the translators of the Septuagint translated the term “*miqweh* of water” in the Pentateuch as τὰ συστήματα τῶν ὑδάτων (Gen 1:10), συνεστηκὸς ὕδωρ (Exod 7:19), and συναγωγῆς ὕδατος (Lev 11:36), these or similar terms are never used when late Second Temple period Greek sources mention Jewish ritual bathing.¹⁵

Toward the end of the second century BCE, or at the beginning of the first century BCE, plastered water installations with steps descending from the rim of the installation to its bottom began to appear in Jewish settlement areas in the Southern Levant (Reich 2013, p. 209; Adler 2011, pp. 51–62; 2018, pp. 7–10). The most plausible hypothesis to explain the function of these installations seems to be that they served as Jewish ritual immersion pools (Reich 2013, pp. 50–51; Adler 2011, pp. 33–42; 2022). Unfortunately, however, there are no surviving archaeological or epigraphic indications of what the people who used these pools might have called them. Although hundreds of pools of this type are now known—scattered throughout Judea, Galilee, Perea, and Idumea—not a single inscription associated with such an installation has yet been found.

4. The Early Rabbinic Corpus

4.1. How the Term Is Used Across the Corpus

The situation changes dramatically when we consider the early rabbinic halakhic corpus. Excluding direct citations from biblical verses, the term “*miqweh*” appears over three hundred and fifty times in these sources (see Table 1).¹⁶ In all these occurrences, the word “*miqweh*” means “*pooled water*,” and the context invariably concerns the pool’s capacity to ritually purify people, clothing, and vessels immersed in it. Bodies of water are never termed a “*miqweh*” unless ritual purification is at stake.¹⁷

To be clear, not every “*miqweh*” in these sources is said to purify. On the contrary, the rabbis developed a complex system of rules regulating the situations in which a “*miqweh*” is deemed “valid” (כָּשֵׁר), meaning capable of purifying, and those in which it is deemed “invalid” (פָּסוּל), meaning incapable of purifying. For example, Mishnah Tractate Miqwa’ot opens with a list of “six grades of *miqwōt*” (שֵׁשׁ מַעֲלֹת בַּמִּקְוֹת), only four of which have the power to purify (m. Miqw. 1:1–8).¹⁸ Much of the remainder of the tractate addresses the capacity of a “*miqweh*” to purify depending on whether the water meets certain conditions. Throughout, the rabbis discuss and debate whether the “*miqweh*” is valid or not; regardless, the pooled water in question is termed a “*miqweh*.”

Table 1. References to “*miqweh*” in early rabbinic halakhic literature.

Mishnah
Ter. 5:6; Šabb. 24:5; Šeqal. 1:1; Yoma 8:9; Mo‘ed Qaṭ. 1:2; ‘Ed. 1:3; Hūl. 1:7; Tem. 1:4; Parah 5:7; Ṭehar. 4:7; 8:9; Miqw. 1:1, 4, 7; 2:1–5, 10; 3:1, 3; 4:1–5; 5:1–5; 6:1, 3–10; 7:1–2, 5–7; 8:1; 10:7; Makš. 4:6, 8.
Tosefta
Šeqal. 1:2; Ned. 6:5; Qidd. 5:3; B. Meṣ 11:17; ‘Ed. 1:3; Parah 5:8; 8:5–6; 9:4; Ṭehar. 2:6; 9:15; Miqw. 1:8–9, 11–12, 16–17, 19; 2:1–3, 5–6, 9, 11; 3:1–3, 6–8, 14; 4:1–2, 6–7; 5:1–3, 5–6, 8, 10, 12, 14; 6:1–2; 7:1; Makš. 2:7; Ṭ Yom 1:7.
Midrashei Halakhah
Sifra, Šemini 9:10; Sifra, Mešora‘ 2:1; Sifra, Mešora‘—Zabim 3:6; Sifra, Behar 1:1; Sifre Numbers, Hūqat 124; Sifre Zuta 19:8, 17.
Jerusalem Talmud
Ber. 7:1 (11a); Ter. 4:12 (43a–b); 5:7 (43d); 8:2 (45b); 10:10 (47c); Ma‘aś. 5:3 (52a); Ma‘aś. Š. 1:2 (52d); Sukkah 1:11 (52c); Hāg. 2:6 (78b–c); Ned. 10:7 (42a); Giṭ. 3:8 (45a); ‘Abod. Zar. 3:6 (43b); 5:4 (44d).
Babylonian Talmud
Šabb. 15a; 15b; 16b; 65a–b; 84a–b; 109a; 144b; ‘Erub. 4b; 14a–14b; 29b; 35b–36a; 104b; Pesah. 16a; 90b; 109a–b; Yoma 31a; Mo‘ed Qaṭ. 5a; 6a; Hāg. 11a; 19a; 21b–22a; Yebam. 15a; 82b; Ned. 40b; 75b–76a; Naz. 38a; Giṭ. 16a; 31b; Qidd. 64a; 66b; 77a; 79a; B. Qam. 67a; B. Bat. 65b; Sanh. 83a; Mak. 3b–4a; ‘Abod. Zar. 52a; Zebah. 22a; 43b; 108a; Menah. 101a; Hūl. 26a; 84a; 101a; Bek. 55b; Tem. 12a–b; Nid. 2b; 3b; 28b; 67a.

Thus, the rabbis established a minimum volume of pooled water that has the capacity to purify: forty *sa’* (probably around 480 L; Sperber 2007) (see, e.g., m. Miqw. 1:4, 7; 2:1–3, 5, 10; 3:1–2; 4:4; 5:6; 6:3, 8; 7:1–4, 6). If pooled water lacks this volume, and “drawn water” (מים שאובין) with a volume of three *lōg* (probably around one and a half liters; Sperber 2007) falls into it, the pooled water remains invalid for immersion even if its volume later increases to meet the forty *sa’* minimum (see, e.g., m. Miqw. 2:3–9; 3:1–4; 4:1–5; 6:4; 6:10–11; 7:2–3, 5). In situations where two bodies of pooled water are in contact with one another, the waters are regarded as one body of water with regard to measuring the forty *sa’* minimum under certain defined conditions (see, e.g., m. Miqw. 6:1–3, 5–7, 9). Pooled water that was rendered invalid due to an admixture of “drawn water” may be rendered valid again if it is brought into contact with valid pooled water meeting the forty *sa’* minimum (see, e.g., m. Miqw. 6:8). Pooled water must be standing to purify (see, e.g., m. Miqw. 1:7–8; 5:6). Pooled water mixed with other substances—mud, wine, olive juice, milk, etc.—retains the capacity to purify only under certain conditions (see, e.g., m. Miqw. 2:10; 7:1–5). Pooled water is often juxtaposed to a flowing “spring” (מעין), whose waters remain valid for immersion regardless of volume and even if “drawn water” falls into the spring (see, e.g., m. Miqw. 1:7–8; 5:1–5; 6:6). In all these cases—whether deemed valid for immersion or not—the pooled water is termed a “*miqweh*.”

Crucially, the term “*miqweh*” as used throughout the early rabbinic corpus always refers to the pooled water itself—and never to the basin or installation where the water is held or the space that houses such a facility. Nowhere in rabbinic literature is there any mention of a “*miqweh*” that is empty of water (i.e., an empty basin) and nowhere is there any mention of a person walking into a “*miqweh*” (i.e., the space where such a basin is located). Likewise, one never finds any reference to digging a “*miqweh*” in the ground, hewing a “*miqweh*” out of rock, constructing a “*miqweh*” using blocks, or plastering a “*miqweh*” with plaster.¹⁹ When the rabbis speak about steps leading down into pooled water, they never refer to it as “the steps of the *miqweh*” (מעלות המקוה); instead, they speak of “the steps of the cave” (מעלות המערה) (m. Miqw. 4:4; 7:7; see below 4.3). The rabbis refer to a wall flanked by

two bodies of water—“a wall between two *miqwôt*” (כותל שבין שני מקוות) (m. Miqw. 6:9)—but never speak of a “*miqweh*” itself as having its own walls, floor, ceiling, or entrance. When the Mishnah rules that “the [...] *miqwa’ot* of water are repaired” (m. Šeqal. 1:1; m. Mo’ed Qat. 1:2), the meaning is an abstract *halakhic* repair of invalid or deficient pooled water by adding more water (see t. Šeqal. 1:1 (ed. Lieberman 1956–1988, p. 200); b. Mo’ed Qat. 5a)—not the physical repair of an installation or structure using mortar or plaster.²⁰

4.2. “*Miqweh*” as a Legal-Technical Term Adapted from Lev 11:36

As we have seen above (Section 3), the term “*miqweh*” appears on several occasions in texts predating the rabbinic literary corpus, but never in the unique way the rabbis later came to employ it. How, then, did the rabbis come to adopt the term in the distinct sense that they consistently used it?

It seems that by the late second century BCE, the Pentateuchal instructions to ritually purify using water—whether through “bathing” (ר-ח-ץ), “laundrying” (כ-ב-ט), “putting into” (א-ב), “rinsing” (ש-ט-ר), or “passing through” (ע-ב-ר) water—had all come to be understood as prescribing that the impure person or object was to be *fully immersed* into the water (see Adler 2018). Presumably, however, this interpretation would have raised a problem: if someone or something impure is immersed into a body of water, does *the water itself* become impure, and if so, how can the impure water possibly retain the power to *purify that which is immersed into it*? The answer was probably sought in Lev 11:36: “But a spring or a cistern of gathered water (וּבֹר מִקְוֵה מַיִם) shall remain pure.” A spring and a cistern would probably have been generalized to all bodies of water, whether flowing or gathered, which are always immune to ritual impurity and therefore preserve the power to purify what is immersed into them. It seems likely that because this verse refers to “gathered water” as “*miqwēh-mayim*,” the rabbis adopted the term “*miqweh*” whenever discussing pooled water within the context of ritual purification.²¹ The term, which originally had a concrete meaning, was now transformed into a legal-technical term reserved for *halakhic* discussions about ritual purificatory immersion.

A somewhat analogous development appears to have occurred with the term “*’ohel*” (אֹהֶל). While the word literally means “tent,” in rabbinic literature it becomes a legal-technical term describing any space beneath an object that overhangs a human corpse or grave, within which space the ritual impurity of the dead body spreads. How this came about is quite clear; Num 19:14–15 reads:

הַתּוֹרָה אָמְרָה כִּי יָמוּת אָדָם בְּ אֹהֶל, כָּל הַבָּא אֵלָּהּ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר בְּ אֹהֶל. יִטְמָא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְכָל כְּלֵי כֶּתֶם זֶה אֲשֶׁר אֵין צִמִּיד פְּתִיל עָלָיו טָמֵא הוּא.

This is the instruction: if a man shall die in a tent, all that enters the tent, and all that is in the tent, will be impure for seven days. And any open vessel without a cover fastened upon it is impure.

The rabbis expanded the concept of a “tent” in the passage to include any overhang, provided that it fulfils certain criteria, and then adopted the word “*’ohel*” from the verse to refer to just such an overhung space. While the term sometimes retained its concrete meaning as a “tent,” as with “*miqweh*” it is most commonly used as an abstract legal-technical term reserved for *halakhic* discussions about ritual purity.²² And just as with “*miqweh*,” where an entire tractate was devoted to clarifying the precise definitions of the term vis-à-vis the laws of ritual purification (Tractate *Miqwa’ot*), so too with “*’ohel*,” an entire tractate was devoted to clarifying the precise definitions of the term vis-à-vis the laws of corpse impurity (Tractate *’Ohalot*).

4.3. What Was the Term for the Space Where Immersion Took Place?

Above (Section 4.1), we saw that the term “*miqveh*” in early rabbinic texts always refers to the pooled water itself and never to the basin or installation where the water is held or the space that houses such a facility. This raises the question: what terms were used by the rabbis to refer to the physical space where a “*miqveh*” gathers and purificatory immersion takes place?

A survey of the rabbinic corpus suggests that the most common term used is “*mā’ārā*” (מַעְרָה), meaning “cave” (Table 2).²³ A “*miqveh*”—the gathering of water itself—is said to fill “the holes of the *mā’ārā*” (חוררי המערה), “the fissures of the *mā’ārā*” (סידקי המערה), and “the hollow of the *mā’ārā*” (עוקת המערה). Leading down to the “*miqveh*” are “the steps of the *mā’ārā*” (מעלות המערה).²⁴ Archaeology has provided the probable explanation for why this curious term was used; at many sites where Roman-era stepped pools have been found, the entire installation—including the walls and ceiling—is carved out of the bedrock, creating an immersion chamber in the form of an artificial cave (see Reich 2013, pp. 52–53). An excellent example is Ḥorbat Susya (in the southern Hebron Hills), where most of the twenty-nine immersion pools uncovered were installed in the walls of stepped corridors that led to subterranean systems beneath the site’s houses and courtyards (Figure 1) (see Baruch and Reich 2023). Possibly, the term “*mā’ārā*” was applied also to ritual bath spaces where the steps and the walls of the immersion basin were hewn into the rock, but above the pool were constructed masonry walls and a ceiling—since these rooms were likely windowless (to keep out light, which would encourage the growth of algae, and external pollutants) and hence probably gave a cavernous feeling.

Table 2. References to “*mā’ārā*” in early rabbinic halakhic literature.

Source	Chronological Information	Notes
m. Šabb. 22:5	Anonymous.	Ruling about bathing ר-ה-ק (on the Sabbath in “the waters of a <i>mā’ārā</i> ” or in the hot springs of Tiberias; unclear if for purificatory reasons.
m. Yeb. 16:4	In citation attributed to R. Yose (late 2nd century CE).	Report about two men who immersed (and apparently drowned) in a “ <i>mā’ārā</i> ”.
m. Naz. 9:2	Anonymous.	Rulings about a Nazirite who immersed in a “ <i>mā’ārā</i> ,” distinction is made if immersion was to purify or to cool off.
m. Ṭehar. 10:3	In citation attributed to R. Meir (late 2nd century CE). R. Yose and R. Simeon (same time) disagree.	Debate about agricultural workers who entered a “ <i>mā’ārā</i> ” for purificatory immersion.
m. Miqw. 4:4	Anonymous.	Rulings about water running down “the steps of a <i>mā’ārā</i> ” into a “ <i>miqveh</i> ”.
m. Miqw. 6:1	Anonymous; commented upon by R. Judah (late 2nd century CE).	Rulings about immersing in a “ <i>miqveh</i> ” which fills “the holes of the <i>mā’ārā</i> ” (חוררי המערה), “the fissures of the <i>mā’ārā</i> ” (סידקי המערה), and “the hollow of the <i>mā’ārā</i> ” (עוקת המערה).
m. Miqw. 7:7	Anonymous.	Ruling about making a wave to immerse a needle lying on “the steps of a <i>mā’ārā</i> ” which lead down into water.
m. Makš. 4:5	Anonymous; commented upon by R. Eliezer (late 1st and early 2nd century CE).	Ruling about water dripping from vessels immersed (and clothing laundered) in a “ <i>mā’ārā</i> ”. Purificatory immersion is implied.

Table 2. Cont.

Source	Chronological Information	Notes
t. Šabb. 16:15 (ed. Lieberman 1956–1988, p. 78)	Anonymous.	Same as m. Šabb. .22:5
t. Menah. 1:9 (ed. Zuckerman 1880, p. 513)	Anonymous.	Rule regarding a priest who immersed to purify in “waters of a <i>mə‘ārā</i> ” instead of sanctifying his hands with a Temple vessel.
t. Miqw. 6:2 (according to some versions; see Lieberman 1939, p. 29)	In citation attributed to R. Simeon b. Gamaliel (late 2nd century CE).	Story about priests immersing in a certain “ <i>mə‘ārā</i> ”.
y. Šabb. 3:3 (6a)	Anonymous.	Ruling about bathing)ן-ן-ן(on the Sabbath in “the waters of a <i>mə‘ārā</i> ” and in the hot springs of Tiberias; unclear if for purificatory reasons.
b. Šabb. 14a	In citation attributed to R. Bebai (4th century CE) in the name of R. Asi (3rd century CE).	Explanation about how people in the past would rinse off after immersing for purification in foul “waters of <i>mə‘ārōt</i> ”.
b. Šabb. 147a–b	Anonymous.	Discussion on m. Šabb. 22:5.
b. Zebah. 20b	Anonymous.	Citation of t. Menah. 1:9 (ed. Zuckerman 1880, p. 513).
Tractate Tefillin 1:19 (ed. Higger 1930, p. 48)	Anonymous.	Story about R. Eliezer (late 1st and early 2nd century CE) immersing in a “ <i>mə‘ārā</i> ”.



Figure 1. Ritual immersion pool in an artificially hewn cave at Horbat Susya (photo: Y. Adler; drawing: Y. Adler after Baruch and Reich (2023), p. 66, Figure 5).

Another term occasionally mentioned in connection with ritual immersion is “*bēt haṭṭābīlā*” (בֵּית הַטְּבִילָה), literally “house of immersion” but more idiomatically “place of immersion” (Table 3). While it is possible that the term refers to the stepped immersion basin where the water is held, it seems more likely that it denotes the space or structure *containing* the facility that holds the water.²⁵ The latter understanding seems implicit where “*bēt haṭṭābīlā*” appears in a list together with “the latrine, the tannery, and the bathhouse (בֵּית הַמְרַחֵץ וּבֵית הַבּוֹרְסָקִי וּבֵית הַמְרַחֵץ)” as spaces or structures that are exempt from the obligation of a mezuzah because of their foul air.

Table 3. References to “*bêt haṭṭabîlā*” in early rabbinic halakhic literature.

Source	Chronological Information	Notes
m. Šeqal. 8:2	In citation attributed to R. Meir (late 2nd century CE). R. Yose (same time) disagrees.	Discusses “ <i>bêt haṭṭabîlā</i> ” in Jerusalem.
m. Yoma 3:2	Anonymous; in report about the Temple set in the past.	High priest immersing on Yom Kippur in a “ <i>bêt haṭṭabîlā</i> ” in the Temple.
m. Tamid 1:1	Anonymous; in report about the Temple set in the past.	Priests immersing in a (subterranean?) “ <i>bêt haṭṭabîlā</i> ” in the Temple.
m. Mid. 1:6	Anonymous; in report about the Temple set in the past.	(Subterranean?) “ <i>bêt haṭṭabîlā</i> ” in the Temple.
m. Mid. 1:9	Anonymous; in report about the Temple set in the past.	Priests immersing in a (subterranean?) “ <i>bêt haṭṭabîlā</i> ” in the Temple (as in m. Tamid 1:1).
m. Mid. 5:3	Anonymous; in report about the Temple set in the past.	“ <i>Bêt haṭṭabîlā</i> ” for the high priest on Yom Kippur on a roof in the Temple.
m. Parah 3:7	Anonymous; in report about the red heifer rite set in the past.	“ <i>Bêt haṭṭabîlā</i> ” on Mt. of Olives for the priest who burned the red heifer.
t. B. Bat. 2:16 (ed. Zuckerman 1880, p. 401)	Anonymous.	Property rights relating to turning one’s well into a “public <i>bêt ṭabîlā</i> ”.
t. Parah 3:9 (ed. Zuckerman 1880, p. 632)	Anonymous; in report about the red heifer rite set in the past.	“ <i>Bêt haṭṭabîlā</i> ” on Mt. of Olives for the priest who burned the red heifer.
Midrash Tannaïm on Deuteronomy 6:9 (ed. Hoffmann 1908, p. 29)	Anonymous.	In list with a “latrine, tannery, and bathhouse” as exempt from mezuzah.
y. Yoma 3:8 (41a)	In citation attributed to R. Simeon b. Karsana in the name of R. Aḥa (both 4th century CE).	The First Temple’s “Sea of Solomon” as a “ <i>bêt haṭṭabîlā</i> ” for priests.
y. Pesah. 7:12 (35b)	Anonymous.	Citation of m. Tamid 1:1.
y. Šeqal. 8:2 (51a)	Anonymous.	Discussion on m. Šeqal. 8:2.
b. Yoma 11a–b	Anonymous.	Baraita; in list with a “latrine, tannery, and bathhouse” as exempt from mezuzah.
b. Yoma 29a	Anonymous.	Discussion on m. Yoma 3:2.
b. Pesah. 19b	Anonymous.	Citation of m. Šeqal. 8:2.
b. Menah. 100a	Anonymous.	Citation of m. Yoma 3:2.
Tractate Gerim 1:1 (ed. Higger 1930, p. 68)	Anonymous.	Immersion of a proselyte in a “ <i>bêt haṭṭabîlā</i> ”.

The terms “*mə‘ārā*” and “*bêt haṭṭabîlā*” both appear in association with ritual immersion far less frequently in rabbinic literature than does the term “*miqweh*.” The reason for this seems to be that halakhic regulations on purificatory immersion were far more focused on the water itself—the “*miqweh*”—and far less on the space that contained the water and in which immersion took place.

5. Chronological Observations

Individual pericopes in the rabbinic literary corpora under consideration are notoriously difficult to date. The texts contain sayings attributed to sages who lived over the span of several generations along with many unattributed rulings. And even when sayings are attributed to named individuals whose dates are thought to be known, there is reason to maintain skepticism about the veracity of such attributions (see, e.g., Neusner 2006). With these well-known caveats in mind, we proceed to consider several chronological observa-

tions regarding occurrences (or the lack thereof) of the terms “*miqweh*,” “*mə‘ārā*,” and “*bēt haṭṭābîlā*” in the ancient literature.

As we have seen above (Section 3.2), the word “*miqweh*” appears nowhere in late Second Temple period literature in reference to purificatory immersion in water. Even in early rabbinic literature, the term is almost completely absent from sayings attributed to sages who were active prior to 70 CE. The lone exception is found in m. ‘Ed. 1:3 (and its parallels in t. ‘Ed. 1:3 (ed. Zuckermann 1880, pp. 454–55) and b. Šabb. 15a), where the term “*miqweh*” is found in citations attributed to Hillel and to Shemaiah and Abtalion (as also to Shammai in the Tosefta)—all thought to have lived in the late first century BCE and into the early first century CE.²⁶ But because this is an outlier, there may be special reason to suspect that the term “*miqweh*” here reflects late literary reworking of the attributed sayings.²⁷ While the lack of the term in late Second Temple texts and in rabbinic sources attributed to early sages is suggestive, it remains difficult to fully discount the possibility that this finding may simply reflect the poor preservation of our sources.

The term “*mə‘ārā*” as a space where ritual immersion takes place is similarly absent from late Second Temple sources and from rabbinic attributions to pre-70 CE sages (see Table 2). Again, it *may* be that the term was used at an early date and that the lack of surviving attestations from before 70 CE is simply a result of preservation bias. Certainly, though, these results do not favor Ronny Reich’s contention that the term “*mə‘ārā*” represents *the more ancient* name for ritual baths, emerging at a time when immersion was supposedly performed mostly in water that had gathered naturally in caves²⁸ (Reich 2013, pp. 25, 29).

Finally, the term “*bēt haṭṭābîlā*” too is completely absent from late Second Temple sources and from rabbinic attributions to sages active before 70 CE (see Table 3). The term is found mostly in unattributed sayings, although it is attributed once to rabbis from the late second century CE and once to rabbis from the fourth century. Noting that “*bēt haṭṭābîlā*” appears disproportionately in association with the Temple and its environs, Reich has suggested that perhaps the term originated before 70 CE—maybe shortly before the term “*miqweh*” came into use (Reich 2013, pp. 26–27). This suggestion, however, relies on the largely outdated notion that the sections of the Mishnah which contain narrative-like descriptions of the Temple are among the oldest texts in the Mishnaic corpus. Today, scholars tend to view this material as a distinct literary genre which is not necessarily earlier in its formation than the apodictic and casuistic texts found elsewhere in the Mishnah (see, e.g., Rosen-Zvi 2008, pp. 242–49; Cohn 2013, pp. 1–15).

Lacking hard chronological data, the most we can do is offer the following speculative diachronic suggestions. The lone terms surviving from antiquity for spaces where Jewish ritual immersion took place are the two terms found in rabbinic literature: “*mə‘ārā*” and “*bēt haṭṭābîlā*.” There is little reason to think that either term was invented by the rabbis; to the contrary, it seems likely that the rabbis simply made use of the terms that were commonplace among ordinary Jews living in their own day. Exactly when either term was first coined is hard to say, although—since it is hard to imagine that the stepped pools we know from archaeology remained nameless for an extended period—it seems probable that a term for them was created soon after they were invented around the turn of the first century BCE. A reasonable guess is that the initial term was the functional one, which described what the space was used for: “place of immersion,” i.e., “*bēt haṭṭābîlā*.” The synagogue provides a useful parallel; already by the first century CE, the space dedicated to communal gatherings had commonly taken on the functional name “(place of) assembly”: “*sunagōgē*” (συναγωγή) in Greek, which is probably a direct rendering of “*kānīštā*” (כנישתא) in Aramaic and “*bēt hakkāneset*” (בית הכנסת) in Hebrew. The presumably more colloquial term “*mə‘ārā*”—which probably reflects the phenomenological, sensory experience of those performing ritual immersion in the space—may have developed only later. Re-

ardless of which term emerged first, by the time the rabbis came to refer to the ritual immersion pools in the now-destroyed Temple, they consistently chose the more formal term “*bêt haṭṭābîlā*” over the more informal term “*mā’ārā*”—perhaps out of deference to the sacred realm of the Temple and its revered cultus. Finally, the abstract legal-technical term “*miqweh*” seems likely to have been adopted by the rabbis only later than the terms commonly used for the physical spaces where immersion was practiced.

6. Summary and Conclusions

This study has reexamined the meaning of the term “*miqweh*” in early rabbinic literature, with particular attention to its semantic development from earlier biblical and late Second Temple period usages. The evidence demonstrates a clear trajectory: whereas in pre-rabbinic literature the term denoted a general “gathering of water” or “reservoir” and was never used in association with purificatory bathing, it acquired in early rabbinic discourse a highly specific and restricted meaning as a legal-technical term referring specifically to pooled water within the framework of ritual purification.

This redefinition was likely catalyzed by rabbinic interpretation of the phrase “cistern of gathered water” (בֹּר מְקוּה־מַיִם) in Leviticus 11:36. From this biblical expression, the rabbis abstracted the term “*miqweh*” and repurposed it as a technical designation for pooled water within the context of purificatory immersion. In doing so, they transformed a noun describing a concrete *thing* into a legal-technical *concept* reserved for halakhic discourse. This process parallels similar developments in rabbinic terminology, where words used for ordinary, concrete entities were reconfigured into abstract legal categories.

Equally significant is the finding that “*miqweh*” never refers to the basin, installation, or structure that contains the water. Terms such as “*mā’ārā*” (“cave”) and “*bêt haṭṭābîlā*” (“house/place of immersion”) are used instead when the rabbis refer to physical spaces that contained the water in which immersion took place. The fact that these terms are far rarer in the rabbinic corpus than the term “*miqweh*” underscores the rabbis’ primary concern with the halakhic status of the water itself rather than with architectural features or facilities.

Tentatively, we have suggested that in speaking of the space where immersion took place, the functional term “*bêt haṭṭābîlā*” came first, followed by the phenomenological and more colloquial term “*mā’ārā*.” The conceptual legal-technical term “*miqweh*” was probably adopted at a later date, only when the burgeoning system of rabbinic laws surrounding purificatory immersion made it necessary to coin such a term.

In light of these findings, I offer the following practical conclusions:

1. The common modern identification of archaeological stepped pools as “*miqwā’ōt*” is mistaken and should be abandoned. More accurate terms for these installations, which capture their likely function, are the following: “Jewish ritual immersion pool,” “ritual immersion pool,” or simply “immersion pool.” Another advantage of these terms is that they allude to what may have been the earliest name for the space where the immersion basins were located: “*bêt haṭṭābîlā*” = “place of immersion.”
2. The common modern translations of “*miqweh*” as “immersion pool,” “ritual bath,” “ritual pool,” and the like are all misleading when applied to early rabbinic sources and should also be abandoned. Instead, renderings such as “gathered water,” “pooled water,” or simply “pool” better capture the original rabbinic meaning and avoid anachronism.
3. The “*miqweh*” of rabbinic literature is not multivalent and should not be used as such. It should be understood as a legal-technical term within the narrow context of the laws of ritual purification through immersion in water. To use Miller’s phrase—but contra his conclusions—the rabbinic “*miqweh*” was quite monolithic.

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Notes

- ¹ The present study represents a substantial reconsideration of, and expansion upon, a brief preliminary essay published previously in Hebrew, in a Festschrift honoring Professor Ronny Reich: Adler (2025).
- ² Danby consistently capitalized “Immersion-pool,” but sometimes he rendered the term simply as “pool” (although this usually seems to be simply an abbreviation of his regular “Immersion-pool”).
- ³ This was the path taken by Jacob Neusner in his translation of the Mishnah and Tosefta (Neusner 1976, pp. 9–65), where he mostly used “immersion-pool,” but also abbreviated this as “pool,” and sometimes rendered the term as “ritual pool” or “gatherings [of water].” Why he chose to switch between renderings, however, is not always apparent.
- ⁴ For a full list of Reich’s work on this topic, see titles collected in Baruch et al. (2025).
- ⁵ Interwoven throughout Miller’s semantic argument about the multiple meanings of “*miqveh*” is an entirely separate contention that the stepped pools known from archaeology had multiple uses, and that they were used both for ritual immersions and for various profane, non-ritual uses.
- ⁶ See, however, the LXX, which translates the verse: “But springs of water, and a cistern, and gathered water (καὶ συνάγαγῆς ὕδατος) shall be pure.” It seems that the Hebrew Vorlage behind this rendering had an added *waw* before מקוה-מים and read: ובור ומקוה-מים.
- ⁷ My thanks to Moshe Kahan and Harald Samuel for their assistance in clarifying the grammatical analysis discussed here.
- ⁸ The Hebrew Sir 10:13 (preserved in Ms A IVr [Jewish Theological Seminary, ENA 2536]) reads: כי מקוה זון חטא. The Greek (ὅτι ἀρχὴ ὑπερηφάνιας ἀμαρτία) and Syriac (ܟܝ ܡܩܘܗ ܙܘܢ ܚܬܐ) either interpreted the word מקוה here to mean “source” (Rey and Reymond 2024, p. 32), or else had מקור (and not מקוה) in their Hebrew Vorlage. The Hebrew Sir 43:20 (preserved in Ms B XIIIr [Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS.Heb.e.62]) reads: וכשרן ילבש מקוה, with the Greek (καὶ ὡς θάρακκα ἐνδύσεται τὸ ὕδωρ) translating מקוה simply as “water” (although the full verse also contains συνάγαγῆν ὕδατος, which is more directly relevant to “gathering/collection of” water). Earlier in the verse, Ms B reads וכרקב יקפא מקורו, with a marginal correction reading: מקוה. But see the Masada manuscript (Mas VI:14), which reads here: מקור.
- ⁹ The Hebrew (preserved in Ms B XVIIIr [Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS.Heb.e.62]) reads: ויחסום הרים מקוה. The Greek reads: καὶ ὑποκόμῃσεν κρήνας εἰς ὕδατα.
- ¹⁰ The Hebrew (preserved in Ms B XIXr [Cambridge University Library, T-S 16.314]) reads: אשר בדורו נכרה מקוה. The Greek (ἐν ἡμέραις αὐτοῦ ἐλατομήθη ἀποδοχεῖον ὕδατων) understands מקוה to mean a reservoir of collected water, while the Syriac (ܡܩܘܗ ܕܡܝܐ) either understands מקוה to mean a flowing spring, or else had an alternate Hebrew Vorlage—perhaps מקור.
- ¹¹ See also: 4Q427; 4Q393 3, 9; 4Q286 1 ii, 5; 1QHa xx, 25, 29; 1QS 9, 1.
- ¹² See: 1QS V 13–14; 4Q251 12, 7; 4Q274 1i 3–9; 2i 1–2, 4–9; 4Q277 1ii 7–10, 13; 4Q284 2i 4; 4Q414 2ii 2–5; 13 5–7; 4Q512 15i–16, 3; 19, 1; 1–6, 5; 42–44ii 5; 56–58, 1; 74, 3; 4Q514 1i 3–9; 11Q19 XLV, 8–9, 15–16; XLIX, 17–18, 20; L, 8, 14–16; LI, 3, 5; CD X, 10–12 (preserved fragmentarily in 4Q266 8iii 9–10; 4Q270 6iv 20–21).
- ¹³ See, e.g., Sir 34:30; Jdt 12:7–9; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.263; Mark 7:3–4; Luke 11:38.
- ¹⁴ See Josephus, *Ant.* 18:116–119; Matt 3:1–17; 21:23–27; Mark 1:4–11; 11:27–33; Luke 3:1–22; 20:1–8; John 1:24–34; 3:22–23; 4:1–2; 10:40; Acts 1:5, 22; 10:37; 11:16; 13:24; 18:25; 19:3–4.
- ¹⁵ In LXX Isa 22:11, the word “*miqwa*” was translated simply as “water” (ὕδωρ).
- ¹⁶ These data represent the results of a search in the Bar-Ilan Responsa Project search engine (<https://www.responsa.co.il/default.aspx>, accessed on 27 March 2026), and employing the following search parameters: “מקוה”; “מקוואות”; “מקוואות”; “מקוה” (all with prefixes and suffixes). Resources searched included all early rabbinic literature in the database, excluding explicitly Aggadic resources (Midrashei Aggada and ‘Ein Ya’akov). To prevent duplication, the Romm (Vilna) edition was also excluded for the search in the Tosefta and the Jerusalem Talmud. Citations to the Mishnah reflect division of mishnayot according to standard print editions. Citations to the Tosefta are to the Zuckerman edition (Zuckerman 1880), with the exception of citations to the Orders Zera’im, Mo’ed, and Našim, and to Tractates Baba Qamma, Baba Meši’a, and Baba Batra—which cite to the Lieberman edition (Lieberman 1956–1988). Citations to Sifra are to the Weiss edition (Weiss 1862). Citations to Sifre Numbers and Sifre Zuta

- are to the Horovitz edition (Horovitz 1917). Citations to the Jerusalem Talmud refer to the Venice edition (Bomberg 1521–1522). Citations to the Babylonian Talmud refer to the standard Vilna edition (Romm et al. 1881–1898).
- 17 In one case, with two roughly parallel sources, the term “*miqweh*” is used in a way that purificatory immersion is not immediately the obvious context: “[...] they fix the roads, the public squares, and the pools of water (מקוות המים)” (m. Šeqal. 1:1 and m. Mo‘ed Qat. 1:2). There is good reason, however, to think that the intention is pooled water within the context of purification, since immediately after this we find the ruling: “[...] and they fulfil all the needs of the public, and they mark the graves,” i.e., to prevent inadvertent ritual defilement. Indeed, in a parallel Tosefta (t. Šeqal. 1:1 (ed. Lieberman 1956–1988, p. 200)) and a parallel baraita cited in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Mo‘ed Qat. 5a), the context is explicitly about “fixing” the volume of the pooled water to render them valid for ritual purificatory immersion. See also t. B. Meš 11:17 and Sifra, Behar 1:1 (ed. Weiss 1862, p. 105a), where the context is probably the same (see also below, n. 20).
- 18 All citations to the Mishnah adopt the standard division of *mishnayot* found in printed editions, while the textual readings follow the Kaufmann Manuscript (Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest, Kaufmann collection, A50).
- 19 When the Babylonian Talmud (b. Šabb. 65a–b; b. Ned. 40b; b. Bek. 55b; b. Nid. 67a) recounts that the father of the Babylonian Amora Samuel “prepared” (עבד להו) for his daughters a “*miqweh*” during the days of Nisan, this most likely refers to channeling and collecting water into one place—not to hewing or constructing a facility to hold the water.
- 20 See above, n. 17. According to the Erfurt manuscript of the Tosefta in t. Šeqal. 1:1 (Berlin State Library, Or. fol. 1220), the act of digging is in fact associated with “*miqwa’ot*”: “On the fifteenth, the agents of the court go out and dig the pits, the ditches, the caves, the *miqwa’ot*, and the water channels.” However, the wording here is most likely mistaken, since in the Vienna manuscript (Austrian National Library, Heb. 20), the London manuscript (British Library, Add. 27296 [Cat. Margoliouth 445]), and the Bomberg edition, the act of digging is mentioned only with regard to “pits, ditches, and caves,” while the statement about “*miqwa’ot*” appears only in the following sentence, which deals with the halakhic “repair” of a “*miqweh*” (that is, a gathering of water) by supplementing it with more water. See also: t. B. Meš 11:17; Sifra, Behar 1:1 (ed. Weiss 1862, p. 105a).
- 21 For an explicit reference to Lev 11:36 as a proof-text for ritual purification through immersion in a pool of water, see Sifra, *Shemini* 9:1 (ed. Weiss 1862, p. 55c).
- 22 On the halakhic abstraction of the concept “*ōhel*” in Tannaitic literature, see Rubenstein (1997, pp. 34–40) and Noam (2010, pp. 74–94). For further discussion of the phenomenon of abstraction in Tannaitic and Amoraic literature, see Rubenstein (1997). There (pp. 33–34) he describes how it is sometimes possible to trace the development of a term from the concrete to the abstract: “Some abstract concepts simply appear in the vocabulary of a legal document without an antecedent; they comprise part of the legal science of the time, but their origin and development cannot be traced. In other cases, however, we can follow the shift from concrete to abstract and catch a glimpse of the development. In early sources certain terms refer to a real object; in later sources to abstractions.”
- 23 A far less common term mentioned as a place where a “*miqweh*” gathers is “*bōr*” (בור), meaning “cistern” or “pit” (m. Miqw. 2:7–9; 3:2–3). Since the rabbis never speak of *people* immersing in a “*bōr*,” however, it could be that a closed cistern is meant—in which case its relevance for ritual immersion might have been limited to the purification of utensils lowered into its water. For the term “*bārēkā*” or “*bārēkā*” (ברכה ובריקה), meaning a “reservoir” of some sort, see m. Miqw. 5:1; t. Miqw. 3:5 (ed. Zuckerman 1880, p. 655). For facilities associated with a bathhouse discussed in connection with ritual purification, see m. Miqw. 6:10–11; t. Miqw. 5:7–8 (ed. Zuckerman 1880, p. 657); 6:4 (ed. Zuckerman 1880, p. 658).
- 24 For reference to “the steps of the *mə’ārā*” where the cave is filled with water, but not within the context of immersion or bathing, see m. Makš. 3:1.
- 25 Miller (2007, pp. 216–17; 2015, pp. 43–44, 311, n. 18) has claimed that the “*bēt haṭṭābīlā*” refers to a private or domestic facility for ritual purification. While it is debatable whether most of the references to this term suggest private usage, one source (t. B. Bat. 2:16 (ed. Zuckerman 1880, p. 401)) explicitly speaks of a “public *bēt ṭābīlā*” (בית טבילה לרבים).
- 26 This is the case across all surviving textual witnesses to the Mishnah; see Wieder (2005, pp. 453–55).
- 27 For the literary history of the first set of pericopes in Tractate ‘Eduyyot, including the likelihood of late redactional activity, see Schmida (1969) and Wieder (2005, pp. 48–53).
- 28 One reason Reich suggested this was because the term “*miqweh*” is conspicuously absent from the expression “pit, ditch, and cave” (בור, שיה, ומערה) appearing repeatedly in Tannaitic sources—which he assumed was because the expression *predates* the term “*miqweh*.” As we have seen, however, the term “*miqweh*” is a conceptual legal-technical term that refers to *the water itself* and accordingly does not belong in the expression “pits, ditches, and caves”—which are the *spaces that hold water*. This distinction is especially evident in the Tosefta (t. Šeqal. 1:1) according to most textual witnesses (see n. 20).

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