

Regulating Consumption of Luxuries (Sumptuary Laws)



Just as Jewish communities regulated important matters by means of regulations (taqqanot, ordinances) that were legally binding, so did they behave with respect to issues relating to consumption of luxuries. In instituting these regulations, community leaders sought to confront different forms of excess, especially in the areas of wardrobe, jewelry, celebrations, festive meals, and gift giving.

The main motive behind these regulations was to lessen tension between different social classes. Some regulations were issued for external reasons, out of a concern for the opinion of the surrounding non-Jewish environment and authorities under whose reign the community functioned.

It is possible to learn quite a lot from the regulations concerning lifestyles in diverse communities, the different types of celebrations and the significance attached to each, and the various styles of men's and women's clothing and their importance. Similarly, these regulations can shed light on the manner of self-government among diaspora Jewish communities, the powers and limitations of the community leaders, the level of autonomy of Jewish communities and the restrictions thereof, and the communities' ability to issue sanctions. Examining a specific community's regulations at a particular point in time can transport the reader to the social milieu and economic conditions that prevailed in the community at that time. In addition, one can learn from these regulations about the differences in standards of living that existed between communities in various regions and about better and lesser-known customs in these places.

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