

SUMPTUARY LAWS IN JEWISH COMMUNAL REGULATIONS

Concern for the Weak and the Struggle against Ostentation

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The theme of luxury has always preoccupied Jewish sages and leaders, and they routinely preached avoidance of luxury and finery. This book studies regulations enacted in Jewish communities to limit luxury.

Just as Jewish communities regulated other important matters in their lives by means of legally binding takkanot (ordinances), so did they promulgate takkanot with respect to matters of luxury. In instituting these takkanot, community leaders sought to tackle different forms of excess, especially in the areas of wardrobe, jewelry, celebrations, festive meals, and gift giving.

The motives behind these community regulations were many and varied. Some were instituted to reduce the tension between different social classes. The rabbis of Talmud themselves legislated takkanot "to prevent embarrassment of the 'have-nots'".

From these takkanot, we can learn quite a lot about lifestyles in these diverse communities, the different types of celebrations and the significance attached to each, and the various fashions of men's and women's clothing and their importance. Similarly, the takkanot 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 thereon, and communities' abilities to enact sanctions. Examining a particular community's takkanot at a particular point in time can transport the reader into the social milieu and economic conditions that prevailed. In addition, one can learn from these takkanot about the differences in standards of living that existed among communities in various regions and about some of the lesser-known customs in these places. The language of the takkanot can also teach us about the manner of the deliberation from which they emerged.

The book consists of two parts. The first part is the introduction, in which we sought to analyze the regulations on luxuries in various aspects.

The second part is the main body of the book and includes the regulations themselves. The regulations were taken from the community books (pinkasim) and from books, articles, and pamphlets preserved in libraries. Most of the regulations are printed, but we have also brought regulations from unprinted manuscripts.

In the appendix, we present regulations of the non-Jewish authorities concerning the luxury of members of the Jewish community. However, there were also regulations of the Jewish community made in coordination with the non-Jewish authorities or according to their instructions.

In the introduction we shall begin with some remarks concerning moral statements and rebukes against luxuries. These are not binding regulations but rather advice and recommendations for standardization of lifestyles. Afterwards we will survey the most important elements of the takkanot, their structure, the reasons for issuing them, their subjects, the legislating body, their publication and enforcement, and those exempt from them.

Attached to the book are regulations from different communities around the world, in different languages, outside Hebrew: Arabic, Bukhari, French,, German, Italian, Ladin, Portuguese, Spanish, Turkish, and Yiddish.

Also, attached are an English Summery (in 30 pages), and an English and foreign languages index.