

Women Living with Disability in Medieval Bavaria: Class, Care, and Community Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Sources

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This paper examines the intersections of gender, disability, and social class in 15th-century Bavarian communities through an integrated analysis of Jewish responsa literature and Christian municipal records. Using the methodological approach of "diverse sources, shared histories," we trace the experiences of women with disabilities across religious boundaries to understand how class status shaped access to care, accommodation, and community participation.

Central to our analysis is the extraordinary case of Adel from Regensburg, documented in the responsa of Rabbi Israel Bruna (1440-1474). Adel's "cramped legs" prevented her from standing, yet her evident social standing enabled her to receive unprecedented rabbinical accommodations for crucial religious ceremonies. Rabbi Bruna's revolutionary modifications to biblical rituals—reversing positions for the halitza ceremony and creating innovative solutions for ritual immersion—reveal how class privilege could facilitate religious inclusion for women with disabilities. Significantly, Adel's final documented appearance involves a business dispute where her disability goes unmentioned, suggesting her economic agency transcended physical limitations.

Comparative analysis with Christian municipal sources reveals parallel patterns of class-based accommodation. City records document women like Anna, whose housing arrangements in Albrecht Weigel's house while her husband resided in St. Lazarus hospital suggest networks of care that crossed household boundaries. Tax lists identifying "the blind Hans and his wife" demonstrate integration into municipal financial structures, while the case of "Stoltz's wife" dying from illness shows how economic status affected access to medical care and burial provisions.

Our research reveals that medieval concepts of disability were contextual and negotiated, particularly for women whose experiences were shaped by marital status, economic position, and family networks. The sources demonstrate sophisticated care arrangements involving families, religious communities, and municipal authorities, with accommodations ranging from architectural modifications to legal precedents. Women with disabilities navigated complex social hierarchies where class status could either facilitate extraordinary accommodations or limit access to basic care.

This interdisciplinary approach, which combines Hebrew responsa with German municipal records, sheds light on previously hidden histories of medieval women with disabilities. Rather than finding uniform exclusion or inclusion, we discover a spectrum of responses that reveals how medieval communities balanced religious obligations, legal requirements, and practical necessities. The evidence challenges binary narratives about medieval attitudes toward disability while demonstrating how gender and class intersected to create diverse experiences of accommodation, care, and community participation across religious boundaries in late medieval Bavaria.