The practice of hydrotherapy is a longstanding historical tradition, with recordings of the therapeutic use of water in Egyptian, Greek, and Roman societies. While the medical merits of the therapeutic use of water have long been debated, its popularity has remained constant, and thousands of people all over the world flock to various hot springs to benefit from their unique properties [1]. These hot springs, formed by water that rises from rock deep in the earth, are heated by geothermal heat. Each spring has its own combination of minerals and surrounding rock formations, such that different springs offer particular medical benefits. In Israel there are a number of well-known therapeutic springs, which are often referred to in rabbinic literature as mei teveryah. While this term literally translates as the “hot springs in Tiberias,” it is used as a general term for all hot springs. Rabbinic writings from the Talmudic period and their contemporary non-Jewish sources indicate that it was common practice for people to bathe in and drink from the waters of these therapeutic springs and baths. These spring waters were widely believed to cure general weaknesses of the body, treat internal problems, and heal various skin disorders. In response to the wide-spread use of therapeutic springs, the Jewish sages discussed both the medical and halakhic issues concerning mei teveryah.

Recent scientific studies on the effects of drinking mineral water from hot springs have confirmed their effective medical properties, many of which were discussed in rabbinic literature. In Tractate Shabbat (110a), the Rabbis explained that such water was called mei deqarim or mei deqalim. While explaining the origin of these names, the Talmud related that, “Those who say ‘mei deqarim’ refer to the piercing of the gall bladder; those who say ‘mei deqalim’ refer to the water which goes out from between two date palms. What is ‘mei deqalim’? Rabba bar Barona said: There are two kinds of palms in the west [of Israel] and a spring of water goes out from between them. The first cup loosens; the second induces diarrhea; and the third passes out just as it enters.” The rabbis recognized that these mineral waters had the ability to treat internal problems and help prevent constipation. Later on in the same Tractate (147b), the rabbis related that these waters were effective only between the holidays of Passover and Shavuot. It is possible that the springs only produced water with a high concentration of minerals during this time interval.

Various discussions centered on the halakhic aspects of using these mineral waters as a strong purgative substance. In a discussion of the therapeutic activities that were prohibited on Shabbat, the Mishna (Shabbat 14:3) related that, “Any food that a person eats for therapeutic purposes and any drink aside from mei deqalim and a cup of roots [are prohibited on Shabbat] because they cure jaundice. But it is permitted to drink mei deqalim for thirst…” Since the Mishna viewed mineral waters as therapeutic, it was prohibited to drink them on Shabbat. However, a person was allowed to drink mineral water on Shabbat to satisfy her thirst. Unlike the Mishna, which prohibited drinking mineral water on Shabbat, the ‘Tosefta stated that on Shabbat “one may drink ichor, mei deqalim, or a cup of roots.” It is possible that the ‘Tosefta is referring to someone who drank spring water to reduce her thirst.

In addition to drinking from hot springs, people throughout the centuries have also bathed in hot springs, hoping to benefit from their therapeutic effects. The Tosefta on Tractate Shabbat (12:13) related that, “it is permitted to bathe in mei teveryah and in the Great Sea, but not in steeping pools and not in the Sea of Sodom [i.e. the Dead Sea]. When? When the purpose is therapeutic. If the purpose is ritual purity, bathing is permitted.” The Tosefta permitted bathing in therapeutic water on Shabbat only when it was common for healthy people to bathe there as well, so that bathing in such areas did not make it appear that the bathers were engaging in therapy. However, bathing in steeping pools or in the Dead Sea was totally prohibited, as the only purpose of bathing in those waters was for their therapeutic benefits. Rabbi Yaakov Sofer, a 20th century Jerusalem rabbi, wrote in his work Kaf ha-Hayyim that the prohibition of bathing in hot springs on Shabbat was meant for healthy people who suffer from slight maladies. He maintained that those who are seriously ill (even if their illness was not life-threatening) were permitted to bathe in therapeutic springs on Shabbat.

The common practice of drinking mei teveryah also gave rise to the issue of whether drinking these waters required a blessing, and if so, what blessing should be recited. The Mishna in Brachot (6:8) teaches that, “The blessing on drinking water when thirsty is she’hakol nihye bi’dvaro. Rabbi Yona said: Aside from mei deqarim. Rabbi Yosi said: Any water drunk for thirst. Rabbi Abbun said: Drinking mei deqarin requires the blessing barukh she’bara mei refu’ot.” Rabbi Yona believed that when the ingestion of spring water was intended for therapeutic purposes, one did not recite the blessing usually recited on drinking water. In opposition to Rabbi Yona, Rabbi Yosi believed that even when the ingestion of spring water was intended to satisfy a person’s thirst, the blessing of she’hakol nihye bi’dvaro was not recited. Rabbi Abbun commented that the end of the blessing over mineral waters required a special formula of barukh she’bara mei refu’ot. Rabbi Abbun seemingly felt that the blessing on mineral waters should reflect their health properties created by God. Interestingly, the question of reciting a blessing upon drinking spring water was not mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, nor is it spoken about by the Rambam or Rabbi Yosef Karo.

Records of rabbinic responsa show that later rabbis dealt with the question of reciting a blessing on mei teveryah. In 1847, Rabbi Yaacov Etlinger was asked if a blessing was required upon drinking spring water for therapeutic purposes. In response, Rabbi Etlinger

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43
wrote that, “we must make the following distinction [regarding different categories of therapeutic water]: drinking bitter water or tasteless well water for therapeutic purposes required no blessing. But drinking good-tasting water required a blessing even if drunk for therapeutic purposes. This is similar to any other good-tasting beverage that requires a blessing even if drunk for therapeutic purposes.” Rabbi Etlinger ruled that a blessing was only required when a person enjoyed the taste of the drink, such that therapeutic purposes did not impact the requirement for a blessing, as the blessing was recited over taste [2].

The therapeutic use of water continues to be popular today. People travel to hot springs and baths all over the world for relaxation purposes and as treatments for serious health conditions. The effectiveness of medical treatments available from these waters can be seen in people with rheumatic diseases, lung ailments, and skin disorders, who regularly visit these springs as part of their healthcare regimens [3]. The medical benefits available in health springs have brought about various halakhic issues which are discussed in rabbinic literature. In regard to the prohibition of healing on Shabbat, the rabbinic consensus was to prohibit sources of water used only for therapeutic purposes. They additionally discussed whether a blessing over drinking the mei teveryah should be recited. It should be noted that this article does not discuss all the issues which may arise from the use of mineral water for therapeutic purposes, such as carrying towels to a bath on Shabbat, swimming on Shabbat, and mixed bathing [2].

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References: