

PREFACE

MY FASCINATION WITH communal bathing and its bodily pleasures, not to say transgressions, goes back to my childhood years as an orthodox Jewish kid. Growing up in the ultra-religious town of Bnei Brak, Israel, our teachers instilled fear of sin in us, but they could not eliminate the basic human impulses of lust and desire. The inner conflicts that ensued provoked sorrow and confusion, in particular when encountering physical exposure at the beaches on hot, summer days, or when brushing against another naked body in the dim, narrow confines of the Jewish ritual immersion installation, the *miqveh*. The pounding of the heart, the sexual arousal, and the shame of contravention all converged with water in my personal world. Years later, having thrown off the strictures of Jewish law, I turned those memories into a scholarly pursuit to understand the mechanisms at work when one sheds clothes and submerges in water.

This book has been long time in the making. I first chose the Roman bathhouse as a topic for my master's final project, which I submitted to the Institute of Archaeology and the Department of Jewish History at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. My background was in Rabbinics, the texts of my childhood that became my passion and vocation. But early on in my academic education, as my teachers made it clear that a single crown would not suffice, I embarked on a lifelong path of preparation in classical languages, studies of the Graeco-Roman world, its texts and cultures, as well as thorough training in archaeology. All these disciplines and fields of study come into play in the current book. After the master's final project on the public bathhouses of Roman Jerusalem, I left the topic to pursue others, only to return to it many years later in the research endeavor that resulted in the current book. Over time many things happened in my life: I rose and fell, achieved and failed, prospered and floundered, but my fascination and love for the topic of Roman baths remained constant and fresh. Engaging it always brought a sense of the calm and accomplishment that I missed so much as a young man.

An academic project is never carried out solo. Numerous institutions and people assisted me over the years. Chief among those is the University of Michigan, which has been my academic home for the past twenty years. Its various units, grants, and endowments offered generous financial support that made this project possible. My students in Ann Arbor provided

regular intellectual stimulation and challenge that fueled my work, and some of them also joined me as research assistants, graduate and post-graduate students, and later young colleagues, who read about, commented on, and argued about the various subjects discussed in this book. They are too many to enumerate here but I owe them and the university a huge debt that can never be repaid in full. My gratitude also goes to the many other institutions and individuals who invited me to speak about the Jews and the baths over the years, in conferences, lectures, seminars, and private correspondence. I learned from many of these encounters, as they gave me ideas and insights that I have incorporated in my work. I hope I have remembered to give full credit in the appropriate places to specific ideas that I borrowed from others. I was also blessed with two superb editors, David Lobenstine and Dr. Jeffrey Green, whose wisdom and skill are evident on every page of this book.

Last but not least, none of this would have been possible or worthwhile without the cozy comforts and support of my family: my parents, my late father Yaacov and my mother Esther; my father-in-law, Dov Kahanah; my sister and brother and their families; and my own two children, Avishag and Evyatar. They all enjoyed life with me, listened with admirable patience to my overly long disquisitions on matters ancient, and brought that sweetness to life that makes it all so joyful. But most of my debt of gratitude goes to my wife, Milka, who has stood by me like a lioness for the past thirty years, even when I didn't deserve it. She has picked me up when I've fallen, set me straight when I've gone astray, and been my best friend and most precious advisor. Not knowing how to repay her, I dedicate this book to her with love and admiration.