



## **Two Stories about Rabbi Akiva and His Student and Their Sexual Experiences: on Bad Odors as a Sign of Sexual Promiscuity**

Duas histórias sobre Rabi Akiva e seu aluno e as experiências sexuais dele: sobre maus odores como sinal de promiscuidade sexual

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**Abstract:** In the moral standards of the Jewish sages, sexual promiscuity is indicated by a foul repugnant smell, while sexual purity is manifested in a good smell. Stories about Rabbi Akiva and his student who had sexual experiences associated with various scents enhance the relationship between nature, culture and religion. They represent the outlook whereby the definition of a smell as good or bad does not follow natural standards rather has religious undertones and depends on one's moral powers.

**Keywords:** Rabbi Akiva. Body Odors. Sexual Morals.

**Resumo:** Nos padrões morais dos sábios judeus, a promiscuidade sexual é indicada por um mau cheiro repugnante, enquanto a pureza sexual se manifesta em um cheiro agradável. Histórias sobre Rabi Akiva e seu aluno que tiveram experiências sexuais associadas a vários aromas aumentam a relação entre natureza, cultura e religião. Elas representam a perspectiva segundo a qual a definição de um cheiro como bom ou ruim não segue padrões naturais, mas tem conotações religiosas e depende dos poderes morais de alguém.

**Palavras-chave:** Rabino Akiva. Odores corporais. Moral sexual.

## **Two Stories about Rabbi Akiva and his Student and their Sexual Experiences: on Bad Odors as a Sign of Sexual Promiscuity**

Perceiving the odor emitted by one's body, as an expression of moral identity is a cross-cultural sociological and literary.<sup>1</sup> In the Jewish tradition smell is a sociological-religious indicator that distinguishes between the good and the corrupt. The term "foul smell" is mentioned in association with negative people, mainly with regard to sexual promiscuity. In contrast, a good fragrance is emblematic of people with stringent sexual morals.

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<sup>1</sup> See LARGEY; WATSON, 1972, p. 1021-1034; IDELMAN SMITH; HADDAD, 1981, p. 173; CLASSEN, 1992, p. 133-166; EVANS, 2002, p. 193-211.



Sexual permissiveness and promiscuity normally involve, among other things, the use of fragrant perfumes to incite passion. In the moral standards of the sages, the opposite is true – sexual promiscuity is indicated by a foul repugnant smell, while sexual purity is manifested in a good smell. One *midrash aggadah* praises the sexual purity of Jewish men who maintain the laws of modesty, and it likens them to the mandrake that gives off a pleasant aroma: "The Scriptural text: 'The mandrakes give forth fragrance' (Song of Songs 7:14) – is an allusion to the young men of Israel who never felt the taste of sin; 'and at our doors are all manner of precious fruits' – is an allusion to the daughters of Israel who tell their husbands about their doors [= who have sexual intercourse only with their husbands]" (B. Eruvin 21b).

It may be assumed that the men's modesty and strict sexual morals are associated specifically with the aroma of the mandrake (*Mandragora autumnalis*) as a result of the plant's association with sexuality and fertility, as due to its pleasant fragrance it was used as an aphrodisiac and for fertility purposes.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1: Mandrake (*Mandragora autumnalis*). In the middle the smelly yellow fruits.

From: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/225743000052895202/?lp=true>

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<sup>2</sup> On the mandrake as an aphrodisiac and for fertility purposes see: PALEVITCH and YANIV, 1991), I, p. 100-103. On the mandrake in ancient Jewish sources see: LÖW, 1934, III, p. 365-366; ROSNER, 1980, p. CCLXXVII–CCLXXXIV.



Figure 2: uprooting Mandrake by a dog From: *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, Lombardy, 14th century (Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome).

The attitude to sexual promiscuity as symbolized by "a foul and disgusting smell" obviously has no realistic foundation. Indeed, many other sources in rabbinical literature are aware of this and portray the permissive sexual domain as involving good fragrances, some of which have a particularly strong effect of sexual arousal.<sup>3</sup>

The approach whereby sexual promiscuity is symbolized by a bad odor emitted by the body of those engaged in it is evident in several rabbinical stories. In current study I shall focus two stories on Rabbi Akiva and his student who had sexual experiences with prostitutes.

### 1 "Their scent comes to me as the flesh of carrion": The story on Rabbi Akiva

The story about Rabbi Akiva occurs during his visit to Rome. According to the story in Avot de-Rabbi Natan, a Jewish aggadic work probably compiled in the geonic era (c. 700–900 CE), the Roman governor sends to Rabbi Akiva (the second century) two beautiful women, adorned and perfumed, to seduce him,

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<sup>3</sup> See B. Bava Kama 16b. According to another homily, the temptation of perfume results not only from its scent but also from its use to anoint female sexual organs: "What this woman most likes is the bag of perfume, where does she keep it? Between her breasts". See: Song of Songs Rabba, par. 1: 1:14, to Song of Songs 1:14 (Vilna edition, 12b). And compare to the version in Yalkut Shimoni, Song of Songs, Remez 984, to Song of Songs 1:14 (Vagshal edition, 2003, p. 397): "the bag of myrrh". On wearing jewelry on female genitalia in ancient world see: KRAEMER, 1969, p. 76.



but he shuns them and keeps his distance. Most surprising is the explanation given by the literary source to Rabbi Akiva's strange behavior as perceived by the governor:

When [Rabbi Akiva] went to Rome, he was reported to the governor, who sent him two beautiful women. These were bathed, anointed, and decorated as brides and they accosted him all night long. This one said: come to me, and that one said: come to me, and he sat between them and spat and did not approach them. [In the morning] they went to the governor and said to him: We would rather die than be given to this man. He [the governor] sent and called for him [Rabbi Akiva]. He [the governor] said: And why didn't you act with these women as men do? Are they not beautiful? Are they not human like you? Did He who created you not create them? He [Rabbi Akiva] said: What can I do, their scent comes to me as the flesh of carrion, unfit food, and vermin.<sup>4</sup>

The researchers disagree as to the historical authenticity of this source. Moshe D. Herr assumes that it is a historical source describing Rabbi Akiva's visit to Rome on official political business and that is why the governor offers him the women.<sup>5</sup> Shimon Appelbaum as well believes that this is not a mere legend, rather a historical story associated with the outcome of the revolt and indicating common attempts by Roman authorities to seduce Jewish leaders in order to convince them to forsake their faith.<sup>6</sup> Peter Schäfer, who disagrees with Herr, argues that this disregards the fact that women who seduce Jewish sages are a recurring literary element in rabbinical stories, and that the story is of no historical value.<sup>7</sup> I shall now focus on the structuring of the symbolism of body odor within the forbidden sexual context.

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<sup>4</sup> Avot de-Rabbi Natan, A:16, Schechter edition, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> See: HERR, 1973, p. 269-297.

<sup>6</sup> APPELBAUM, 1983, p. 229-260, and particularly 259.

<sup>7</sup> See: SCHÄFER, 1980, II, p. 113-130. Another story of seduction is, for example, the story of Rabbi Zadok that appears in Avot de-Rabbi Natan, A: 16 (Schechter edition, p. 63): "Rabbi Zadok was a great man. When he was taken to Rome as a prisoner one wealthy lady bought him and sent him a beautiful slave. When he saw her [the slave] he directed his gaze at the wall so that he would not see her, and he sat and learned all night." In contrast to this latter source, the women sent to seduce Rabbi Akiva appear to have been free women and not slaves.



Several Mishnahic and Talmudic traditions refer to the sexual trials that Rabbi Akiva and other sages endured with women and how he managed to withstand temptation. Stories of this type belong to the hagiographic genre, i.e., stories about holy people that display respect and admiration for key figures in the Jewish faith who constitute role models.<sup>8</sup> In many sexual Talmudic stories, the woman is the seducer and the man is tempted. While men and women possess a *yetzer*, men are the ones who struggle against it, i.e., self-control is a component in the "male identity". The *yetzer* itself is more closely associated with women because it is often characterized in feminine terms or even instigated by women.<sup>9</sup> Daniel Boyarin has shown that female sexuality is sometimes portrayed as dangerous and threatening and this appears to be the impression formed by the image and behavior of the seducing women who "accosted" Rabbi Akiva all night long.<sup>10</sup>

Another story brought in B. Kidushin 81a tells of Satan who disguised himself as a woman and tried to seduce Rabbi Akiva, and the latter, in response, fled and climbed a tree. In this case, similar to our story, Rabbi Akiva is portrayed as having strict sexual morals and responding to the trials to which he is subjected decisively and even radically. According to the story, Rabbi Akiva was subjected to this trial after he made a joke about transgressors who are incapable of resisting temptation, to which Satan answered that he is capable of sending Rabbi Akiva even greater temptations that he would probably not be able to withstand.<sup>11</sup> Satan's statement conveys the message that the intensity of

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<sup>8</sup> On the motif of sages endured with women and managed to withstand temptation there is a vast literature. On R. Akiva's temptations see: Rosen-Zvi, 2011, p. 112-113; REEG, 2013, p. 78-79. On R. Amram's temptations see: NAEH, 1997, p. 73-89; KOSMAN, 2007, p. 101-106; LABOVITZ, 2009, p. 229-244.

<sup>9</sup> SATLOW, 1995, p. 158-167; SATLOW, 1996, p. 19-40, and at length ROSEN-ZVI, 2011, p. 120-127.

<sup>10</sup> BOYARIN, 1999, p. 93-103.

<sup>11</sup> In this story, "Transgressors" (*ovri avera*) are men that cannot control their sexual desire. Rosen-Zvi emphasizes that the cultural Talmudic outlook is that the struggle against women's temptations is not against sexual desire, but something else – "yetzer hara" or Satan (compare to Baba Batra, 16a: Resh Lakish said: Satan, the evil prompter, and the Angel of Death are all one."). See: ROSEN-ZVI, 1999, p. 55-84. Rosen-Zvi also argues that there are two characterizations of the *yetzer hara*. The school of Rabbi Akiva understands the *yetzer* as a natural inclination toward self-interest whereas the school of Rabbi Ishmael innovatively represents the *yetzer* as a substantive "demonic enemy" essential to its anthropology (See: ROSEN-ZVI, 2011, p. 14-35). There is another



the temptation changes according to the circumstances and that it also depends on one's character and not everyone are equal in this matter. Rabbi Akiva is portrayed as a role model and a moral person worthy of unlimited appreciation. Satan's claim, however, puts a limit to this supremacy. Thus, our source is not interested in portraying a figure devoid of human weaknesses.

In fact, we know nothing about the women sent by the governor to Rabbi Akiva, aside from their natural beauty that was further enhanced by the cosmetic treatment they received in preparation for the seduction. The mission is planned in detail, so that the quarry had assumedly only a very slight chance of escaping the trap set for him. The planner of the plot does not make do with one woman and he uses an active, inviting method of seduction. Objectively, the scents of the seducing women were heady and provocative.<sup>12</sup> Their adornment as "brides" stresses that they used the best cosmetics available, those used in ancient times in preparation for the wedding night.<sup>13</sup>

The moral of the story is that a "pleasant scent" has subjective meaning that is affected by one's morality. Due to Rabbi Akiva's religious devotion and strict sexual morals he does not behave as expected of a person with regular urges. He perceives the scent of forbidden perfume as the odor of carrion and unclean meat. Meat that is forbidden by Jewish law is not necessarily any different than meat that is permitted with regard to its physical qualities (or its odor, unless it is in a state of rot).<sup>14</sup> The difference between them is the religious prohibition, and this is also true of the attitude to perfume and to the scent of prostitution.

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difference between the two schools: The school of Rabbi Akiva does not mention the term "yetzer hara" at all, but the school of Rabbi Ishmael uses "yetzer" and "yetzer hara" interchangeably (ROSEN-ZVI, 2011, p. 44-64).

<sup>12</sup> The motif of the fragrant loose woman is valid in the Bible. See: Book of Proverbs 7: 5-23. On the precious oil of the sinful woman in the Syriac tradition, see ASHBROOK HARVEY, 2002, p. 69-89; ASHBROOK HARVEY, 2006, p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> On the adornment of Jewish brides on the eve of their wedding see: Shemot Rabba, *Be-shalah*, par. 23:5, to Exodus 15:1 (Vilna edition, 43a): "R. Levy said: It is a custom of the world that a bride is adorned and perfumed and then wedded." Concerning the rabbinic sources attitude towards women's cosmetics See LABOVITZ, 2012, p. 12-34.

<sup>14</sup> Basically, carrion and unclean meat are inedible food. The nexus of food and sex or forbidden dishes and forbidden sex is a motif in the Rabbinic Literature. See for example, Y. Ketubot 5:11, 30b; B. Berakhot 62a. On the comparison of women to food there is a vast literature. See: BOYARIN, 1993, p. 113; SATLOW, 1995, p. 240; ILAN, 1995, p. 111; BIALE, 1997, p. 51; GRAETZ, 1998) p. 74-75;



We can assume that the metaphor of "flesh of carrion" originated from R. Akiva's teacher R. Joshua ben Hananiah, one of the leading tannaim in the first half-century following the destruction of the Temple (d. 131 C. E.).<sup>15</sup> According to the midrash R. Joshua of the opinion that women's motive for perfuming is a need rather than a desire, because naturally they smell bad (!): "R. Joshua was asked [by his students] [...] why does woman need to perfume herself, but a man does not need to perfume himself? He said to them: Adam was created from earth, and earth never decomposes. Eve was created from bone. For example, if you leave meat three days without salt it immediately becomes putrid"<sup>16</sup>. R. Joshua introduces an explanation for the "physiological" difference between male and female. The comparison of the women to "putrefying meat" leaves no doubt of their "otherness", but the foul odor does not indicate on immorality. R. Akiva thinks that in a case of seduction aromatic perfumes do not change the bad natural odor of the woman.

## 2 "The body part that you like is the filthiest": The story on Rabbi Akiva's student and a prostitute

Another story linking forbidden sexuality and repugnant scents is that of the tempestuous affair between a student of Rabbi Akiva and a prostitute. In contrast to other stories about encounters of Jews with prostitutes in foreign countries ("cities of the sea"), this story occurred in Eretz Israel, indicating that prostitution was also rampant in the sages' own territory.<sup>17</sup> The student fell in love with a prostitute and clung to her, but surprisingly it is precisely she, the immoral woman, who convinces him that his interest in prostitution is a result of his illogical attraction to promiscuous sex:

A story of one of the students of R. Akiva who sat at the head of twenty four thousand students. Once he went to a market of prostitutes, where he saw a prostitute and fell in love with her, and a messenger traversed between them

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ROMNEY WEGNER, 1998, p. 86; BASKIN, 2002, p. 107, and LABOVITZ 2008, p. 147-170.

<sup>15</sup> On the biographies of the two tannaim see: MARGALIT, 2000, II, p. 181-183; p. 291-294.

<sup>16</sup> *Bereshit Raba* 17, 8. On this midrash see also GREEN, 2011, p. 136-138.

<sup>17</sup> BAR-ILAN, 1998, p. 134-160. On stories of prostitutes in the cities of the sea, i.e., in regions of a foreign and distant cultural and ethnic nature, see B. Avodah Zara 17a; B. Menaḥot 44a. And in detail: BALBERG, 2008, p. 191-213. On the phenomenon of prostitution and temptations in rabbinic literature see: RAVEH, 2014, p. 100-115.



until evening. When evening came she ascended to the roof and saw him sitting at the head of the students like a military commander with Gabriel standing at his right. She said [...] How can such a great man who seems like a king be tormented by a woman destined for hell upon her death? [She understood that] if he would only listen to her she could save both him and her from a fate of hell. When he came to her she said: My son, why would you give up a life in the world to come for one hour in the present world? He did not come to his senses until she said: My son, the body part that you like is the filthiest and most foul of all the parts [a gourd full of excrement and garbage] and no creature can smell it. He did not come to his senses until she caught him by his nose and drew him to that grave. Upon smelling, it became repulsive to him and he never married. A heavenly voice was heard to say: this woman and that man [is] (are promised) a place in the world to come."<sup>18</sup>

The student encountered the prostitute in a market of prostitutes and contacted her through a mediator. This source does not describe the prostitute's sensuality, rather focuses on the virtues of the select student, one of Rabbi Akiva's best. In any case, there is no doubt that during the man's interaction with the prostitute she was perfumed and attractive. As stated by Y. Peleg, in the ancient world prostitutes were distinguished from the decent matrons by their appearance. While the matrons normally wore a stola, prostitutes were obliged by law to wear a clumsy male toga to make them seem unkempt. In practice, however, most of the prostitutes did not obey the law. On the contrary, both classical and rabbinical sources speak of "pretty and choice prostitutes". These sources describe their colorful clothes, perfume, heavy makeup, and elaborate hairdos, which became their identifying marks.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, shops selling perfumes and cosmetics were located in the prostitute markets,

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<sup>18</sup> ISH SHALOM, 1904, p. 39. See also KUSHELEVSKY, 2010, p. 169-180.

<sup>19</sup> PELEG, 2005, p. 50-63. On adorned, coiffed, and painted prostitutes in rabbinical literature see Y. Shabbat 8:3, 11b; B. Shabbat 34a. On "pretty and choice" prostitutes, or those "who deceive all people with their beauty", see Avot de-Rabbi Natan, A: 2 (Schechter edition, p. 14); B:3 (Schechter edition, p. 13). The sources also speak of rich prostitutes who charge high prices and serve their clients in elaborate and high-class homes. See: B. Menaḥot 44a.





apparently since these type of products were associated with the provision of sexual services.<sup>20</sup>

In order to dissuade him from the act and arouse him from the illusion formed by the forbidden pleasure she displayed the "repulsive side" of her body, her "foul smelling" intimate parts that supposedly reveal her shame.<sup>21</sup> The relationship with a prostitute constitutes a breach of limits in the sages' cultural world, and her course of action as well deviates from the customary conduct of whores. Portraying herself as foul smelling is an act that contradicts her interest as a prostitute to sell her clients an attractive and sensual experience. Looking at, smelling, or kissing intimate body parts might arouse sexual excitement and gratification when part of an intimate relationship. However Jewish sources, both ancient and more modern, have a completely different perspective. They express their reservations at these acts and perceive them as an undesirable and repulsive and even as a dangerous practice.<sup>22</sup> In this spirit, the narrator presents the student's smelling of the prostitute's intimate parts as a repulsive and upsetting experience, so much so that he never marries. Interestingly, in the story of Eleazar ben Dordia as well, his attitude is transformed during the encounter with the prostitute following an incident of flatulence, i.e. a bodily excretion usually involving an unpleasant smell. This is a scatological element, aimed at expressing scorn for the forbidden sexual act and for the seducing

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<sup>20</sup> Shemot Rabba, *Ki Tisa*, par. 43:7, to Exodus 32:11 (Vilna edition, p. 72b); ISH SHALOM, *Nispahim le-Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, 39. The market and the inn were public spaces identified with prostitution. On this issue see: SPERBER, 1998, p. 15-17.

<sup>21</sup> The element of the prostitute who tries to dissuade a Jewish scholar from a forbidden act also exists in the story of Elisha ben Avoya. When he demands the services of a prostitute she asks him: "Aren't you Elisha ben Avoya?" And only after he uproots a radish on the Sabbath does she acquiesce (B. Hagiga 15a). Mira Balberg claims that going to a prostitute is a symbolic act of transition from a different existential and moral space. It is precisely the prostitute, whose status is heterotopic, who defends of the proper morals and order, and therefore she is astounded that a scholar who symbolizes this order violates the ethics. However, once he transgresses a prohibition of the Sabbath she understands that he has crossed the lines. See: BALBERG, 2008, p. 197.

<sup>22</sup> Tractate Kallah, 1:9, HIGGER, 1936, p. 135; Kallah Rabati, 1:13, HIGGER, 1936, p. 182; Batei Midrashot, Part I, Tractate Kallah, 2:2 (VERTAIMER, 1989, p. 229); KARO, 1993, *Orah Hayim*, 240:4.



prostitute, who is allegedly fragrant and pleasing.<sup>23</sup> It may be assumed that the flatulence was unplanned and not initiated by the prostitute, but it nonetheless served as a reminder to Eleazar ben Dordia about his lack of self-control and his irreversible spiritual state.

The prostitute in the story about Rabbi Akiva's student symbolizes sin and is identified with impurity and filth. The scene in which the student smells the prostitute's intimate parts intensifies and stresses her negative foul smelling character, although in practice she herself is conscious of her bad odor and issues a warning to the student. The narrator uses the term "grave" (*kever*), the location of dead bodies, considered an impure and foul smelling place.<sup>24</sup> Impurity, filth, and foul smells are considered, according to Mary Douglas, an anomalous irregularity (deviating from the proper order), versus the scholar who represents the opposite, the norm.<sup>25</sup>

### 3 Conclusions

Body odor have been perceived throughout history as a manifestation of one's spiritual world and moral identity. The bad body odor of the prostitute in the story about Rabbi Akiva's student symbolizes sin and is identified with impurity and filth. In contrast, the women in the story of Rabbi Akiva have good odors, but according to Rabbi Akiva it is misleading – it is bad smell that indicates their immorality. The stories about Rabbi Akiva and his student who had sexual experiences associated with various scents enhance the relationship between nature – and culture and religion. They represent the outlook whereby the definition of a smell as good or bad does not follow natural standards rather has religious undertones and depends on one's moral powers. The olfactory

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<sup>23</sup> See B. Avodah Zara 17a: "As he was with her, she blew forth breath [emitted flatulence] and said: As this blown breath will not return to its place, so will Eleazar b. Dordia never be received in repentance." On the association between bodily excretions and sexual urges in rabbinical literature see: BALBERG, 2008, p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> In the Mishnah Ohalot 7:4 giving birth is described by the phrase "as long as the grave is open." As Rachel Elior argues, the "uterus-grave" emphasizes the ambivalence and the anxiety regarding the contrary forces of life and death associated with woman's body, with the cycle of fertility and destruction in it. The purity or impurity of a woman's body is associated with the uterus and with the menstrual blood those flaws from it in uncontrollable cycle, that symbolizes life (coupling, procreation) and death (menstruation, destruction). See: ELIOR, 2008, p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> DOUGLAS, 2001, p. 30-41.



sense is an animal sense, and it is survival-oriented. Nonetheless, on the cultural level it expresses a more ideal dimension capable of transcending physical needs.

Rabbi Akiva's sense of smell does not operate in a natural way; rather it identifies pleasant smells bearing forbidden sexual meaning as bad smells. Rabbi Akiva's student represents the opposite. The student, who does not seem to have reached a proper state of moral maturity, surrenders to his urges and is attracted to a prostitute. In contrast to Rabbi Akiva, the student is attracted to the woman's intoxicating smell rather than being revolted by it. Surprisingly, it is precisely the prostitute, a figure representing enticing smells, who reveals the bad smell of her intimate parts. Thus, the two stories represent different points on the rejection-attraction spectrum of forbidden smells. Rabbi Akiva and the prostitute epitomize their repugnance, while the student depicts their natural attraction.

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