



"They enjoyed the scent of his clothes blessed by his forefathers": The encounter of Rabbi Jacob Saphir with the Holy 'Sayeed' in Yemen

"Eles gostaram do perfume de suas roupas abençoadas por seus antepassados": o encontro do Rabbi Jacob Saphir com o Santo 'Sayeed' no Iêmen

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Abstract: Although body odor is a completely natural feature, smells emanating from the human body or clothes have been perceived throughout history as a manifestation of one's spiritual world and moral identity. The current study discusses the encounter of Rabbi Jacob Saphir (1822-1886), a famous Jewish traveler, with honorable Muslim. During the event the followers of the holy man do not touch him but smell the special scent of his clothes. The unusual event illustrating the social significance of the odor emitted by distinguished figure's body or clothes among Muslims. It also demonstrates a new insight of Saphir concerning the meaning of body odors in Jewish scriptures.

Keywords: Jacob Saphir. Body. Odors. Moral.

Resumo: Embora o odor corporal seja uma característica completamente natural, os cheiros que emanam do corpo ou das roupas foram percebidos ao longo da história como uma manifestação do mundo espiritual e da identidade moral. O presente artigo discute o encontro do rabino Jacob Saphir (1822-1886), um famoso viajante judeu, com um honrado muçulmano. Durante o evento, os seguidores do homem santo não o tocam, mas sentem o perfume especial de suas roupas. O evento incomum ilustra o significado social do odor emitido pelo corpo ou pelas roupas de figuras distintas entre os muçulmanos. Também demonstra uma nova visão de Saphir sobre o significado dos odores corporais nas escrituras judaicas.

Palavras-chave: Jacob Saphir. Corpo. Odores. Moral.

Introduction

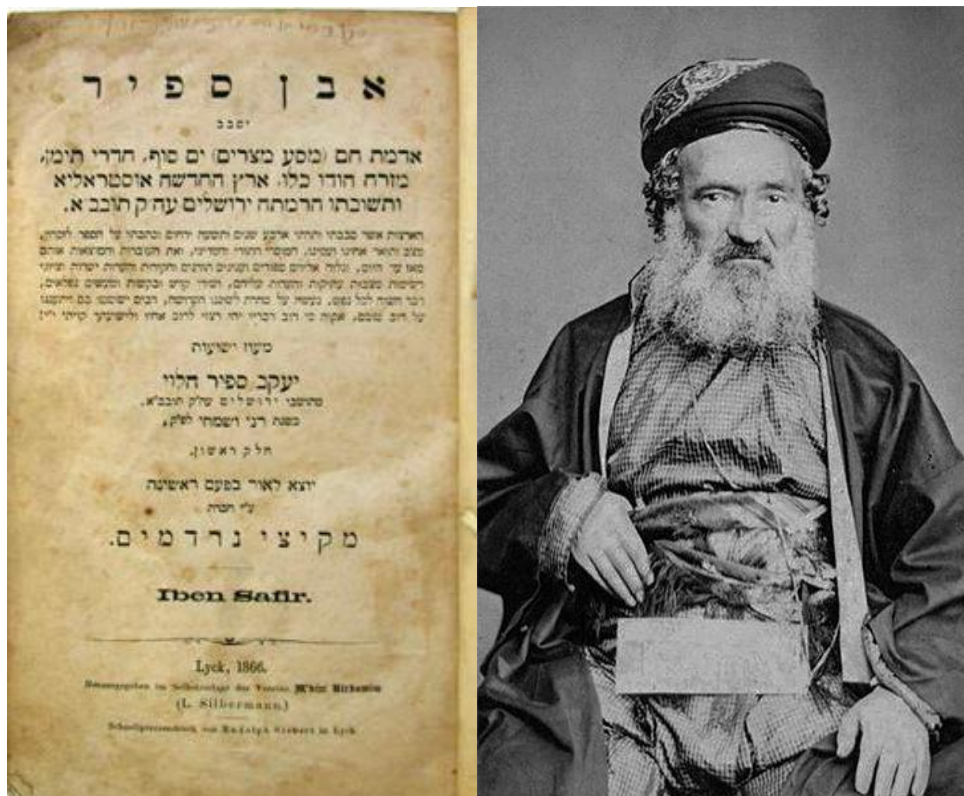
Rabbi Jacob Sapir (1822-1886), a famous Jewish traveler, was born in 1822 in Oshmiany near Vilna (figure 1). In 1832 While still a boy his family went to live in Eretz Israel and settled in Safed.¹ In 1836 after the death of his parents, Rabbi Nathan and Tova Levi

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Saphir, he removed to Jerusalem, and not much after his arrival he married Feige Leah, the daughter of Rabbi Zalman Cohen. The couple had two sons and three daughters. Leah had to take care of their children in poverty during the long periods when her husband was away on his voyages.²

In 1848 Saphir was commissioned by the Jewish community of Jerusalem to travel through the southern countries to collect alms for the poor people of the city. In 1854 he undertook a second tour for collecting funds for the construction of the Hurva Synagogue in the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem. In this voyage he visited Yemen, British India, Egypt, and Australia.³ The result of this journey was his ethnographic book "Even Sappir" (figure 2), in which work he gave the history and the condition of the Jews in the countries he had visited.⁴ As Raymond Apple stated "Saphir's international travels were frequently of far-reaching importance both to Jewish history and to geographical discovery in general".⁵ Saphir died in Jerusalem in 1886.



¹ See SINGER and OCHSER, 1906, v. 11, p. 51; EISENSTEIN, 1952, v. 7, p. 243.

² RIVLIN, 1940, p. 74-81, 385-399.

³ APPLE, 1968.

⁴ The book "Even Sappir" was published (in Hebrew) in two volumes by Mekitze Nirdamim, a society for the publication of Hebrew books and manuscripts. The first volume was published in Lyck in 1866 and the second one in Mayence [Mainz] in 1874.

⁵ APPLE 1968.



Figures 1-2: Rabbi Jacob Sapir: portrait and book 'Even Saphir'
From: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:YakovSapir.jpg>

1 The purpose of the study

Saphir traveled from Jerusalem to India and Australia, eventually arriving in Yemen in 1859. Saphir was robbed and could not pay the fees, so he was forced to leave the ship. In Yemen he met the residents, Jews and Muslims, and learnt on their ways of life.

The current study discusses Saphir's coincidental encounter with honorable Muslim, an unusual event, which illustrating the social significance of the odor emitted by one's body or clothes among Muslims and Jews. As will be shown later, the occasion teaches Saphir a new cultural insight and understanding of many verses in the Bible.

2 The encounter with the Holy Muslim: odor of body and clothes as indicator of sanctity

Saphir visited al-Hudaydah (الحدیة), a port town in west Yemen, on the coast of the Red Sea (figure 3). While he was going in one of the streets, he saw people smelling the clothes of a distinguished looking man (figure 4). Sapir proceeds to present several insights arising from Jewish sources that mention similar conduct, leading to the significance of the incident for our discussion. Due to the importance of this historical testimony I shall cite the passage in full:

That afternoon, when the Muslims finished their prayers on Friday, I went to tour the city and observe the people. I saw an old man with a long beard, very distinguished with long white voluminous clothes and a green tiara on his head and he passed before them [...] pleasantly and with an air of pride, walking at his leisure and surrounded by the entire crowd. All who were close to him grabbed the edge of his robe or his sleeve and sniffed it. They did not touch his hand or his flesh or kiss him, only enjoyed the scent of his clothes, blessed by his forefathers. They called him Sayeed, a descendant of the Prophet their legislator, and paid him all manners of honor. I walked by, despondent and angry, and in passing him did not hasten to sniff the edge of his robe, and he became upset. He sent one of those walking before him to call me because he saw that I was a stranger in the land and wished me to come to him. Why did you not come to me? He asked. And who are you, sir? I asked him. I am the man Sayeed before whom everyone stands and whom everyone smells.⁶ Forgive me, sir, I am a Jew [...] and I have no olfactory sense. He laughed in commiseration and wished me farewell. I subsequently perceived this custom among all

⁶ In Arabic سَيِّد (Sayeed) means sir and is also a title of respect for the descendants of Prophet Muhammad.



their great priests in this land, that the common people touch only their clothing or their sleeves and sniff them. So I tried to understand that which our Patriarch Isaac said to his son Jacob, blessed be their memory, after it says So he went to him and kissed him. "And he smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him, and said, "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed" (Genesis 27:27),⁷ and also "His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord" (Isaiah 11:3)⁸ promised to the Messiah of Jacob's God. Because he who has a real fear of the Lord will be honoured by His good and pure scent awarded to those who adhere to His faith and will receive His blessing.⁹

The locals believed this honored man to be a descendant of Prophet Muhammad. The passersby approached him and inhaled the scent of his clothes as these reflected his high spiritual status. Jacob Saphir, a Jew of Ashkenazi origins born in Oshmiany who had immigrated to Jerusalem with his family, was not familiar with this conduct from the regions where he had lived and operated. Therefore, he did not adhere to the custom of the local crowd and the honored man chided him on his disrespectful behavior. To his defense Saphir stated that he is a Jew, considered impure by the Muslims, and in any case "he has no olfactory sense", i.e., he is anosmic and incapable of enjoying the man's special scent.

Saphir relates that, in time, he encountered this custom again among clergymen, whose followers do not touch them or kiss their hands rather smell the special scent of their clothes.¹⁰ The exact nature of this scent is unclear, as is its distinction compared to the scent of perfumes with which honorable people anoint themselves, but it obviously served as an identifying mark customary in traditional societies.

⁷ The citation is according to the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV).

⁸ In Hebrew Bible: "וְהָרִיחוּ בְיָרְאֵת ה' וְלֹא לְמִרְאֵה עֵינָיו יִשְׁפּוֹט וְלֹא לְמִשְׁמַע אָזְנוֹ יוֹכִיחַ". The English citation is according to NRSV. Many translations do not mention the olfaction of the Messiah. See for example, the *King James Version* (KJV) translates: "And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord". Compare to the *Orthodox Jewish Bible* (OJB): "And His delight shall be in the Yir'at Hashem [=God-fearingness]". See also *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (CSB).

⁹ SAPHIR HALEVY, 1866, v. I, p. 47b.

¹⁰ On perfuming clothes by placing sweet smelling perfumes among them or by *mugmar* (=incense) see BABYLONIAN TALMUD, Berakhot 53a; Shabbat 18a; PESIKTA ZUTRATA, *parashat Ha'azinu*, Deuteronomy 32:1, Buber edition, 54b, and at length SHEMESH, 2017, p. 171-178.



Figure 3: Al-Hudaydah: Location within Yemen (Map).
From: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yemen-map.png>

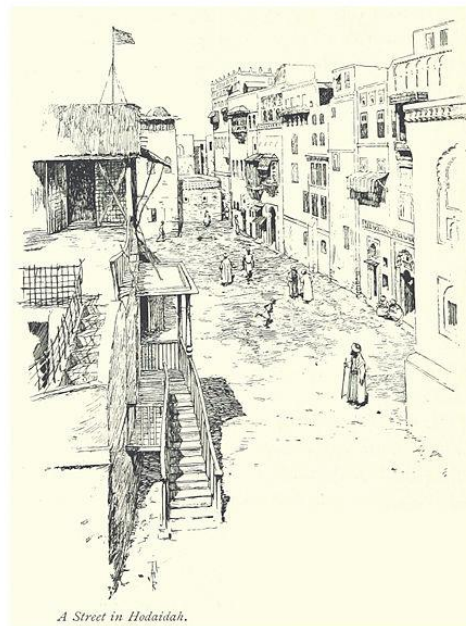


Figure 4: A street in Al-Hudaydah, Yemen, 1893.
Source: Walter Burton Harris, *A Journey through the Yemen* p. 434
British Library HMNTS 10076.eee.25 From:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:434_A_Street_in_Hodaidah.jpg



3 The insights derived from the encounter: The Sayeed, Isaac the patriarch and the Messiah

Saphir's encounter in the streets of Al Hudaydah elucidated for him why Isaac smelled Jacob's clothes in the biblical story and explained their fragrant scent (Genesis 27:27). The narrator states that the smell of Jacob's clothes was "like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed", i.e., a smell that attests to his high spiritual rank and that he is entitled to his father's blessings (According to rabbinical sources, the scent of his clothes was that of a field of apples or the scent of the Garden of Eden).¹¹ This also taught Saphir about the uniqueness of the Messiah. In the world to come the body of the Messiah will also have a fragrant smell that will rouse God fearing people to discern his virtues. The customary interpretation of the verse "וְהָרִיחַוּ בְּיָרֵאתָ ה'" is that the Messiah will be capable of discerning people's nature by using his special olfactory sense.¹² But according to Saphir's interpretation, it is the Messiah's special scent that will be noticed and that will bring people to recognize his superior spiritual nature, as exemplified by Saphir's 19th century Muslim experience.

Conclusions

The encounter of Rabbi Jacob Saphir with the holy 'Sayeed' in Yemen is an example for the concept that good body odors are indicator of righteousness and distinguished people. In the next lines, I shall relate to this phenomenon in many cultures and religions.

Scents emanating from the human body or clothes have been perceived throughout history as a manifestation of one's spiritual world and moral identity. It may be hypothesized that the perception of body odor as indicating purity, righteousness or moral corruption is rooted in the belief that this scent originates from deeper metaphysical levels in one's soul. Namely, the scent originates from one's internal hidden world but is evident in practice in the odor spread by means of the body.

The concept that body or clothes odors is indication of moral identity, is a cross-cultural element. The assumption was that, just as smell is used to characterize edible and spoiled dishes, or the feelings of disgust and pleasant environment, it might also

¹¹ See BABYLONIAN TALMUD, Ta'anit 29b; GENESIS RABBAH, Toldot, parasha. 65:22 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, v. 2, p. 741); SONG OF SONGS RABBAH, Parasha. 4:11:2 (Vilna edition, p. 28a); MIDRASH TANHUMA, *Toldot, Parasha 10*, Buber edition, p. 132.

¹² Ian D. Ritchie in his study on the exceptional sense of smell of the Messiah argues that generally in the Bible, smell both as a means and metaphor of knowledge has been sidelined in favour of sight or hearing. See: RITCHIE, 2000, p. 59-73. On the olfactory sense in the Bible see at length: JÜTTE, 2005, p. 93-95. The "salvific knowing" has significant place in the early Christianity. See: ASHBROOK HARVEY, 1999, p. 23-34; ASHBROOK HARVEY, 2006, p. 229-240.



attest to the quality of human beings.¹³ In the Christian, Muslim, and Bahai traditions, holy people, such as prophets, martyrs,¹⁴ and shahids (شهداء), were perceived or described as smelling good.¹⁵ In Islam children, similar to holy people, are portrayed as smelling good, as they have not sinned and their soul is pure and undefiled.¹⁶ Moreover, in ancient Muslim culture the body odor of an intended bride determined her suitability for marriage. If she smelled bad the match was cancelled. Christian clergy would determine a woman's virginity by her body odor, and interestingly, scent-based tests were customary among the sages of the Talmud as well.¹⁷

Largey and Watson defined the custom of categorizing or typifying people by their scent as "sociology of the senses" or "sociology of the body". Namely, scents are an indicator that sets social boundaries and they are used to distinguish between groups of people according to their status or identity.¹⁸ Classen showed how social categories are shaped and transmitted through codes related to odor. In various societies odor is used to discern negative and positive persons or groups. In fact, "others" may be foreigners, outcasts, an entire gender or enemies. They may be physically located within a larger group ("inside other") or reside outside the community ("outside other"). The negative features attributed to others are: (a) a bad smell; (b) a dangerous smell; (c) the lack of a good smell. In contrast, the positive categories are: (a) fragrant; (b) a neutral smell or the lack of a smell.¹⁹

In the story of R. Jacob Saphir in Yemen, the local Muslims believed that the honored man to be a descendant of Prophet Muhammad. The respected man was a member of distinct group of people, so the locals approached him and inhaled the scent of his clothes as these reflected his high spiritual status. In this case, body scents set social boundaries between common people and descendant of Prophet.

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¹³ See HORKHEIMER AND ADORNO, p. 151.

¹⁴ On the martyr as a person who was symbolized in the Christian tradition by pleasant holy scents see EVANS, 2002, p. 193-211; ASHBROOK HARVEY, 2006, p. 11-21.

¹⁵ On the element of the shahid whose body or clothes smell good as reflecting his essence in Islam and in the Bahai faith see: ROTHENBERG, 2008, p. 106; SHARON, 2008, p. 189.

¹⁶ IDELMAN SMITH and HADDAD, 1981, p. 173.

¹⁷ See: BABYLONIAN TALMUD, Yevamot 60b; Ketubot 10b.

¹⁸ Largey and Watson, 1972, p. 1031-1032.

¹⁹ See Classen, 1992, p. 133-166.



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