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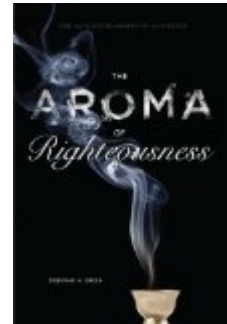
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Deborah A. Green. *The Aroma of Righteousness: Scent and Seduction in Rabbinic Life and Literature*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011. xiv + 286 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-03767-7.

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## Tracking the Trail of Scent in Rabbinic Literature

Deborah A. Green's analysis of the language and sensory experience of smell in early rabbinic Judaism is—I'll risk the cliché—a breath of fresh air in the often stodgy discipline of rabbinic textual studies. Reading Green's book reminded me of Wayne Meeks's critique of "the air of unreality pervading much of the recent scholarly literature" about ancient Christian texts back in the early 1980s.[1] Green's expansion of what began as a textual study of literary references to olfaction to "the relevant history, archaeology, and cultural data" they presupposed resonated with me (p. 3). At last, a fellow reader who remembers that texts under critical consideration were composed by living, breathing, feeling human beings! And with their olfactory-enhanced concern with the emotionally charged subjects of love and death, the same texts affect us too as living, breathing, feeling human beings, even if not quite in the same way. Just as Meeks and others turned to sociology and social history to flesh out "the air of unreality" pervading descriptions of ancient Christianity, so Green and a cohort of scholars have recently turned to the sensory dimensions of ancient Jewish and Christian texts and practices, to re-embody human experiences and emotions latent in them.[2] This scholarship notably shares a multidisciplinary interest in current biological and cognitive neuroscience research on the physiology of the senses and emotions, as well as philosophical and social historical studies on how western European intellectual tradition generally, and the study of Jewish religious texts in particular, have maligned the "lower senses" of smell, taste,

and touch (pp. 3-4).

The book's organization reflects Green's commitment to a multidisciplinary approach. In chapter 1, "Tracking the Trail of Scent," Green aptly opens with the famous story of R. Eliezer's bad breath in R. Yohanan ben Zakkai's *bet ha-midrash* to justify focusing on scent in rabbinic literature, because "odor, whether pleasing or foul, enters almost every aspect of our lives—its subtle pervasiveness affects our attitudes and our judgments toward both the mundane and the sacred. In the rabbinic worldview, where almost every daily activity becomes a locus of theological discussion, interpretation, or legislation, aroma was quite naturally a part of the discourse" (p. 1). Moreover the sense of smell particularly interested the rabbis theologically because "olfaction is one of the primary modes of interaction and communication with God in the Hebrew Bible," i.e., the *reah nihoah* (soothing odor) of the sacrifices God accepted (p. 4). Green continues with an exemplary discussion of "Problems in the Study of Odor," "The Physiology of Smell," and "Philosophy and Psychology and the Sense of Smell" and survey of relevant "Studies of Scent." This part of her first chapter is recommended for a concise and informative introduction to the sensory studies behind the new approaches to the Bible, early Judaism, and Christianity. Green alludes to the connection between smell and taste, as well as to disgust, but could say more. Some of the recent psychological and philosophic studies of taste and disgust by Rachel Herz, Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Carole Korsmeyer

are quite relevant to her line of analysis.[3] Finally, Green makes clear the parameters of her study in her “Method and Organization” section. She restricts her focus on rabbinic literature to Amoraic aggadic midrashim from *Genesis Rabbah* and *Song of Songs Rabbah*, though she’s interested in the “much older material” from the Mishnah, baraitot, and Palestinian Talmud they contain. Given the Palestinian provenance of most of the traditions she cites, she draws her archaeological evidence from studies of the cities and towns like Caesarea, Tiberias, Sepphoris, Meiron, Gush Halav, and Beit She’arim that had a “rabbinic presence” from around the second through fifth century CE (p. 16). However, since the rabbinic midrashim also interpret biblical images of scent, Green devotes a chapter to the terminology of scent in the Hebrew Bible, especially in accounts of the sacrifices, the Song of Songs, seductive smells in Proverbs, and prophetic metaphors.

The premise of her second chapter on the archaeological evidence for “aromatics in Roman and rabbinic culture” is the problem Green suggests makes the study of odor especially difficult: it is hard to describe fragrances with language other than the thing itself that gives off the odor. “A bar of soap may smell like a rose, but it is difficult to describe precisely what ‘rose’ smells like to anyone who has not already experienced this fragrance, and further descriptions of the object will seek to include visual, tactile, or other perceptual clues of the ‘bar’ or ‘soap’ rather than of the ‘rose’” (p. 5). Hence, one *has* to turn to the kind of material evidence archaeology offers, like the visual and tactile cues of ancient perfume bottles, incense shovels, and the layout of fumigated dining rooms. Green first examines the archaeological evidence for general ancient Roman use of aromatics, and then the specific evidence of archaeological sites in the land of Israel, especially the Galilee in the “late Roman and early Byzantine periods” (p. 19). The most relevant aromatic experiences for the rabbis’ imagination that Green derives from this evidence are “the fumigation of clothing and rooms, the use of incense in the rituals of various religions, the application of medicinal unguents and ointments, and the bathing and anointing of the body with oil” (p. 2).

Green’s literary analysis of the biblical semantics of smell in her third chapter is my favorite part. No summary does it justice. Green surveys the biblical terms for perfumes and incense, and the verbs associated with them, and important biblical themes involving smell: in priestly concerns about “prescription and aroma,” “incense and atonement,” in demonstrations of “authority and the suppression of rebellion” (e.g., Aaron’s sons, Ko-

rah, King Uzziah); in the erotic descriptions of the Song of Songs—smell as an “evocation of memory” or describing “the woman as a garden”—but also ambivalence toward the “aroma of the ‘Other’” in the stink of the Ammonites (2 Sam 10:6) or Proverbs’s “disturbing ‘other,’” the woman whose “sensual desirability, seductive power, and sexual appetite ... leads the unsuspecting male to death and Sheol (Prov 5:5-9), as her honey seduces him into sexual perfidy” (p. 99). Green draws special attention to the eroticism of Song of Songs’ phrase “while the king was in his enclosure, my nard gave forth its fragrance” (1:12), of which the rabbinic midrash later made much, albeit to different ends. Green calls it as she sees it: “the phrasing of the verse is as erotic in English as it is in Hebrew. We are inclined to read the woman’s ‘nard,’ as her body, which emits a fragrance that draws in her lover,” and then gets quite explicit as to what this obviously means (p. 86). It’s no cliché for Green to point out a “close association between perfume and the feminine” in the erotic aromas of Song of Songs and Proverbs. Viewed in the context of other biblical texts, fragrance is gendered: “Whereas the biblical texts describe male ‘otherness’ as ‘stinking,’ the female ‘other’ is alluring in her fragrance” (p. 114). Granted, Green cautions against over-associating women with the sense of smell, as academics who make the debatable claim that “‘women have a keener sense of smell’” are wont to do (p. 12). In any case, Green calls attention to the biblical tradition’s somewhat fluid gendering of “female” fragrances (they can be attractive in both good and bad ways) in order to contrast it with the more negative rabbinic view of women’s fragrances: “The rabbinic voices equate the Jewish woman with the wanton woman of Proverbs” (p. 115).

Green organizes her fourth chapter, “Fragrance and Rabbinic Beliefs,” around four themes to demonstrate what are old (biblical) and new rabbinic formulations. The first two are “the garden”—the rabbinic “reassociation” of biblical garden imagery with places of particular interest to the rabbis: “the tent, the world, Eden, and heaven”; and “shifting and ambivalent rabbinic attitudes to the ‘other’ (usually female) as depicted by the pleasurable and arousing fragrances” drawn from biblical descriptions. In contrast to these two biblically derived themes, Green suggests two other themes “unique to the rabbis,” namely “rabbinic values” and “historical moments” (p. 117). The rabbinic midrashim she discusses in this chapter link fragrance to rabbinic values—“concepts considered paradigmatic in rabbinic thought, such as the importance of study, good deeds, and righ-

teousness” (i.e., like her introductory story of R. Eliezer’s bad breath), and to “historical moments depicted in the Bible” like the exodus from Egypt, receiving the Torah on Mt. Sinai, and the Golden Calf incident (p. 117). Green’s basic argument throughout this chapter is that rabbis use the register of pleasant to disgusting aromas to label the relative value of things that are important to them: the quality of a sage’s learning, Israel’s (or its rivals’) behavior at a historical moment vis-a-vis God, or the merit of doing *mitzvot*.

In her fifth chapter, Green shows how the aromatic verse from Song of Songs 1:3, “*The fragrance of your oils is good; oils poured forth, your name*” (as well as other verses from it like Song 1:13-14) continues to shape the midrashic formulation of rabbinic ideas and values, this time about death, suffering, and sacrifice (as in martyrdom). Applied to stories about Abraham, Daniel’s three friends, and other “righteous Jews,” the fragrant perfume flowing forth is “the scent of their burning flesh” (p. 186). The effect of *Kiddush ha-Shem* (sanctification of the Name) with its dual connotation as behavior that wins converts and as martyrdom is represented in images of wafting, fragrant aromas pervading the world. In particular, such pleasant smells are signs of God’s acceptance of such gestures, even as God’s taking pleasure in the sweet smell of the biblical incense sacrifices were (p. 187). Green sums up the intimate connection between death, suffering, and sacrifice in rabbinic midrashim about Israel’s love relationship with God this way: “The sensual evocations of the lovers in the Songs are transformed in order to introduce an ideology of pain and suffering for love of the Divine” (p. 194). Or as she puts it more specifically and poetically, “the life of the rabbi is plucked like a flower in the field, and scholars lure the angel of death with the precious perfume that is their knowledge” (p. 195).

I have one criticism of Green’s presentation of aromatically evocative midrashim in her fourth and fifth chapters. It is not always immediately clear to me how these midrashim work literarily and rhetorically to support the points she introduces them to support. From context I know they are supposed to exemplify the various theses about rabbinic beliefs she asserts before quoting them. But more often than not, their meaning turns on some kind of Hebrew wordplay, like *mor/merer* (“myrrh/embitter”) and *kofer/kipper* (“henna/atone”) in the midrashim from Songs R. 1:14 (pp. 192-193), or *shemen/shem* (“oil/name”) in the midrash from Songs R. 1:3 (pp. 154-155), which she doesn’t refer to until *after* she has quoted them. This can be confusing, since

without knowing about the crucial wordplay, it is hard to see how the midrash, at least at first sight, proves her point. Perhaps if Green had inserted transliterations of the relevant Hebrew words parenthetically into the quoted midrashim, or signaled *before* she quoted the midrashim that their meaning was going to be conveyed at least in part by some Hebrew wordplay, her intent would have been clearer. Granted, she or her editors may have thought that doing so would appear clunky or cumbersome. I can empathize. It is not easy to convey midrashic rhetoric in English without some kind of explanation. That sometimes goes over about as well as trying to explain a joke. However, in light of her acute sensitivity to smells, I wish Green had called more attention to the sounds of the midrashim. Or better, I wish Green said more about how these midrashim evoked smells and sounds simultaneously, integrating them for a kind of synaesthetic effect on the reader. It is quite like the way the language of the Song of Songs mixes sight, sound, smell, taste and touch metaphors. But that is a minor point, reflecting my own interpretive predilections, and should not diminish the outstanding contribution her book makes to our understanding not only of rabbinic literature, but of the religious and cognitive significance of what has too often been dismissed as one of “the lower senses.”

This is an important and thought-provoking book, a model for integrating the analysis of texts and material culture, not only for the field of rabbinic literature, but also for religious studies in general. Green’s focus on olfaction, that is, on an aspect of the *sensory dimensions* of religious experience, proves here to be a very promising line of inquiry for interpreting Jewish religion and culture.

Finally, Green’s *Aroma of Righteousness* did something for me that very few academic books do; it spoke to me not just as a critical scholar but as a whole person. Green writes engagingly from her own experience, so that certain passages really moved me. One such passage was the opening paragraph of her final chapter, “Ephemerality and Fragrance: Desire for Divine Immanence.” Here Green observes that “[F]ragrance is fleeting and elusive.... It seems to enter at the fringe of our awareness. Once inhaled and inside us, aroma can either calm or excite, arouse or soothe. Too much of a pleasant aroma may repel us, while a mere whiff may unaccountably draw us to its source. Aroma’s ephemerality and liminality mirror love, with its expectant possibilities, its lonely yearning, and sometimes obsessive infatuation. And fragrance is also intimately tied to death—perhaps as a repre-

sensation of what we desire in that finality—that death too will be fleeting, temporary, and of no consequence. Or it may be that fragrance and death unite with the bonds of love and longing we feel in mourning those whom we have lost” (p. 197).

Deborah Green has not only masterfully explicated the meanings of aroma in rabbinic literature and thought in this book, but also reminded us throughout why it matters.

#### Notes

[1]. Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983), 1.

[2]. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California, 2006); Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: T & T Clark, 2012), a revision of her 2008 Haifa University PhD dissertation, which Green cites; Athalya Brenner and Jan van Willem, eds., “Food and Drink in the Biblical Worlds,” *Semeia* 86, no. 2 (1999); Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, “‘Truly the Ear Tests Words as the Palate Tastes Food’ (Job 12:11): Synaesthetic

Food Metaphors for the Experience of the Divine in Jewish Tradition,” in *Food and Language: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2009*, ed. Richard Hosking (Devon, UK: Prospect, 2010), and with Betsey Dyer, “Cultures and Cultures: Fermented Foods as Culinary ‘Shibboleths,’” in *Cured, Fermented and Smoked Foods: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food And Cookery 2010*, ed. Helen Saberi (Devon, UK: Prospect, 2011).

[3]. Rachel Herz, *The Scent of Desire: Discovering Our Enigmatic Sense of Smell* (New York: William Morrow, 2007), and *That’s Disgusting: Unraveling the Mysteries of Repulsion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012); Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, et al., “Disgust: The Cultural Evolution of a Food-based Emotion,” in *Food Preferences and Taste: Continuity and Change*, ed. Helen Macbeth (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1997), 65–82; Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and C. R. McCauley, “Disgust,” in *Handbook of Emotions*, 3rd ed., ed. M. Lewis et al. (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), 757–776; Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), and *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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