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THE AROMA OF RIGHTEOUSNESS: SCENT AND SEDUCTION IN RABBINIC LIFE AND LITERATURE

Deborah A. Green. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011. 286 pp.

The current trend in historical scholarship to include the five senses as worthy research categories, ones that may shed light on the human experience of far away civilizations, has not passed over Judaic Studies. During the last century, interest has gradually shifted from political and military events on one hand, and textually based investigations on the other, to the social and cultural dimensions of people's life; the lower strata as well as peripheral social groups, together with the full spectrum of human emotions, mundane daily activities, and the interactions of people with the physical landscape that engulfed them, all have proved worthy of inspection and capable of enriching our understanding of the ancient world. Then came the senses, first with a series of studies unpacking the processes involved in viewing, and more recently studies about smelling (one can only extrapolate that the future may bring about works on hearing and listening habits, and perhaps even touching and tasting).

Deborah Green strides into these still uncharted territories with elegance and confidence. Her book exhibits wide learning in rabbinics, especially midrash, and biblical studies, as well as sharp eye for those details minute yet significant, which creep up in our sources and tend to be overlooked by those who study them. She sets out to tell us the story of fragrance as it is depicted and perceived by the rabbis. The book consists of five chapters and a short concluding statement. In her first, introductory chapter, Green surveys the theoretical and methodological issues involved in her research. She correctly points out the contribution of psychology to this area of study since much of the impact of smell registers in the intangible realms of human experience, in the mind and in the imagination. Good and bad odors are very much a matter of psyche; consider, for example the horrible, disgusting stench encountered by visitors to the Jerusalem Temple precinct—the blood, the meat rotting in the Mediterranean heat with no refrigerators, the flies—a reality well portrayed by Green (69). But Jews inhaled such smells with the greatest joy, as it symbolized for them the open communication lines with their God, who accepted their animal offerings. They called the place the Mountain of God's perfume (*har ha-moriah*).

Green's assertion, on the other hand, that scholarly work on scent developed with the rise of women and feminism in the academy (13) seems puzzling (perhaps requiring psychology as well), especially in Judaic Studies where the early inquiries into the intricate world of perfumes and smelling date back to the first decade of the twentieth century, a time when, as far as our records show, there was not even one woman in this discipline in the academy. Samuel Krauss devoted an entire section in his magisterial book—*Talmudische Archäologie*—to *kosmetik* (vol. 1, 233–52), dissecting “feminist” topics such as ointments, perfumes, and the ideal of beauty (*Schönheitsideal*). Krauss's book is not used even once in Green's work (other than a general reference in ch. 1n36), one of very few glaring lacunas.

The next four chapters are divided thematically. Chapter 2 deals with the physical environment, discussing the entities that made perfumes available to people (merchants, markets), the various places that consumed them (such as bathhouses with their wide expenditure of oil, used as both soap and ointment), and some tools that were used in the consumption of these products. The next chapter studies scent in biblical language. It goes back in time to the biblical world, that is, the Iron Age, a chronological leap of some 750 years that may irritate some historically oriented readers, especially since the rich Jewish literature of the Second Temple is completely ignored (other than a short reference to the Book of Enoch on 119), but which Green justifies due to the ontological fusion of the rabbis with the imagery and terminology of the Bible. The following two chapters focus on rabbinic literature, aiming to show the conceptuality and perceptions that the rabbis articulate about the odors and fragrance that surrounded them.

On the whole the book opens the door to a fascinating and neglected facet of human experience. It also includes numerous nuggets of close reading and insightful interpretations of rabbinic passages. As such, it deserves the reading of those interested in the rabbis and the world they inhabited. Like any book, this one is not without problems—Green seems overly taken by the portrayal of the rabbis as a configured and relatively homogeneous movement, group, and community, a mistake that has become widely entrenched in current scholarly circles (the fictional category “Rabbinic Judaism” being its most notorious product). In the many places where she categorically speaks of the rabbis (e.g., 39: “To be sure, they [the rabbis] may have objected”), a more nuanced formulation, such as “some rabbis,” would have served her better. A more rigorous consultation of studies on the general Roman environment would have added depth and context to

the discussions and could have prevented some inaccuracies; for example, baths were not situated in “areas of ill repute and prostitution” (27) but rather at the center of cities, many times as an integral part of its forum, and adjacent to the most respectable structures, such as temples and civic basilicas. In the same vein, the sheer prices of perfumes and spices would make them almost completely unattainable to anyone below the higher echelons of society (a good book to consult here is Susan Stewart, *Cosmetics and Perfumes in the Roman World*), which makes their usage a social marker very different from our own time. The book would have also benefited from a meticulous proofreading, especially of technical and foreign terms—so “*ḥāḏēr*” not “*ḥāḏēr*” (48); “*ḥīḥā ḥērī*” and not “*ḥīḥā ḥēr*” (152); “Constantinople printed edition” not “manuscript” (217n69); “*ḥāḥ*” (231n70), to name a few. But beyond these quibbles, it is a worthy, well written book on an interesting topic that will surely resonate in future studies tackling the other senses of the ancients.

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HANK GREENBERG: THE HERO WHO DIDN'T WANT TO BE ONE  
Mark Kurlansky. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. 164 pp.

Mark Kurlansky offers a breezy, upbeat recounting of the life and times of 1930s Jewish sports icon, Hank Greenberg. Clearly pitched for a popular crowd, it may well replace the “Great Jews in Sports” volumes that are often rife with errors and inaccuracies as a ubiquitous bar or bat mitzvah gift. However, as scholarship, the book breaks little new ground as it repeats much of what is already known about an era of great discomfit for Jews in America within which the slugging first baseman for the Detroit Tigers played. Rather, it offers a useful primer for the uninitiated on the basic facts and trends in the sports history of the Jews in the United States. Kurlansky also complements what is actually a long essay on Greenberg with warranted, but not uncommon, discussions of Jewish attitudes towards physical versus intellectualism, taking his story—on occasion—back to biblical times. Most of his overviews are on target, as they have been drawn from the important academic work that is presently being achieved in the field. These derivative insights are not documented by notes, although there is a bibliography of the key books that the interested can consult, if they seek to delve more deeply.