

DISGUST, ETHICS AND ETIQUETTE IN THE RABBINIC TRACTATES
DEREK EREŠ RABBAH AND ZUṬA

1. *Introduction: Derek Ereš and Disgust*

The study of emotions in Jewish culture is an almost unexplored territory, whose investigation counts only sporadic contributions, mostly dedicated to Biblical literature.¹ The present article aims to venture further in this direction, addressing this time rabbinic literature, through a case-study involving, on the one hand, the emotion of disgust and, on the other hand, the *Derek Ereš* tractates.

Derek Ereš Rabbah e *Derek Ereš Zuṭa* – which could be entitled *Major* and *Minor courtesy book* – represent two of the extra-canonical Minor Tractates of the Babylonian Talmud. As in the case of other well known works such as *Avot* and *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, the couple of texts can be classified as ethical compilations,² since they are characterized by the systematic interaction between moral advices and more trivial and mundane prescriptions that could be regarded as *savoir-faire* instruction. Place and date of redaction are but a conundrum:

with much philological caution, the compilation of the texts can be dated to the 8th-9th centuries, considering that, together with original materials, the tractates incorporate excerpts paralleled and likely derived from the Babylonian Talmud (5th-7th centuries), the Aggadic Midrašim (4th century), the Palestinian Talmud (4th century), the Tosefta (3rd century), the Halakic Midrašim (3rd century), *Avot* (3rd century)³ and *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* (8th-9th centuries).⁴ The redactional adjustments that have progressively affected the compilations do not permit to recognize any allegedly original core in the text. Maxims and instructions are expressed in tannaitic Hebrew and either exposed as *baraytot* (early anonymous traditions) or attributed to the eminent sages from the first centuries C.E. However, even the tannaitic form does not point to an early redaction. Rather, it constitutes a rhetorical feature providing the texts with the authoritative prestige of rabbinic golden age lore.⁵ The phrase *derek ereš* can be translated as *good manners*, *polish* or *courtesy* and indi-

¹ See the monograph by TH. KAZEN, *Emotions in Biblical Law: A Cognitive Science Approach*, Sheffield-Phoenix, Sheffield 2011 and ID., *Dirt and Disgust: Body and Morality in Biblical Purity Laws*, in B.J. SCHWARTZ et al. (ed.), *Perspectives on Purity and Purification in the Bible*, T & T Clark, New York 2008, pp. 43-64. See also the recent F. SCOTT SPENCER (ed.), *Mixed Feelings and Vexed Passions: Exploring Emotions in Biblical Literature*, SBL Press, Atlanta 2017.

² «Ethical anthology/compilation» is the definition coined by J.W. SCHOFER, *Rabbinical Ethical Formation and the Formation of Rabbinical Ethical Compilations*, in C.E. FONROBERT - M.S. JAFFEE (eds.), *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2007, pp. 313-335, cfr. pp. 316-319.

³ Although traditional, dating *Avot* as part of the Mišnah is not completely correct. Even though part

of the materials collected in *Avot* are undoubtedly tannaitic, it would be more accurate to relate the final redaction of the tractate in its entirety, including Post-Talmudic interpolations, to a later phase of rabbinic literature, cfr. G. STEMBERGER, *Mischna Avot: frühe Weisheitsschrift, pharisäisches Erbe oder spätrabbinische Bildung?*, in «Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft» 96,3-4 (2005), pp. 243-258.

⁴ Cfr. M.B. LERNER, *The External Tractates*, in SH. SAFRAI, (ed.) *The Literature of the Sages. First Part: Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud. External Tractates*, Fortress Press, Van Gorcum, Assen, Philadelphia 1987, pp. 367-409.

⁵ The authoritative predilection of tannaitic Hebrew is a stylistic typicality found in the ethical anthologies, cfr. SCHOFER, *Rabbinical*, cit., p. 316. The extant critical editions of the *Derek Ereš* corpus are those compiled by M. HIGGER, *Massektot Ze'i-*

cates the set of behavioral features that most immediately and evidently distinguish a member of the rabbinic elite conducting a sage-like way of life. Whereas *Derek Ereš Rabbah* is devoted to applied etiquette covering various areas of everyday life – table manners, hospitality, and behavior in toilets, baths, and the marketplace –, *Derek Ereš Zuṭa* is mostly concerned with religious assertions and ethical guidance for *talmide ḥakamim*, rabbinic disciples.

As far as our *horrendum fascinans* is concerned, in the last decades the emotion of disgust has received increasing attention not only in the field of psychology and neurosciences but also in that of humanities. Two eminent examples are *Anatomy of Disgust* by William I. Miller⁶ and *Hiding from Humanity* by Martha C. Nussbaum.⁷ The first scientific contribution to this apparently trivial and even risible emotion has been outlined by the psychologist Paul Rozin. Rozin describes disgust as an emotion originally based on

oral incorporation and food rejection. It may be elicited by a set of agents that can be sorted into nine categories: food, bodily secretions, animals, sexual behaviors, contact with death and corpses, violation of the body external surface (including gore and deformities), poor hygiene, interpersonal contamination, ethical offences.⁸ But how can we explain such a diversified array of stimuli, ranging from ingestion and contagion through sympathetic magic to moral taboos? A study by Daniel Kelly provides a valid taxonomy explaining the psycho-evolutionary development of disgust.⁹ From the evolutionary perspective, the mechanism of disgust functions primarily as a defence against diseases, parasites, and food poisoning. Thanks to the capability to identify and acquire new elicitors, this system is coopted in order to cope with new adaptive problems, especially those related to social interaction.¹⁰ It can be thus understood how disgust is triggered by a variety of factors that are per-

rot, New York 1929 (Hebrew) and Id., *The Treatises Derek Erez*, New York 1935 (Hebrew and English). The texts have been translated into English by M. GINSBERG, *Derek Ereš Rabbah*, *Derek Ereš Zuṭa*, in A. COHEN (ed.), *The Minor Tractates of the Talmud: Massektoth Ketannah* 2, Soncino Press, London 1965, pp. 529-602, and by M. VAN LOOPIK, *The Ways of the Sages and the Way of the World*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 1991, including a profuse commentary. Moreover, Chapters 5-8 from *Derek Ereš Zuṭa* have been translated and commented by D. SPERBER, *A Commentary on Derech Erez Zuta. Chapters Five to Eight*, Bar-Ilan University Press, Ramat-Gan 1990. For the Italian translation and commentary see I. BRIATA, *Due trattati rabbinici di galateo. Derek Eres Rabbah e Derek Eres Zuta*, Paideia Editrice, Brescia 2017.

⁶ W.I. MILLER, *Anatomy of Disgust*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1997.

⁷ M.C. NUSSBAUM, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2004. See also J. LAUWEREYNS, *The Anatomy of Bias. How Neural Circuits Weigh the Options*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2011; W. MENNINGHAUS, *Disgust. The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, State of New York University Press, Albany 2003; J.J. PRINZ, *Gut reactions: a Perceptual Theory of Emotion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York 2004.

⁸ P. ROZIN, J. HAIDT, C. MCCAULEY, *Disgust*, in

M. LEWIS, J.M. HAVILAND-JONES, L.F. BARRETT (eds.), *Handbook of Emotions*, Guilford Press, New York 2008³, pp. 757-776. See also P. ROZIN, A. FALLON, *A Perspective on Disgust*, in «Psychological Review» 94 (1987), pp. 23-41; P. ROZIN, J. HAIDT, C. MCCAULEY, S. IMADA, *Disgust: Preadaptation and the Cultural Evolution of a Food-Based Emotion*, in H.M. MACBETH (ed.), *Food Preferences and Taste: Continuity and Change*, Berghah, Oxford 1997; P. ROZIN, L. LOWERY, R. EBERT, *Varieties of Disgust Faces and the Structure of Disgust*, in «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology» 66,5 (1994), pp. 870-881; P. ROZIN, L. LOWERY, S. IMADA, J. HAIDT, *The CAD Triad Hypothesis: A Mapping between Three Moral Emotions (Contempt, Anger, Disgust) and Three Moral Codes (Community, Autonomy, Divinity)*, in «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology» 76,4 (1999), pp. 574-586; P. ROZIN, L. MILLMAN, C. NEMEROFF, *Operation of the Laws of Sympathetic Magic in Disgust and Other Domains*, in «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology» 50 (1986), pp. 703-712; P. ROZIN, C. NEMEROFF, M. HOROWITZ, B. GORDON, W. VOET, *The Borders of the Self: Contamination Sensitivity and Potency of the Body Apertures and other Body Parts*, in «Journal of Research in Personality» 29 (1995), pp. 318-340.

⁹ D. KELLY, *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2014.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 117-119.

ceived as noxious and defiling, such as organic waste, decay, phenotypic and behavioral abnormalities. Disgust plays a pivotal role in cultural transmission and, when human inter-relational structures progressively develop, the aforementioned factors begin to include not only biological issues but also social norms, such as purity rules¹¹ or ethnical demarcation, and finally they come to influence the cognitive process involving the formulation of moral judgment.¹²

In the following sections, I will propose a selection of literary examples showing how the emotion of disgust is treated in *Derek Ereš Rabbah* and *Derek Ereš Zuṭa*. The excerpted passages will address three thematic directions: (a) etiquette and oral incorporation, (b) distinction: good and bad taste, (c) body management and the ethics of caducity. The Hebrew text is quoted according to the oldest dated manuscripts – ms. JTS 2237 (Provence, 1271) for *Derek Ereš Rabbah* and ms. Oxford 896 (Libya, 1202) for *Derek Ereš Zuṭa*.

2. (a) Etiquette and Oral Incorporation

Derek Ereš Rabbah 9,1 educates on table manners rationalizing the instructions through motivations implying the problem of disgust:

לא יפרוס אדם פרוסה על גבי הקערה אבל מקנח אדם קערה בפרוסה ולא ילקט אדם פירורין ויניח על גבי שולחן מפני שהוא ממחה דעתו של אדם חבירו
ולא ישוך אדם מן הפרוסה ויחזירנה לתוך הקערה וכן לא ישוך אדם מפרוסה ויתננה לחבירו לפי שאין דעת הבריות שוות ולא ישתה אדם מן הכוס ויתננה לחבירו וזה מפני סכנת נפשות

One should not break bread over the dish, but it is permitted to wipe the dish with bread. One should not gather crumbs and leave them on the table, because he could hurt his fellow's taste. One should not bite the bread and then return it on the

dish and not even bite it and then pass it to his fellow, because not all tastes are equal. One should not drink from a goblet and then pass it to his fellows – and this is because it is a danger to health.

The phrases *mifne še-hu' mamḥeh da' ato šel ḥavero*, because he could hurt his fellow's taste,¹³ and *le-fi še-'en da'at ha-bryut šawet*, because not all tastes are equal, introduce the motive of disgust into the realm of etiquette. A respectful behavior requires to abstain from what could bother the fellow diners by provoking their sense of disgust. The key-word to understand how the text approaches disgust is the expression *da'at*. *Da'at* – which has been rendered here as *taste* – is usually translated as *mind*, *opinion*, but in rabbinic language it refers more precisely to the sensitive aspect of the human mind and encompasses a set of psychological reactions and sensations that, when transferred to the social dimension, takes the form of taste, as opposed to disgust (*goût* vs. *dégoût*).¹⁴

Together with the matter of personal sensibility, *Derek Ereš Rabbah* raises another reason to justify the table prescriptions, i.e. the principle of *sakkanat nafšot*, or the *danger to life/health*. Besides being potentially repelling, other people's saliva also represents a hygienic threat. A similar rationale, belonging – so to speak – to medical reasoning, is mentioned in a passage from the Babylonian Talmud, in *b. Tamid* 27b:

חשיך תקין נפשך וקדים תקין נפשך כי היכי דלא תרחק
[...]

שטוף ושתי שטוף ואחית וכשאתה שותה מים שפוך מהן ואח"כ תן לתלמידך כדתניא לא ישתה אדם מים ויתן לתלמידו אלא אם כן שפך מהן
ומעשה באחד ששתה מים ולא שפך מהן ונתן לתלמידו ואותו תלמיד איסטנים היה ולא רצה לשתות ומת בצמא

Before nightfall, take care of your health and do the same at daybreak, so it will not leave you.

¹¹ The system of purity norms recalls the well known theory of «matter out of place» elaborate by M. DOUGLAS, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. With a New Preface by the Author*, Routledge, London 2002 (1 ed. 1966), pp. 51-71. Cfr. MILLER, *Anatomy*, cit., pp. 43-50; NUSSBAUM, *Hiding*, cit., p. 5; 93-94; KAZEN, *Dirt*, cit., p. 64.

¹² KELLY, *Yuck*, cit., pp. 119-125.

¹³ This formulation recalls the enunciation in *Ben Sira* 31,15: «Measure your fellow's taste on your own (*de'ah re'aka ke-nafšeka*), taking into consideration what bothers you».

¹⁴ An equivalent semantic intersection between the psychological and the social/moral sphere occurs with the Latin notion of *fastidium*, cfr. R.A.

[...] Rinse the cup before drinking and rinse it again before putting it down. When you drink water, pour out some and then give the cup to your disciple, as it has been taught: You should not drink water and give the cup to your disciple, unless you pour out some water. It happened to one man that he drank without pouring out some water. Then he gave the cup to his disciple, but this disciple was squeamish¹⁵ and did not want to drink – so, he died of thirst.

Saliva is not *tame*, impure, per se, but nevertheless vehicolates ritual impurity, as for instance in *Leviticus* 15:8: «If he who has gonorrhoea [*zav*] spits on a pure person, this one shall wash his garments and bath in water; he will be impure until evening».¹⁶ In *Derek Ereš Rabbah* the prophylactic mechanism against this source of contamination – which seems to be more medical than ritual – entails directly and explicitly the sense of disgust. According to William I. Miller's view about manners, the process of codification of etiquette universally evocates hygiene as a rationale when it comes to instruct on the less decourous and more repellent aspects of human interaction. Such a (pseudo)scientific argument does not necessarily constitutes the real foundation of etiquette – rather, the idea of hygiene reflects the successful deployment of the psychological and social mechanisms operating at the basis of the codification of manners.¹⁷

Whatever the actual grounds for the prescriptions against the violation of the self through contact with other people's bodily secretions are, in *Derek Ereš Rabbah*, the double etiology taste-hygiene is conceived as an inextricable

connection. Respect towards *da'at haver*, together with the warning against *sakkanat nafšot*, intertwines a theory of disgust that becomes functional to instruction on good manners. The role of disgust in etiquette literature has been highlighted by Shaun Nichols. By means of a comparison between contemporary regulations and the prescriptions included in one of the most popular manuals of the 16th century, *De civilitate morum puerilium* by Erasmus of Rotterdam, Nichols underlines how the norms that are more likely to survive in a cultural system are those connected with disgust. If the forbidden action triggers negative emotions, such as revulsion, the prohibition will thus be more easily remembered. Such a mechanism stands also at the basis of moral harm norms. Witnessing other people suffering produces a particularly upsetting emotional response in humans – which is why disgust play a noticeable role in the realm of ethics.¹⁸

Not differently from the well known *savoir-faire* manuals from the European Renaissance, *Derek Ereš Rabbah* is not an exception when it comes to represent the cultural process weaving together emotion and education: disgust becomes in fact a productive device in transmitting practical instruction.

3. Distinction: Good and Bad Taste

The central section in *Derek Ereš Zuṭa*, transmitted in chapters 5-8, constitutes an originally independent textual unit, shaped as a condensed *savoir-faire* manual which share many

KASTER, *The Dynamics of 'Fastidium' and the Ideology of Disgust*, in «Transactions of the American Philological Association» 131 (2001), pp. 143-189.

¹⁵ *Išṭenes, delicate, sickly*, from the Greek word ἄσθενής, cfr. S. KRAUSS, *Griechische und Lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum*, Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, Hildesheim 1964 (1899), vol. 2, pp. 98-99.

¹⁶ Cfr. J. PREUSS, F. ROSNER, *Biblical and the Talmudic Medicine*, NJ London Aronson, Northvale 1994, pp. 85-86. On the usage of saliva in medical cures or incantations see D. JAFFE, *Talmudic Polemics and Incantations in the Name of Jesus: Saliva as 'Materia Medica'*, in «Judaica» 71,4 (2015), pp. 334-348. On Greco-Roman sources about medical and magical

aspects of saliva see G. VELTRI, *Magie und Halakha, Ansätze zu einem empirischen Wissenschaftsbegriff im spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Judentum*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 1997, p. 164.

¹⁷ MILLER, *Anatomy*, cit., p. 173. N. ELIAS (*La civiltà delle buone maniere, La trasformazione dei costumi nel mondo aristocratico occidentale*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2009 [Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. I. Wandlungen des Verhaltens in den Weltlichen Oberschichten des Abendlandes, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1969]) notes that hygienical argumentations for spit management do not appear in the European manuals before the 19th century, p. 306.

¹⁸ On disgust and cultural transmission see also KELLY, *Yuck*, cit., pp. 119-122.

passages with the more extensive *Derek Ereṣ Rabbah*. Among the instructions on good manners, there are few maxims denouncing particular behaviors as repugnant:

ארבעה דברים גנאי לתלמיד חכמים לא יהא מחשך בדרך ולא יצא לשוק מבושם ולא יכנס לבית הכנסת באחרונה ולא ירבה שיבתו עם עמי הארץ

(*Derek Ereṣ Zuṭa* 6,1) Four things are repugnant for a *talmid ḥakam* [rabbinic disciple]: he should not be on the road after nightfall; he should not go to the market scented; he should not be the last entering the synagogue; he should not spend too much time with the ‘*ame ha-areṣ* [the ignoramuses who do not practice rabbinic legislation].¹⁹

כל תלמיד חכם שהוא מזלזל בנטילת ידים הרי זה מגונה אורח מכניס אורח מגונה ממנו אורח מטריח אורח מגונה משלשתן

(*Derek Ereṣ Zuṭa* 8,9) A *talmid ḥakam* who neglects to wash his hands is repugnant. Even more repugnant is the guest who invites another guest. And the most repugnant among these three is the guest who bothers his host.

The term *repugnant* has been chosen as the English rendition for two Hebrew expressions, *gana'i* and *meguneh*, respectively noun and adjective from the root *ganah/gany*, literally meaning *to cover, to hide something shameful and indecent*. In particular, the *pu'al* participle *meguneh* does not simply designate an ideal note of reprehension, but entails a tangible dimension evoking sensations of shame and ugliness that stand not far from what we could define disgust transposed from the psychological to the social level.²⁰ The inextricable connection between the graphic, material facet and the ethical, metaphorical one reveals how disgust infiltrates into the sphere of morality when it comes to define the socio-cultural coordinates of the rabbinic elite. The moralistic invective against actions such as being late, tart up or disrespecting guests – actions that do not violate the juri-

dical order – may sound clamorous and excessive to our modern ears. As a matter of fact, when it comes to rabbinic literature, it is difficult to discern the limit between ethics and what pertains to a more trivial and quotidian aspect of life, in other words, to what we could call etiquette. The truth is that such a limit does not exist and the concept of disgust in the analyzed rabbinic tractates can be helpful in order to understand the nature of this continuum between ethics and etiquette.

Public disapproval and stigmatization of bad manners offer a hint *a contrario* for the delineation of the behavioral ideology at the basis of the *Derek Ereṣ* corpus. In order to do so, it will be necessary to reflect in depth on the very concept of *derek ereṣ*. The phrase possesses a complex polysemy, whose range of meanings varies from *sexual intercourse, secular activity, good manners*. However, in some passages of the *Derek Ereṣ* tractates,²¹ the expression *derek ereṣ* seems to be understood as an actual cultural construct. There are, for instance, anecdotes in *Derek Ereṣ Rabbah* where the protagonists are indeed tested in their *derek ereṣ* – meaning in their capability to distinguish themselves as members of a rabbinic circle at the first sight. In this way, Rabban Gamli'el is recognized as a *ḥakam*, a sage, because he considerably knock at his fellow's door, Rabbi Yehošua' is praised for not compromising an abstinence vow, while the education of Rabbi 'Aqiba's disciples is evaluated by observing their voracity or decorum during dinner. As far as we can infer from the texts themselves, the concept of *derek ereṣ* seems to overlap to a certain extent the notion of *habitus* as developed by Pierre Bourdieu. As Bourdieu describes it,

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, system of durable, trasposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can

¹⁹ Like the observance of ritual purity, cfr. A. OPPENHEIMER, *The 'Am Ha-Aretz. A Study in the Social History of the Jewish People in the Hellenistic-Roman Period*, Brill, Leiden 1977.

²⁰ On the process of psychogenesis and socio-

genesis of the European ideal of civility and on the consolidation of disgust and shame standards, see ELIAS, *Civiltà*, cit., p. 268.

²¹ *Derek Ereṣ Rabbah* 5,2; 6,1; 7,1; *Derek Ereṣ Zuṭa* 3,1.

be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or expressing mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor.²²

In other words, the habitus is the lifestyle that distinguishes a particular social group, a system including all those non-discursive aspects of cultural phenomena – such as taste and style – by means of which a social group defines itself. Such a system is centered on bodily learning, through which an individual can acquire the basilar structures that are indispensable for his inclusion in a given social space. From this point of view, good manners represent an exemplary form of *connaissance par corps*:²³ they are in fact essentially corporeal behavioral dispositions whose acquirement is an integral part of the formation of single members of a group that defines, with such manners, its identity and ethos on the immediate level of practice.²⁴ Like Bourdieu’s habitus, rabbinic *derek ereṣ* (a) implies a social dimension unfolding into two directions, since it not only originates from and applies to everything involving social interaction but also comes to be an expression of socio-cultural distinction. (b) This ideological structure operates in an eminently practical realm and entails actions and behaviors that are considered obviously normal, appropriate, and convenient. Therefore, the mechanisms by which this experiential wisdom is learned usually do not belong to intellectual speculation of rabbinic instruction. (c) In other words, *derek ereṣ* can hardly be turned into an object of verbal and literary discourse.²⁵ Such a theoretical indefinability ge-

nerate the liminal status of *derek ereṣ* in halakic codification and explains why its *mise en texte* is relatively late.²⁶

The antipodes of rabbinic habitus are thus occupied by those behaviors esecrated in the two passages from *Derek Ereṣ Zuṭa*. In order to embody good taste, it is necessary and complementary to recognize, rebuff and rebuke bad taste.²⁷

4. Body Management and the Ethics of Caducity

Derek Ereṣ Rabbah 3,3 depicts an unflattering portrait of human beings:

אדם נאה ומשובח ומוציא דבר מגונה מפיו
משלו משל למה הדבר דומה לטרקלין גדול רוקב בורסקי קבוע
בתוכה
כל עובר ושב ואומר כמה נאה טרקלין זה אילמלא ביב של
בורסקי קבוע בתוכה
כך אדם נאה ומשובח ומוציא דבר מגונה מפיו
אם מוציא ממעיו פליטון או אפרסמון או אחד מכל מיני בשמים
על אחת כמה וכמה שהיה מתגאה על הבריות

Man would be graceful and praiseworthy if he would not produce disgusting matter from his orifices. We can make a comparison: what does this story resemble to? To a huge *triclinium* under which a tannery is built. Everyone passing by says: «How graceful would be this *triclinium* if the sewer of a tannery was not built under it». Similarly man would be graceful and praiseworthy if he did not produce disgusting matter from his orifices. If he produced *foliatum* or balm or whichever among the spices, how much more would he exalt himself over the other creatures!²⁸

Once again, the text uses the participle *meguneh*: what prevents man from appearing as a perfect creature is a *davar meguneh*, a *repugnant thing* discharging from his orifices. It

²² P. BOURDIEU, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2014 (*Le sens pratique*, Les Éditions Minuit, Paris 1980), p. 53.

²³ P. BOURDIEU, *Meditazioni pascaliane*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1998 (*Méditations pascalienes*, Éditions de Seuil, Paris 1997), p. 135.

²⁴ P. BOURDIEU, *La distinzione. Critica sociale del gusto*, Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna 1983 (*La distinction*, Les Éditions Minuit, Paris 1979), p. 177.

²⁵ BOURDIEU, *Logic*, cit., p. 91 and 102-103.

²⁶ BRIATA, *Due*, cit., pp. 35-44.

²⁷ Cfr. NUSSBAUM, *Hiding*, cit., pp. 217-218.

²⁸ In *Abot de-Rabbi Natan A* 19 [35b] the version of the parable slightly differs: «Rabbi Šim‘on ben Eli‘ezer says: I will make an example. What does the matter resemble to? It resembles to a king building a huge palace and dwelling in every part of it, even though the sewer of a tannery runs through it and streams at its entrance. Everyone passing by says: How graceful would be this palace if the sewer of a tannery did not run through it. And such is man, exalting himself over the other creatures even

should be kept in mind that the word *peh* means *opening, bodily orifice* but it primarily denotes the *mouth*. Accordingly, the whole period could also mean that man *pronounces shameful things with his mouth*. However, the tractate *Avot de-Rabbi Natan A* (19 [35b]) contains a parallel to this *mašal*, or parable, that dispels the ambiguity between orality and anality. The key is the phrase *me-me'aw ma'in saruah*, meaning [he produces] from his bowels a putrid substance – or, better to say, an organic fluid subject to material transformation and decay. In *Derek Ereš Rabbah*, a derivative and secondary source, we thus find a euphemism in order to put into words what makes man part of the creation: the unfortunate ability to produce revolting material through an excretory system.²⁹ Human beings stand in a special position among the creatures but, simultaneously, share the earthly nature with (other) animals, as they possess bodies that «generate, fornicate, secrete, excrete, suppurate, die, and rot».³⁰ Corporeality with its by-products represents one of the main object of disgust exactly because of its connection with the same animality that man so tenaciously tries to escape. Body constantly reminds that man is not different from all those creatures that come into the world, transform and finally die.³¹ Mortality and vulnerability of material exteriority are deeply feared and, therefore, rejected and removed with a disgust reaction.

In *Derek Ereš Rabbah* this association between death and animality is explicitly stated. The text discussed above, in fact, is introduced by a section devoted to *memento mori*:

בן עזאי אומר כל הנותן ארבעה דברים הללו כנגד לבו ועל עיניו שוב אינו חוטא לעולם מאין הוא בא ולאן הוא הולך ומי הוא דיינו ומה הוא עתיד להיות מאין הוא בא ממקום חושך ואפלא ולאן הוא הולך למקום חושך ואפילה מאין הוא בא ממקום טומאה ולאן הוא הולך לטמא אחרים מאין הוא מליחה סרוחה וממקום שאין העין יכול לראות ולאן

if he produces putrid fluids from his bowels. If he produced scented oil, balm or *foliatum*, how much more would he exalt himself!»

²⁹ Cfr. J.W. SCHOFER, *Confronting Vulnerability. The Body and the Divine in Rabbinic Ethics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2010, pp. 53-59; Id., *The Beastly Body in Rabbinic Self-Formation*, in D. BRAKKE, M.L. SATLOW, S.

הוא הולך לשאול ולאבדון בגהינם ולישרף באור ומי הוא דיינו תדע שאינו דיינו בשר ודם אלא אדון על כל המעשים ברוך הוא ומה הוא עתיד להיות עפר רימה ותולעה שנאמר אף כי אנוש רמה ובן אדם תולעה ר' שמעון אומר רימה בחייו ותולעה במותו איזוהו רימה שבחייו אילו הכנים ותולעה במותו אלו מה שמרחיש במותו

Ben 'Azza'i says: Whoever pays attention to these four things will never sin again – whence he comes, where he goes, who is his judge and what he is bound to become. Whence does he come? From a place of gloom and darkness. Where does he go? To a place of gloom and darkness. Whence does he come? From a place of impurity. Where does he go? Defiling the others. Whence does he come? From a putrid secretion and from a place that the eye cannot see. Where does he go? To Še'ol, to perdition in Gehinnom, to burn in flames. Who is his judge? Know that his judge is not flesh and bones, but the Lord of all the creatures, blessed be He. What is he bound to become? Ashes, worms and maggots, as it is written *How much less man, that is a worm – the human being, that is a maggot* [Job. 25:6]. Rabbi Šim'on says: Man is worms when he is alive and maggots when he is dead. Worms when he is alive – that is lice; maggots when he is dead – that is the creatures swarming from his death.³²

This gloomy representation of human existence lays bare the awareness of man's viscid fugacity on the *'olam ha-ze*, this world. The excerpt sheds light on two – predictable – reference points of human life: birth and death. Human beings originate from a *liḥah seruḥah*, a putrid (or organic) secretion, and, when turning inexorably into corpses, they end up giving rise to *rimmah we-tola'ah*, worms and maggots. Far from evocating a nihilist thought, the text projects a didactic intent on the *'olam ha-ba'*, the world to come, whose access is supervised by an absolute judge assessing all the deeds that are done under the sun, during the few days of men's lives.

WEITZMAN (eds.), *Religion and the Self in Antiquity*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis 2005, pp. 197-221. See also VAN LOOPIK, *Ways*, p. 85.

³⁰ MILLER, *Anatomy*, cit., p. 49.

³¹ NUSSBAUM, *Hiding*, cit., pp. 89-92; KELLY, *Yuck*, cit., p. 139.

³² Cfr. *Abot* 4,1; *Abot de-Rabbi Natan A* 19 [35a-b]; *Abot de-Rabbi Natan B* 32 [35a].

The literary extract under analysis – a *pastiche* derived from parallel passages in *Avot* and *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* – prefaces the large collection of etiquette instructions that forms the bulk of *Derek Ereš Rabbah*, functioning as a moral *caveat* dictating a proper behavior in accordance with divine and human law. In this case, the text aims at eliciting disgust in its readers, through a psychological expedient that raises bewilderment and intimidation, in order to engrave in their minds the importance of performing the best possible conduct.

5. Conclusions

The selection of texts from the *Derek Ereš* corpus shows how a literary work focused on the practical and ideological regulation of sociality approaches the topic of disgust. Disgust comes into play on various levels: in the implementation of etiquette normatives, as in *Derek Ereš Rabbah* 9,1; in the construction of the rabbinic lifestyle, as in *Derek Ereš Zuṭa* 6,1 and 8,9; in the ethical exhortation to a pious life, as in *Derek Ereš Rabbah* 3,3.

Our study is by all means preliminary and partial, since it takes into account the *loci*, in *Derek Ereš Rabba* and *Zuṭa*, where the emotion of disgust is more or less explicitly evoked. However, the *Derek Ereš* tractates include other – more indirect – manifestations of disgust, such as, for instance, a discussion on the management of physiological needs.³³ Considering rabbinic literature in general, paradoxically we have not examined the Hebrew expression that more closely seems to translate our perception of disgust, the root *ma'as*. Similarly, we have not engaged with the notorious carnivalesque and grotesque episodes appearing in the Babylonian Talmud.³⁴ These are just few of the directions that a thorough investigation on rabbinic disgust can explore. Research should in fact be extended to a wider range of texts reflecting the status of disgust in rabbinic culture, in order to promote our knowledge on a universal mechanism concerning the entirety of human life aspects, from biology, to psychology and sociology.

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³³ See *Derek Ereš Rabbah* 7,6 and *Derek Ereš Zuṭa* 8,12.

³⁴ *Baba Meši'a* 83b-84b. For a study in Bakhtinian terms see cfr. D. BOYARIN, *Carnal Israel: Read-*

ing Sex in Talmudic Culture, University of California Press, Berkeley 1993; Id., *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2009.

SUMMARY

Since William I. Miller's *Anatomy of disgust*, the emotion of revulsion has drawn increasing attention in the humanities. However, theoretical models on disgust have been applied only sporadically to Jewish studies and, specifically, to rabbinic literature. A particularly intriguing and productive case-study is constituted by the tractates *Derek Ereş Rabbah* and *Derek Ereş Zuṭa*. Two late compilations included among the Minor Tractates of the Babylonian Talmud (8th-10th century), *Derek Ereş Rabbah* and *Zuṭa* deal with ethics and etiquette. The phrase *derek eres* can be translated as *good manners*, *courtesy* and indicates the set of behavioral features that most immediately distinguishes the member of the rabbinic elite as an educated man. Instructions in the *Derek Ereş* corpus cover every aspect of everyday life – from table to toilet, from school to market. More or less explicitly, this normative structure refers to the concept of disgust in a wide range of semantic nuances, such as physical repulsion, social inappropriateness, and moral reproach. In the light of the extant inquiries on disgust, the rabbinic texts suggest three thematic directions: (1) *etiquette and oral incorporation*, based on *Derek Ereş Rabbah* 9,1, where table manners find their *raison d'être* in a combination of hygienic considerations and personal issues connected with individual sensibility; (2) *good and bad taste*, on *Derek Ereş Zuṭa* 6,1, where the usage of the adjective *meguneh* (*revolting* or *reprehensible*) reveals the continuity between corporeal perceptions and moral/social rebuke; (3) *body management and ethics of caducity*, on *Derek Ereş Rabbah* 3,3, depicting a grotesque portrait of human condition through the symbolic connection between physiological functions and distance from divinity. As an anthological collection of materials dedicated to quotidian behavior, the *Derek Ereş* corpus represents a productive starting point for the exploration of the idea of disgust in Jewish medieval literature.

KEYWORDS: Rabbinic Literature; *Derek Ereş*; Disgust.

