1. Introduction: Derek Ereş 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. 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 Ereş tractates.

Derek Ereş Rabbah e Derek Ereş Zuta – 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, 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 ereş can be translated as good manners, polish or courtesy and indi-

---


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 Weisheitschrift, pharisäisches Erbe oder spätrabbinische Bildung?, in «Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft» 96,3-4 (2005), pp. 243-258.


5 The authoritative predilection of tannaic Hebrew is a stylistic typicality found in the ethical anthologies, cfr. Schofer, Rabbinical, cit., p. 316. The extant critical editions of the Derek Ereş corpus are those compiled by M. Higger, Massektot Zei-
Ilaria Briata

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 Erez Rabbah is devoted to applied etiquette covering various areas of everyday life – table manners, hospitality, and behavior in toilets, baths, and the marketplace –, Derek Erez Zuta is mostly concerned with religious assertions and ethical guidance for talmide hakhamim, 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. Miller and Hiding from Humanity by Martha C. Nussbaum. 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

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 Erez Rabbah, Derek Erez Zuta, in A. Cohen (ed.), The Minor Tractates of the Talmud: Massektoth Ketannoth 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 Erez Zuta 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.

10 Ivi, pp. 117-119.
Disgust, Ethics and Etiquette in Derek Ereš Rabbah and Zuṭa


11 The system of purity norms recalls the well
12 KELLY, Yuck, cit., pp. 119-125.
13 This formulation recalls the enunciation in
14 An equivalent semantic intersection between

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

In the following sections, I will propose a
selection of literary examples showing how the
emotion of disgust is treated in Derek Ereš Rab-
bah and Derek Ereš Zuṭa. The excerpted pas-
gages 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 quo-
ted 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:

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 fel-
low, 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 misfne še-hu’ mamheh da’ ato
šel havero, 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 provo-
kling their sense of disgust. The key-word to
understand how the text approaches disgust is the
expression da’at. Da’at – which has been rende-
red 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 re-
actions 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 sensi-
bility, Derek Ereš Rabbah raises another reason
to justify the table prescriptions, i.e. the princ-
iple of sakkana nafruit, 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:

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

[...]

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 oc-
curs 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 squeamish and did not want to drink – so, he died of thirst.

Saliva is not tame', impure, per se, but nevertheless vehiculates ritual impurity, as for instance in Leviticus 15:8: «If he who has gonorrhrea [zav] spits on a pure person, this one shall wash his garments and bath in water; he will be impure until evening». 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 decorous 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 secritions are, in Derek Ereš Rabbah, the double etiology taste-hygience is conceived as an inextricable connection. Respect towards da’at ūavero, 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 civitate 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 aspects of saliva see G. Veltri, Magie und Halakha, Ansätze zu einem empirischen Wissenschaftsbegriff im späantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Judentum, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 1997, p. 164.


18 On disgust and cultural transmission see also Kelly, Yuck, cit., pp. 119-122.
Disgust, Ethics and Etiquette in Derek Ereš Rabbah and Zuṭa

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

(דerek Ereš 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].

(דerek Ereš 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, guna’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. 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 juridical 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 Ereš corpus. In order to do so, it will be necessary to reflect in depth on the very concept of derek ereš. The phrase possesses a complex polysemacy, whose range of meanings varies from sexual intercourse, secular activity, good manners. However, in some passages of the Derek Ereš tractates, the expression derek ereš seems to be understood as an actual cultural construct. There are, for instance, anecdotes in Derek Ereš Rabbah where the protagonists are indeed tested in their derek ereš – 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 ereš 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

20 On the process of psychogenesis and socio-
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.

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: they are in fact essentially corporeal behavioral dispositions whose acquirement is an integral part of the formation of sigle members of a group that defines, with such manners, its identity and ethos on the immediate level of practice. Like Bourdieu’s habitus, rabbinic derek ereş (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 ereş can hardly be turned into an object of verbal and literary discourse. Such a theoretical indefinability generates the liminal status of derek ereş in halakic codification and explains why its mise en texte is relatively late.

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

4. Body Management and the Ethics of Caducity

Derek Ereş Rabbah 3.3 depicts an unflattering portrait of human beings:

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 folium or balm or whichever among the spices, how much more would he exalt himself over the other creatures?

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

---

25 Bourdieu, Logic, cit., p. 91 and 102-103.
26 Briata, Due, cit., pp. 35-44.
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 [35bh]) 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 Ereş 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 revolving material through an excretory system.⁹ 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».¹⁰ 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.¹¹ Mortality and vulnerability of material exteriority are deeply feared and, therefore, rejected and removed with a disgust reaction.

In *Derek Ereş 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*:

> וב נאם מה מתrepid ואבצבה רביד חלול בז מזר הפ ועי
> שב אל סימע עלול בעל מקא איב אלל אה חלול מי והה
> ידני המ את תעדות
> מקא את מקסמק תדע איבלא אה חלול לעמק
> והשל אופילאח מקא את מקסמק שמא אה לאו
> מקא את מקסמק שאר אבצבה יפעל מזרא להא

if he produces putrid fluids from his bowels. If he produced scented oil, balm or *foliatum*, how much more would he exalt himself!²⁹ 

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 place of defiling 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 ve-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.
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 sociability 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.

Ilaria Briata
Dip.to di Lingue e Letterature Straniere
Università di Verona
e-mail: ilariabriata@gmail.com

---

\[^{33}\] See *Derek Ereš Rabbah* 7,6 and *Derek Ereš Zuṭa* 8,12.

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 Eres Rabbah* and *Derek Eres Zuta*. Two late compilations included among the Minor Tractates of the Babylonian Talmud (8th-10th century), *Derek Eres Rabbah* and *Zuta* 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 Eres* 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 Eres Rabbah* 9.1, where table manners find their raison d’etre in a combination of hygienic considerations and personal issues connected with individual sensibility; (2) good and bad taste, on *Derek Eres Zuta* 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 Eres 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 Eres* corpus represents a productive starting point for the exploration of the idea of disgust in Jewish medieval literature.

KEYWORDS: Rabbinic Literature; Derek Eres; Disgust.