

The Scent of Women: Incense and Perfume in Talmud *Yerushalmi Sheqalim* 5:2

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As with the Babylonian Talmud (*Bavli*), women are not at the centre of interest of redactors and authors of the Gemara of the Jerusalem Talmud (*Yerushalmi*). When it comes to the temple, women are identified only in relation to men, be it with regard to purity or the carrying out of cultic tasks. They are always depicted as acting from a position of inferiority, and are not honored with the same rights and obligations as men. The same holds true for the depiction of women in the talmudic Tractate of *Sheqalim*, which deals with the collection of the half-shekel (or two-drachma) tax for the expenses and the expenditure of the Temple.¹

Introduction to Massekhet *Sheqalim*

With the exception of *Massekhet Sheqalim*, the *Bavli* comments on and explicates all tractates of the order *Mo'ed* in the Mishna. A gemara on Tractate *Sheqalim* is found only in the *Yerushalmi*, and this gemara is usually included in the printed editions of the *Bavli*.² Since the collection of the *sheqel*, the temple tax, began at an appointed time the tractate was included in *Seder Mo'ed*.

In comparison with the *Bavli*, texts from this Talmud are older and sometimes much more difficult to explicate. In my mind and in the mind of other scholars, the *Yerushalmi* preserves sometimes more reliable sources of informing for understanding the historical context regarding gender issues. Even the relationship between the Mishnah and Gemara in the *Yerushalmi* is more complex than that in the *Bavli*. While the Mishnah is intimately connected to the *Bavli*, the Mishnah in the *Yerushalmi* was added to the manuscripts at a later date, and the less redacted text of the gemara made room for broader discussions as well as for the addition of seemingly unrelated aggadic notes and narratives. The manuscript transmission of the tractate shows many differences and a great variety of readings. Most notable are the corrections and differences in the version of the tractate transmitted in a commentary by the thirteenth century Rabbenu Meshul-

¹ For a general assessment of this literature see the introduction by ILAN, "Introduction," 10-11. On the early development of the *sheqel*-tax see BAUMGARTEN, "Invented Traditions," 199-202 (with the literature cited there).

² Cf. STEMBERGER, *Einleitung*, 202-203.

lam of Lunel, and also in the manuscript of Shlomo Sirillo.³ The difficult state of preservation of the text is reflected also in Chapter 5 of the *Yerushalmi* tractate. In this chapter the Mishnah lists the various chief officers of the Temple and speaks, in particular, about the administration of the *sheqel* funds, thereby transmitting a remarkable and somewhat strange note on a group of priestly women.

The following tradition is found already in *tYom* 2:5, (ed. Lieberman, 232); and then in a longer version in the midrash *Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* (*SongR* 3:5, 20d); and in a parallel text in *yYoma* 3:9, 41a. The version in *bYom* 38a already seems to interpret the passage in the Tosefta, and since I have taken upon myself the task of writing a commentary on passages in *Massekhet Sheqalim* referring to women and the feminine, this paper will deal first and foremost with this tradition in the *Yerushalmi*. Focusing on *Sheqalim* rather than on *Yoma* does not imply a judgement on whether the *Sheqalim* text has preserved a more original context than in the one in *Yoma*. On the contrary, it seems that at first sight the whole passage was studied and repeated initially in the context of discussions on the Day of Atonement (*Yom ha-Kippurim*). The tractate on this day deals with all kinds of priestly duties and services at the temple. In particular, the second chapter of *Yoma*, in the Mishna as well as in the Tosefta, seems to have been a fitting context for mentioning a tradition where women from a special family were highlighted.

Interestingly, this tradition draws our attention to the fact that Jewish women in antiquity used perfumes; but, as a sign of devotion to God, some of them refrained from its use. The most interesting passage in this division of the Gemara refers to some women from the household of the family of Avtinos:

דבברים הללו מזכירין אותן לשבח שלא יצאת אשה משלאחר מהן מבושמת מעולם. ולא עוד אלא כשהיה אחד מהן נושא אשה ממקום אחר היה פוסק עמה על מנת שלא תתבשם, (שלא יהו אומרים: ממעשה פטום הקטורת הן מתבשמות, לקיים מה שנאמר: "והיתם נקיים מה' ומישראל" [במדבר לב לג]).⁴

[A] And in this matter, they are remembered for good: A woman of their household [i.e. the household of Avtinos] never went out wearing perfume at any time,

[B] and not only so, but when they would marry into their household a woman from some other place, they made an agreement that she not put on perfume,

[C] so that people should not say: Their women are putting on perfume made up from the preparation of the incense for the Temple.⁵

[D] This they did to fulfill the following verse: "And you shall be clear before the Lord and before Israel" (Num 32:22) (*ySheqalim* 5:2, 49a⁶).

³ See SUSSMANN, "Messorat limmud," 12-78.

⁴ In Ms Leiden these sentences are added later by a second scribe. This insertion is found in all other complete witnesses of the *Yerushalmi*. It is missing, however, in the citation of this passage in *Sefer Vebizḥir*, ed. FREIMAN, Vol. 1, Ostrova, Warschau 1873, 220.

⁵ I have used the translations of NEUSNER, *Sheqalim*, 104. Cf. NEUSNER, *Tosefta*, Vol. 1, 550. The structure is mine.

The family of Avtinus, as explained earlier in this text (as well as in the parallels), superintended the preparation of incense in the Temple, while another family, the family of Garmu (*Bet Garmu*), was responsible for making the show bread. The names of these families and some of the technical Hebrew terms in this tradition are intriguing. As far as I know, scholars do not have clear cut explanations for all of them.⁷

Most scholars assume that the name Avtinus comes from a Greek loanword. Samuel Krauss, for instance, thinks that the name is a composite from the word *eu* and *toine*, in the meaning of ‘banquet’.⁸ More likely, however, it is a derivation of the Greek verb *thyein*, meaning ‘to fumigate’, or the noun *tyma*, ‘sacrifice’, as explained in the *Aruch* of Natan of Rome.⁹ Not very likely are some explanations provided by Joseph Perles, who assumes a derivation from the Greek word *euthys*, meaning ‘straight’, or a similar verb *euthyno*, meaning ‘to make straight’, thereby referring to the column of smoke they produced. Joseph Perles also considered the derivation of their name from the word *botanē*, meaning ‘plant’.¹⁰ Others thought the name is the same as that mentioned in *mHal* 4:11, Ben Antinos. This might however be the result of an early copying error. A house in the Temple precinct where the incense was stored is mentioned in *mYom* 1:5 and *mMid* 1:1 as *Bet Avtinus*. According to *AdRN* A 41 the mortar of the family of Avtinus had been preserved in Rome. Tal Ilan translates the Greek name Avtinus accordingly with *al ma’ase ha-qetoret*, or ‘the (one) who prepared the incense’.¹¹

As identified in our text, the members of the house of Avtinus were experts in the preparation of incense for smoke. Although some other experts for making incense from spices were invited from as far as Alexandria in Egypt, only the house of Avtinus could make the smoke ascend straight to heaven, this being a sign of direct acceptance by God. This is a remarkable hint of the special gift possessed by this family. The Avtinus family possessed an arcane knowledge of how to prepare incense. Therefore, and because they had also knowledge about a secret vision of the destruction of the Temple, they did not disseminate this information to outsiders.

⁶ According to Ms Leiden as transcribed in *Synopse zum Talmud Yerushalim*, ed. P. Schäfer / H.-J. Becker, Vol. II/5-12, 96.

⁷ See on the close textual context of this passage, where women are mentioned who wove the curtain, ILAN, *Ta’anit* (FCBT II/9), 295f.

⁸ KRAUSS, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter*, Vol. 1, 5 (cf. also the note by I. Löw).

⁹ Cf. KOHUT (ed.), *Aruch completum*, Vol. 1, 6a (see also the note by KRAUSS, Vol. 9, 3).

¹⁰ See PERLES, “Miscellen,” 257.

¹¹ ILAN, *Lexicon of Jewish Names*, vol. 1, 280. On the possible derivation of the name see also HÜTTENMEISTER, *Sheqalim*, 47f.

Incense

As is well known, incense plays a prominent role in ancient temple worship.¹² Aaron is permitted to burn incense, *qetoret*, as part of lawful worship. According to a priestly tradition incense was burned on a golden altar every morning in front of the Holy of Holies. Leviticus 16 describes how incense protected the high priest with a cloud against the divine wrath or divine radiation when entering the Holy of Holies. The incense smoke gave protection, and it is for this reason that the incense burner was always placed between the priest and the Holy of Holies or the Deity, like in Assyrian-Babylonian temples. Incense was also offered in the morning and evening to secure the presence of God and his attention to man's prayer. Incense rituals were thought to have also apotropaic functions. In Numbers 17 Aaron stops a plague by burning incense, and Nadav and Avihu seem to have performed an unknown, though forbidden practice of burning incense which resulted in their death.¹³

The Bible, however, does not reflect much upon the origin of the use of incense. In Exod 30:34–38 it is simply introduced as a divine commandment. Why God desires incense, and why he likes pleasant smell (*reah nehoah*) ascending straight and not dispersed in all directions is not explained, but presupposed. It was a common heritage of late antique, oriental cult; incense was accepted in the daily cult from early on, and the preparation was in the hands of specialists.¹⁴

Perfume

The term *mitbasem*, for 'putting on perfume', does not exactly explain which kind of perfume is under discussion. The dictionaries translate the *hitpa'el* as 'to perfume oneself (with oil)'.¹⁵ The word כַּשֵׁם in biblical Hebrew designates the balsam tree, which in Latin is *commiphora gileadensis* or *commiphora opobalsamum*. Pliny mentions the use of balsam resin as perfume. *Shir ha-Shirm* 1:14 praises the spray of Balsam and *benna* blooms in the vineyards of En-Gedi. Balsam from Judea is thought to have been the most precious perfume in antiquity. Pliny says that it had a value of 592 denarii for every pound. In Massada shards from store vessels with the inscription *Balsana* were discovered. Resins of balsam were ingredients for ointments and crèmes, valued by Greek and Latin authors of antiquity. Statius, for example, a Roman writer in the second half of the first century, praises

¹² Cf. KRAUSS, *Talmudische Archäologie* 1, 233-244; NIELSEN, "Incense," 406-407; OUELLETTE, "Incense and Perfume," 754-755; see also GREEN, *Aroma*, 73-83.

¹³ On the tendency in rabbinic interpretations of this famous biblical passage on incense cf. SHINAN, "The Sins," 174-205.

¹⁴ See BECHMANN, "Duft," 49-90.

¹⁵ JASTROW, *Dictionary*, 179; MATTHEWS, "Perfumes and Spices," 226-227; FELIKS, "Incences and Perfumes," 753-754; see also GREEN, *Aroma*, 32.

the ‘juices of Palestine’ or the ‘Hebrew juices’, thereby most probably referring to balsam.¹⁶ And Oppian of Apamea (or Pella), a third century Roman poet, admired balsam as ‘the perfume of Palestine’.¹⁷

Since balsam and the products made of balsam were so valued and costly (it was used not only for perfumes but also as medicine), recipes for its production were often kept a secret.¹⁸ The profession of perfumer is first ascribed to Bezalel in Exod 37:29. Since other ingredients and fragrances, like frankincense and myrrh, were used as perfume and incense, the perfumers came from different families. Exod 30 and I Chr 9:30 partly restrict the production of incense to priestly families. However, there was obviously a large secular market for perfumes too. I Sam 8:13, for instance, states that women were drafted to work for the palace as perfumers.

Evidently, the use of perfume by men and women was commonly accepted in Jewish daily life in Roman Palestine. Although this fact has been known for a long time, it has not been researched until recently.¹⁹ Apparently, Jews had also accepted older customs and fashions which are not necessarily Jewish of perfuming and using fragrances, sometimes even as medicines.²⁰ Perfumes played a certain role in everyday culture, and this fact can be assumed even if there are no explicit laws or restrictions concerning their use or abuse. Even the profession of a perfumer was known to the Rabbis; for example, in *bQid* 82b a certain Yudah, son of Yeshaya, a druggist or perfumer, is mentioned. According to *bYev* 24b and *bQid* 92a these dealers of perfume brought their wares directly in private homes. In *bPes* 65a (parallels *bQid* 82b) it is emphasized that the world cannot exist without perfume dealers.²¹

In Roman society men and women used to perfume or to fumigate themselves; particularly, after meals when the use of all kinds of odorous substances was the common practice.²² And it seems that also most of the rabbis acted in this regard the same way.²³ Even on a Shabbat the use of perfuming substances was allowed,²⁴ and its use is attested especially by the houses of wealthy people – for example, after bathing the application of oil and ointments is depicted. The

¹⁶ STERN, *Greek and Latin Authors* 1, 515

¹⁷ STERN, *Greek and Latin Authors* 2, 335.

¹⁸ On the economical background of perfume trade in Jewish late antiquity cf. NIELSEN, “Incense,” 407-408; SAFRAI, *Economy*, 225-305.

¹⁹ For example, the new handbook on *Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, edited by CATHERINE HEZSER, Oxford 2010, has no chapter on this issue. But see now GREEN, *Aroma*, 19-63.

²⁰ See PREUSS, *Medizin*, 431-433; ROSNER, *Medicine*, 240-241.

²¹ On the ambiguous status of perfume dealers see, however, also *AdRN* A 18:1; *bYev* 63a.

²² Cf. BALSDON, *Frau*, 288-293; RIMMEL, *Das Buch des Parfums*, 59-81.

²³ See, e.g., ROSENZWEIG, *Kleidung*, 96f.

²⁴ See *Soferim* 19:10.

practice of fumigating clothes is also important for an adequate understanding of the text (לְקַדֵּשׁ), as attested in *mKel* 22:10 and *DeutR* 1:1.

But the traditions concerning perfume are not as unambiguous as one might think. On the one hand, there is much evidence that rabbinic Jews in late antiquity used to perfume themselves and their dresses; but on the other hand, there are rabbinical traditions, like in *bBer* 13b, which condemn perfumed men walking in the streets. *tBer* 6:5 declares that the use of perfume is inappropriate for men,²⁵ and according to a baraita in *bBer* 43b a *talmid hakham* should not go to the market perfumed. Women however are allowed to use perfume and men are obligated to provide their wives with money for their perfume baskets.²⁶ An amoraic midrash explains the prohibition which applies to men by the exegetical observation that man was created from earth ‘which never smells’ whereas woman was created from Adam’s rib, “and if someone leaves flesh three days without salt it will begin to stink.”²⁷ Many other rabbinic sayings and aggadic traditions presuppose that the flavouring and perfuming of women leads to desire and harlotry.²⁸ As it is insinuated in *bShab* 62a-b, that a woman going out on the streets with perfume is liable a sin-offering. This concept stands also from a baraita transmitted in the *Tosefta*.²⁹ All these traditions combine motives of pleasing scent with the motif of sexual desire and with the ideal of perfection and beauty.

The concept that a perfect body smells good and a defective body smells bad, is an ideal attested in Plato’s *Timaios* (50e).³⁰ However, in Plato scent is an ambiguous phenomenon. For him and other Greek and Latin philosophers in antiquity odors define a ‘half-formed nature’ with an ambiguous status. They are considered thinner than water and coarser than air. For Aristotle odors are difficult to name or classify, unlike colours.³¹ Olfaction therefore is deemed to be deceitful, the visual sense is deemed the only clear sense which leads the human mind to form ideas. These concepts of odor might have had an influence on Jewish ways of perception, especially in priestly families, who may have adapted their private customs under the strong influence of Hellenism. Already the Greek name of the family of Avtinos points to how strong this influence might have been. Even after the seemingly anti-Hellenistic Maccabean revolt, Hellenism changed Jewish life in all spheres of public and private interaction. This is

²⁵ See also *bBer* 43b.

²⁶ Cf. *bNid* 66b; *bKet* 66b.

²⁷ See *GenR* 17:8. Cf. on this BASKIN, *Midrashic Women*, 65-66.

²⁸ See, e.g., *Midrash LamR* 4:18, where a woman is depicted taking a hen’s gullet, filling it with balsam and placing it between her heel and her shoe. When she saw a band of young men, she pressed upon it so that the perfume went through them “like the poison of a snake.” See on this NAHSHON, *Jews and Shoes*, 13.

²⁹ Cf. *tShab* 4:11, and see on this tradition LIEBERMAN, *Tosefta Kifshutab* 3, 67.

³⁰ Cf. ARCHER-HIND (ed. and transl.), *Timaeus of Plato*, 243-247.

³¹ See on this CLASSEN et al., *Aroma*, 48. Cf. ARISTOTELES, *De anima*, II 9.

especially true for the wealthy and learned priestly circles around the Temple in Jerusalem.³²

I therefore suggest that the commonly accepted idea of the elusive and misleading nature of scent might have caused priestly Jews to develop the new and strange notion of mistrust and doubt about women in the households of the family of Avtinos. Since priestly families in those times adopted Hellenistic customs and ideas, it is most likely that they also accepted the Greek view of odor. Therefore, perfumed women were viewed as not as pure as they could be and regarded as being of an ambiguous status; and, it is interesting to take notice of the fact, that the seemingly later version of this passage in *Midrash Shir ha-Shirim* adds the detail, that even children did not go out perfumed.³³ The most interesting imaginary charge in the text, namely that women of the family of Avtinos might have taken incense produced for the Temple for their own use, seems to have been a typical male rhetorical device to control and to subordinate women, who seem to have been attracted to fine scents and odor. Behind this imagined charge there stands the strong prohibition of using priestly incense for private purposes in Exod 30:38. The explication, that even women who married from outside (the family?), ‘from another place’ (then Jerusalem?), into the Avtinos family had to adopt this restriction, indicates that the rabbis who composed this midrash imagined the women in this family as being treated more rigidly and being more restricted in their usual ways of behaviour.

Evidently this tradition, which also informs us that the family of Avtinos had certain knowledge about the forthcoming destruction of the Temple, is full of legendary and aggadic allusions. The reporting of the details of the women and wives of the family of Avtinos, however, seems to transmit a certain ideal of holiness, purity and perfection deeply rooted in Hellenistic views of scent and women. The perfect priestly woman needs no perfume, because perfume like any odor might cause misunderstandings leading to false accusations or malicious gossip to the effect that priestly women from the house of Avtinos have taken something that was not permitted to them. The editors of this text did not intend to say that the women of the House of Avtinos were remembered for good, but rather that their men tried to implement a Hellenized priestly ideal, expressed in the concluding citation from Num 32:22. The verse **והייתם נקיים** (masculine) in this context has its emphasis therefore in its second half, not explicitly cited in the *Sheqalim* version, but underlying the ideal of purity, “before the Lord and before Israel.”

³² On the somewhat complex situation in research on priests and priesthood in Second Temple times see, e.g., GUSSMANN, *Priesterversiändnis*, 39-76. For the category of ‘Hellenization’ cf. SCHÄFER, “Introduction,” 1-20; SCHWARTZ, *Imperialism*, 22-25.

³³ See on this also GREEN, *Aroma*, 145, who observes that the mention of children in *Midrash Shir ha-Shirim* is missing from the older version.

Purity in this sense points to the social character of the rabbinic idea of purity, a kind of interrelated common purity, acceptable and explicable to the common people, the Israelites, who tried to adapt priestly rules to their daily life; in other words, a life applying rules of purity – not smelly or malodorous.

In as much as God is thought to have been invisible according to the biblical report, he also seems to have been thought of as being numb or neutral in olfactory terms. Therefore, priests – including their women – should not smell. This simple, somewhat odd concept seems to be the reason why this baraita on the preparation of incense used in the Temple was introduced both into *Massekhet Shegalim* and into *Tosefta Yoma*.

The original pro-feminist tendency in this tradition however, has clearly been reduced after its incorporation into the *Bavli* and into *Midrash Shir ha-shirim*.

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