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In the rabbinic worldview, man goes through life surrounded by temptation. Whether it be the idolater who cannot resist the urge to libate every drop of wine in sight,1 or the well-endowed rabbi who must overcome his sexual desire, which is as large as his gigantic phallus,2 the world is a place where temptation lurks on every street corner, at every table, and at every moment. For the rabbis, Torah—both Written and Oral—is the solution to controlling the yēšer (יֶשֶׁר), the inclination to act on one’s desires.3 The ability to control one’s yēšer is essential for proper rabbinic comportment. Unfortunately for women, according to the rabbis, only men are capable of controlling their yēšer.4 Given that only men could control their yēšer, women often appear in rabbinic literature in the role of the temptress, seeking to seduce men into transgressive social, ethical, legal, and theo-

2. For discussion, see Daniel Boyarin, Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture (New Historicism 25; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 197–206.
4. The rabbis are not unique in the ancient Mediterranean in holding this gendered view. In general, see Michael L. Satlow, “‘Try to be a Man’: The Rabbinic Construction of Masculinity,” HTR 89 (1996): 19–40. For this reason, I will often employ gendered language in this essay. When I say “man” or use masculine pronouns (as I did in the first sentence of this essay), it is because the rabbis themselves believe a certain view is attributed only to men; when I employ gender neutral or inclusive language, it is a reflection of a rabbinic belief that is attributed to both genders. Such statements should not be considered a reflection of my own beliefs but only those of the ancient rabbis.
logical practices. All of this helps to explain how Rabbi Aqiba found himself in bed with two women.

But before we enter Rabbi Aqiba’s bedroom, we must first properly contextualize this story. This account is part of a series of three stories in which women test men’s self-control. Jonathan Schofer summarizes well the issues encountered in these incidents:

“These stories present tests of exemplary male figures. Each one is subjugated to powerful non-Jews, yet at the same time each is offered the possibility of sexual intercourse: they are both under threat and sexually tempted. Gender and power are intertwined in complex ways, and the key point is that in all three cases, the hero withstands both the threat and the temptation.”

In the reversal of the Hollywood cliché of our day, the hero does not end up with the leading lady. He neutralizes the threats, one of which is sexual temptation. It is a chaste ending to which the rabbis aspire and, at least in this instance, which they achieve.

While I will not discuss at length the first two stories of this trilogy, it is worth briefly mentioning them in order to contextualize the tale that will be the focus of this essay. In the first narrative, the biblical account of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife with its midrashic expansions appears. This narrative depicts “Joseph the Righteous” parrying the sexual advances of Potiphar’s wife. It is fitting that an essay in honor of Ross Kraemer’s distinguished academic career at least briefly touch on this narrative, the

5. On this theme in rabbinic literature in general, see Michael L. Satlow, Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality (BJS 303; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 158–67 (and, on nonrabbinic parallels, see pp. 167–69).


7. Schofer, Making of a Sage, 106.


9. On the title, “Joseph the Righteous,” see Kugel, In Potiphar’s House, 24–26, esp. 26, where Kugel also notes, “’Joseph the Righteous,’ the Scriptural example of resistance to temptation, whose heroic struggle against the advances of his master’s wife might serve as a model to later generations.”
subject of Kraemer’s masterful book *When Aseneth Met Joseph*. The gendered implications of these various tellings and retellings of this narrative are well documented by many, especially Kraemer herself, but for our present purposes we only need to note that this is the first narrative in the trilogy in which a Jewish man manages to avoid the seductive temptation of a non-Jewish woman.

Lest one be astonished by Joseph’s actions, a second narrative is immediately offered, wherein Rabbi Ṣadok displays even greater self-restraint than Joseph. In this story, which as we shall see shares the same narrative structure as the Rabbi Aqiba story, Rabbi Ṣadok is taken captive and sent to Rome. Upon arriving in Rome, a matron purchases him and sends him a beautiful maidservant, with whom he is supposed to copulate so as to produce slave children. Upon seeing this beautiful woman enter his bedroom, the pious and temperate Rabbi Ṣadok stares at the wall and sits in silence all night long. Once morning arrives, the maidservant complains to her mistress that she would rather die than be given to that man, who ignored such a beautiful woman instead of fornicating with her throughout the evening. The mistress inquires of Rabbi Ṣadok why he did not act with the maidservant as men usually act when left alone with a beautiful woman—that is, why did he show self-restraint in the face of sexual pleasure? He replies that he is of priestly descent and, should this coitus result in a child, that child would be a *mamzer*. Apparently, his argument is very persuasive, since she immediately releases him “with great honor.”

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11. Although the terms “Jew” and “non-Jew” are anachronistic in regard to the biblical account, I employ them here because that is how the rabbis understand Joseph and his neighbors: as Jew and non-Jews, respectively. This flattening of difference is part of a normative claim in which rabbis are the final link in an unbroken chain of tradition that goes back to Moses (whom they call “Moses our Rabbi”) and God on Mount Sinai. On the development of the term “Jew,” see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Hellenistic Culture and Society 31; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000 [1999]). Cohen briefly references the main text of this essay on p. 245 n. 12.

12. The phrasing of this sentence consciously echoes the wording of the text itself, which exhorts its reader not to be astonished (אלא תתמה). As we shall see below, this same wording introduces the next story.


14. Though the story does not explicitly locate the narrative in his bedroom, the context suggests that this is where the events took place. In the ’Abot R. Nat. version, Rabbi Ṣadok spends the night studying rabbinic traditions all night long.

15. For a good discussion of the issues surrounding defining, and the stigmas associated with being, a *mamzer*, see Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 263–307, which discusses the development of the rabbinic principle of matrilineal descent. Cohen briefly references Rabbi Ṣadok’s situation (p. 280), where he correctly notes that Rabbi Ṣadok’s interpretation represents an exception to the general rabbinic view on these issues. Also see n. 25, below.
I have recounted Rabbi Ṣadok’s narrative in more detail since it provides several parallels with that of Rabbi Aqiba. By comparing some key differences, we can better understand the latter tale. Therefore, keeping Rabbi Ṣadok’s story in mind, we are now prepared to analyze Rabbi Aqiba’s story.

[A] And do not be astonished by Rabbi Ṣadok, for Rabbi Aqiba was greater than he.
[B] When Rabbi Aqiba went to Rome, they slandered him before a certain general.¹⁶
[C] The general then sent him two very beautiful women.¹⁷ They were bathed, anointed, and adorned like brides for their grooms.
[D] All night, they fell all over him. One said: Turn toward me! [חזרו אצלי]
And the other said: Turn toward me! [חזרו אצלי]
[E] Sitting between them, he spat at them.¹⁸
[F] In the morning, they went and met with the general and said to him: Death would be better for us than being given to this man!
[G] The general said to Rabbi Aqiba: Why did you not do with these women what men usually do? Are they not beautiful? Are they not children of Adam like you? Did not the One who created you create them?
[H] Rabbi Aqiba] said to him: What could I do? Their body odor, like [the stench of] carrion meat or pig [זרזא] meat, overwhelmed me.¹⁹

While many of the elements from Rabbi Ṣadok’s story appear in this tale, there are some key differences.²⁰ First of all, Rabbi Aqiba arrives in Rome as a free man, not as a captive. Rabbi Aqiba therefore has the agency to act of his own freewill.²¹ Second, it is slander (presumably that he enjoys

¹⁶. Following the emendation suggested by Mandelbaum. On this phrase, see Schofer, Making of a Sage, 239 n. 84.
¹⁷. In the ’Abot R. Nat. version, the two women are simply “beautiful” and not “very [רמצ] beautiful.”
¹⁸. In the ’Abot R. Nat. version, Rabbi Aqiba is described as spending the night sitting between them, “spitting and did not turn [פנה] towards them.”
¹⁹. Pesiq. Rab Kah. Supplement 3:2 (ed. Mandelbaum, 461). In the ’Abot R. Nat. version, their offending odor is compared to carrion meat [נבלה] but also to that of meat torn by wild animals [טרפה] and land swarmers [שרצים], which like the therein unmentioned pig, are biblically forbidden for consumption (for the rabbinic definition of the first two terms [carrion and torn meat], see m. Hul. 2:4, a conversation in which Rabbi Aqiba takes part). I will discuss the importance of pig in this tale further below. Though Schofer divides this tale into five sections (Schofer, Making of a Sage, 108–9), I have divided it further so as better to separate what I deem to be important narrative elements.
²⁰. Much of my commentary here draws from Herr’s insights (“Jewish Sages and Roman Dignitaries,” 136–37); however, we do not share a fundamental assumption: underlying Herr’s interpretations is a presumption of the intrinsic historicity of the narrative itself. Despite this important difference, I agree with many (though by no means all) of his conclusions.
²¹. Similarly, see Herr, “Jewish Sages and Roman Dignitaries,” 137; and below, n. 26.
“the company of loose women”) that sets the scene for sexual temptation, not a matron’s desire to propagate her servants.\textsuperscript{22} It is important to note that in neither case does the sexual desire actually originate with the rabbi himself; rather, it is forced upon him. Third, it is a Roman man who sends the women to Rabbi Aqiba, while a Roman woman sends the woman to Rabbi Ṣadok.\textsuperscript{23} Fourth, Rabbi Aqiba is tempted with two women, double the number of females that tempt Rabbi Ṣadok. Fifth, Rabbi Aqiba must listen to the women talk to him all night, as they beg him to “Turn toward me!” Rabbi Ṣadok, on the other hand, shared a bed with a woman who is depicted as being silent, mirroring his own evening-long silence. Of course, as Ross Kraemer’s work continually reminds us, even when we “hear” women’s voices in these texts, they are “unreliable witnesses”; they teach us more about cultural constructions and gendered assumptions than about actual historical speeches and events.\textsuperscript{24} Sixth, and finally, while Rabbi Ṣadok was concerned about the religious and social status of potential offspring from his encounter with a Roman woman, Rabbi Aqiba never got that far.\textsuperscript{25} His reason for abstaining was the women’s body odor: it reminded him of biblically forbidden foods.\textsuperscript{26}

Several of these points require further elaboration. In particular, I will focus on two issues: (1) Rabbi Aqiba’s interaction with the women while sharing a bed; and (2) Rabbi Aqiba’s explanation for his actions.

\textsuperscript{22} This provocative phrase and interpretation come from William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, \textit{Pesikta De-Rab Kahana: R. Kahana’s Compilation of Discourses for Sabbaths and Festal Days} (1975; repr., Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2002), 635 (the entire narrative appears on pp. 634–36). I prefer this understanding to another common translation: “informed against” (e.g., Stern, “Captive Women,” 115). In both translations, however, Rabbi Aqiba is in a potentially dangerous situation and his self-control is being tested.

\textsuperscript{23} Rabbi Aqiba is on an official mission to Rome, so it makes sense that he would interact with male Roman officials. Rabbi Ṣadok could have been purchased by a male in the slave market, but perhaps it is a woman who purchases him so that, in the end, he can sway her and escape both physical and sexual servitude. Such a gendered understanding of Rabbi Ṣadok’s appeal to emotions underlies Herr’s interpretation of the events, wherein he states, “Such was the spirit of the time that [Rabbi Ṣadok’s] reply struck a responsive chord in the heart of the matron, who thereupon liberated him ‘with great honours’” (“Jewish Sages and Roman Dignitaries,” 137). If this interpretation is correct, then Rabbi Aqiba had a harder task ahead of him: he could not appeal to the emotions (gendered as feminine) of his male interlocutor.


\textsuperscript{25} On the religious and social status of a mamzer, see Satlow, \textit{Tasting the Dish}, 56–60. Also see n. 15.

\textsuperscript{26} Herr may be correct when he asserts that Rabbi Aqiba’s argument only works for a free man with his own agency. In contrast, Rabbi Ṣadok was a captive who could not openly disobey his matron; therefore, his only course of action was to use a legal claim regarding his “ancient and noble descent” (“Jewish Sages and Roman Dignitaries,” 137).
When the two women enter Rabbi Aqiba’s bed, we know a few important details about them: (1) they are very beautiful; (2) they are all gussied up, wearing their finest clothes, jewels, and makeup; (3) they are sent there by a Roman general (גמון; from the Greek ἡγεμόν), so this is not a task that they can take lightly; and (4) based on slander, they expect to encounter a willing participant in their ménage à trois. The reader also knows that this (both ancient and modern) male fantasy is a temptation to which many—even a supposedly pious rabbi—would succumb. Thanks to the foreshadowing by the text’s introduction (“And do not be astonished by Rabbi Șadok, for Rabbi Aqiba was greater than he”), we are not surprised by Rabbi Aqiba’s refusal to participate in the evening’s activities. However, the reader is not prepared for Rabbi Aqiba’s expression of disgust, though perhaps not as shocked by it as are the women themselves.27 Remember, they are “two very beautiful women,” who have ornamented themselves to the fullest extent possible, and then entered the bedroom of a man they believe to be a willing participant, only to find him less than cooperative.

With one very beautiful, bathed, anointed, and adorned-like-a-bride-for-her-groom woman on his right, and another very beautiful, bathed, anointed, and adorned-like-a-bride-for-her-groom woman on his left, Rabbi Aqiba chooses to sit all night between them and practice self-control. Though Rabbi Aqiba’s self-control in regard to choosing Torah study over sexual gratification is the stuff of legend elsewhere in rabbinic literature, this is quite the crucible in which to test one’s mettle.28 Further, while Rabbi Șadok had only one beautiful woman to share a bed with in silence, Rabbi Aqiba had two women who spent the night talking to him, continuously entreating him “Turn toward me!” His response was to spit each time they made their request, treating the erotic situation with contempt. At this moment, we take a turn for the carnivalesque.29 Rabbi Aqiba does not stare at the wall and study rabbinic texts all night long, like Rabbi Șadok; rather, he has internalized and embodied Torah, which

27. In his translation of the ‘Abot R. Nat. version, Judah Goldin softens Rabbi Aqiba’s actions by not translating it directly. Thus, rather than describing him as spitting (which the text explicitly does—see n. 18 above), he renders the text: “But he sat there in disgust and would not turn to them” (The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan [1955; Yale Judaica Series 10; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983], 84).

28. For a general survey of rabbis choosing Torah study over sexual intercourse, with particular attention to traditions about Rabbi Aqiba, see Boyarin, Carnal Israel, 134–66. For a recent reassessment of these Rabbi Aqiba traditions, see Azzan Yadin, “Rabbi Akiva’s Youth,” JQR 100 (2010): 573–97.

29. This term, popularized by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, has been usefully applied to rabbinic texts in recent years. For example, see Daniel Boyarin, Socrates and the Fat Rabbis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).
has transformed him into a sage with legendary self-restraint. Despite the fawning attention of two gorgeous, but non-Jewish, women literally falling all over him all night, Rabbi Aqiba proves he is the rabbinic paragon of self-control.

The very beautiful women’s words, “Turn toward me!”[^30] are an important clue to elucidating Rabbi Aqiba’s explanation for his actions. Again, Kraemer reminds us to listen to ancient women’s voices with our scholarly ears attuned to their gendered implications. Ancient Mediterranean male authors used their full literary prowess to craft women’s voices in order to articulate their own fears, hopes, and ideals. We should read the rabbinic testimony of these women through this theoretical lens. Keeping in mind the fact that the women’s words teach us more about the male authors and their gendered assumptions than about the women who purportedly uttered them, the women’s words are significant. The root for the Hebrew word for “turn” (חזר) is morphologically similar to the word for “pig” (חזיר). Only one vowel sound, represented by the matres lectionis waw (ו) and yod (י), respectively, distinguishes them. The women’s words reinforce the scent that Rabbi Aqiba attributes to them: that of pig meat. The association between Roman women and pig is not random. It is part of a long tradition in which pig serves as a metonym for Rome, Romans, and Romanness. Thus, when Rabbi Aqiba says that they smell of various non-kosher foods, it is quite important that pig appears on this list: it has become the non-kosher beast par excellence due to its association with Roman identity. The very words that these very beautiful women use to

[^30]: See n. 14 above. On the notion that Torah study leads to self-restraint, see Satlow, “Try to be a Man.” On the ethical transformations brought about by proper Torah study, see Schofer, Making of a Sage.

[^31]: The verb מתנפלות is the reflexive conjugation of the common rootFragmentManager[isim], “to fall.” When כבש is conjugated as such, it usually means “to prostrate oneself” or “to bow” (see Marcus Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature [1903; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005], 924). One could thus read into this verb an allusion to idolatry, a common rabbinic connection between having intercourse with non-Jews and the slippery slope toward idolatry (as I have argued elsewhere in regard to commensality; see Jordan D. Rosenblum, “From Their Bread to Their Bed: Commensality, Intermarriage, and Idolatry in Tannaitic Literature,” JJS 61 [2010]: 18–29). I believe that this allusion lurks in the background but decided to render the phrase with an English idiom that shares the root meaning of “fall” and conveys the larger point. Unfortunately, the act of translating from one language to another requires the translator to make a decision that sometimes cuts off other interpretative possibilities.

[^32]: This pun proved popular in rabbinic literature; see. e.g., Lev. Rab. 13:5; twice in Eccl. Rab. 1.9.1.

[^33]: I have written on this association elsewhere; see esp. Jordan D. Rosenblum, “‘Why do you refuse to eat pork?’ Jews, Food, and Identity in Roman Palestine,” JQR 100 (2010): 95–110.

[^34]: To my knowledge, this point is missed by every commentator on this text. This omission, however, might be due to the fact that most exegetes focus on the ‘Abot R. Nat.
seduce him are reminders of their non-Jewish—and treyf, or non-kosher—identity. One can actually use an American English vulgarism for coitus to render this term exactly how it sounded to Rabbi Aqiba’s ears: each woman was imploring him “Pork me!”

Further, as this English vulgarism reminds us, there is a cross-cultural connection between the verbs for consumption that satisfies the appetite for both food and sex. Thus, when Rabbi Aqiba imagines the women as pigs, he is referring not only to the metonym of Rome but also to the connection between consuming these women as sexual and culinary objects. Partaking of metonymic pigs in the bedroom would lead to his partaking of literal pigs in the dining room. This direct connection is actually made elsewhere in rabbinic literature. In another tale of Rabbi Šadok being tempted by a Roman matron, he uses hunger as an excuse to delay engaging in sexual intercourse with her. When he discovers that the only food she has to offer for a nosh is not kosher, he replies, “The one who does this, eats this”—thus equating sex with a non-Jewish woman with ingesting non-kosher food. It is best to leave pig, whether literal or figurative, off the rabbinic plate.

Rabbi Aqiba’s auditory and olfactory senses both remind him that these women, no matter how tempting, are taboo. It is for this reason that he describes himself to the Roman general as being overcome, and hence unable to engage in sexual congress. In a pun too perfect to be coincidental, the Hebrew phrase for “overcame me” (בָּא עֲלֵי), which literally means “entered into/upon me,” is a common rabbinic phrase for sexual intercourse. Thus, Rabbi Aqiba is literally saying that their body odor prevented him from having sex. Despite the fact that they have bathed and anointed themselves, their Roman/pig scent overcomes Rabbi Aqiba and prevents him from having sex with them—both of which events can be described using the same words!

This subtle argument is advanced to a Roman general. It is for this reason that euphemism makes sense. After all, he is rejecting the women for being Romans to a Roman general. Unlike with Rabbi Šadok, we do

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36. I have briefly discussed this elsewhere. See Jordan D. Rosenblum, Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 133–34.

37. B. Qidd. 40a. Herr comments on this text, as well (“Jewish Sages and Roman Dignitaries,” 136 n. 58). Either this text refers to the same events, or Rabbi Šadok finds himself in this situation quite often!

not learn the Roman general’s reaction.\textsuperscript{39} Did the general see through the thinly veiled references to Rome? Did he respect Rabbi Aqiba’s act of self-control? Or was he baffled by Rabbi Aqiba’s reason for not doing “with these women what men usually do?”

However Rabbi Aqiba’s response was received, what mattered to the rabbinic audience were his actions in the face of fantastic temptation. Rabbi Aqiba proved himself to be the rabbinic paragon of self-control. The women in this tale serve the role of seducers. Whether they actually smelled of pork or even ate pork was irrelevant. As Roman women they were metonyms for Rome and, hence, were not to be consumed to satisfy either appetite. By paying close attention to the wording and gender constructions in this tale, readers learn the lesson about how a rabbinic man must act at all times: with self-control. Failure to act accordingly leads down a slippery slope of sin, from sexual to culinary improprieties. After spending the night with two women, the legends told about Rabbi Aqiba are not ribald tales of sexual prowess, but chaste tales of rabbinic prowess.

\textsuperscript{39} Pesiq. Rab Kah. expresses approval for Joseph, Rabbi Šadok, and Rabbi Aqiba’s actions as a whole by ending this narrative with a quotation from Ps 103:20. Based on other evidence, it would seem that Rabbi Aqiba survives this encounter, only to suffer a gruesome martyr’s death during the Hadrianic persecutions (see b. Ber. 61b).