

(פיגם) רודה – Rue – *Ruta Graveolens*

The Strong, Musty Scented Protective Rue

Like many other families in Bat Ayin and in other religious neighborhoods in Israel, I have planted a rue at the entrance of my garden for protection against *Ayin Hara* (the evil eye). My rue looks a bit reedy and frazzled, perhaps due to the *Ayin Hara* it may have absorbed. The tradition that rue expels various forms of negative energy is prevalent in Jewish teachings, among the Bedouin and Arabs, as well as in other cultures. The musty scent of rue is believed to chase away negative spirits. The specific name, *Graveolens*, is Latin for “having a strong or offensive smell.” No doubt, rue has a strong scent, which I find more interesting than repulsive. The Latin name, *Ruta* – derived from ‘*rhutos*’ – a Greek word meaning ‘shield’ testifies to rue’s protective properties. In Italy, it is so highly valued for this purpose that a silver charm called *Cimaruta* – Italian for ‘Sprig of Rue’ – is worn as a protective amulet or hung above an infant’s bed. At Sephardi traditional Henna parties, held before weddings, sprigs of rue are included on the Henna tray, for protection against *Ayin Hara*. Rue is native to the Middle East. It grows in the northern and central parts of Israel, including the Judean hills where we live. In ancient Israel, rue grew wild in the mountains; and was therefore exempted from *ma’aser* (tithe) as it was considered *hefker* (free for all to take) also during the Shemita year (*Mishnah Shevi’it* 9:1). The Hebrew word רודה/*ruda* furthermore means ‘to rule,’ thus rue is also known as ‘queen of herbs.’ It is possible that the name ‘*ruta*’ is from the Greek ‘*reuo*’ (to set free), because this herb is so efficacious in treating various diseases.



Torah Teachings on the Potent, Protective Properties of Rue

In the language of the Mishna, rue is called הפיגם/*HaPegam*, a word that is made up of the same Hebrew letters as the word מגפה/*magefa* – ‘epidemic.’ This may be because rue is one of the foremost protective herbs effective even against epidemics. The Chida writes, “I would like to entrust to generations to come that the *ruda* is effective against *Ayin Hara* and against any kind of spell. I have even heard this from Rabbis of the holy city of Jerusalem. When a person who carries this herb thinks about the sacred name, ‘*Rota*’ only good things will happen to him” (Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai, *Kikar La’eden* p. 285a). “In the holy books, there are several esoteric devices for protection from *Ayin Hara*, I especially recommend to carry the רודה/*ruda* – ‘rue,’ which is very potent. It is proper to protect oneself from *Ayin Hara*. This is included in the general mitzvah, ‘... and you shall vigilantly protect your lives’ (*Devarim*, 4:15)” (Rabbi Eliezer Papo, *Pele Yoetz, Teviot, letter Ayin*). I have personally visited Rabbanit Tzadka – the sister of the well-known Sephardi Rabbi Mutzaffi – for removal of *Ayin Hara* through עופרת/*oferet* – ‘lead.’ She taught me the procedure in details, which includes filling a round vessel with water and adding three small pieces of rue leaves. The lead is heated on the stove and when melted, it is thrown quickly into the water, while reciting certain prayers. At the end of the procedure the lead and the rue is removed and sprinkled with salt to neutralize the negative energy that it absorbed. Then the lead/rue/salt package is thrown in the street to be dispersed with the wind.

Rue for Eyesight

It is interesting that just as rue is effective against the evil eye, among its medicinal properties it is known to strengthen the eye. Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79), held rue to have such a strong effect on the preservation of sight that the painters of his time used to devour a great quantity of it. Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci regularly ate the small, trefoil rue leaves to improve their eyesight and creativity. Italians still eat it in their salads. Rue was recognized as making the sight both sharp and clear, especially when the vision had become dim through over-exertion of the eyes. Rue is valued for its flavonoids, particularly rutin, which strengthens blood vessels in general and the eyes in particular. It was with "Euphrasy and Rue" that Adam's sight was purged in John Milton's, *Paradise Lost*.

Rue for Purification

Rue has a long-standing reputation as a disinfectant. It constituted a chief ingredient of the famous antidote to poison used by Mithridates in the 1st century BC. It was one of the most complex, highly sought-after drugs during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, particularly in Italy and France, where it was continually used for centuries. An updated recipe was known well into the 19th century. Hippocrates also commended rue and Nicholas Culpeper instructs us to eat rue leaves either by themselves, or with figs and walnuts, to cause "all venomous things to become harmless." Gerard says, "If a man be anointed with the juice of rue, the poison of wolf's bane, mushrooms, or todestooles, the biting of serpents, stinging of scorpions, spiders, bees, hornets and wasps will not hurt him" (Maud Grieve, *A Modern Herbal: The Medicinal, Culinary, Cosmetic and Economic ... Volume 2*, p. 695). Rue is one of the ingredients in the Vinegar of the Four Thieves, a formula made famous during the plague years in Europe. It was the custom for judges to have sprigs of rue on their bench against the pestilential infection brought into court by prisoners.

Repellent Pesticide

Rue has been regarded from the earliest times as successful in warding off pests. Whether growing or dried, rue is useful for repelling insects due to its powerful, exceedingly bitter, acrid odor. In the garden, rue may be planted near valuable plants to repel cats as well. When mixed as a decoction, rue can be used topically to kill lice and fly larvae. Rue-water sprinkled in the house 'kills all the fleas,' says an old book. You can still make good use of rue today, as a flea repellent and to discourage slugs and beetles in the garden.

Medicinal Properties of Rue

Rue is not only a pesticide in the garden; in the human body, rue treats parasitic worms. It is a useful medicine in hysterical spasms, colic and flatulence, being a mild stomachic. Rue alleviates respiratory infection, cough and croup due to its antiviral, antibacterial, antispasmodic and expectorant properties. The juice of the rue plant has also been used to treat earaches. As an emmenagogue it brings about menstruation. Used in small amounts rue can ease headaches, especially those caused by nervous tension, either as a tea or applying the fresh leaves to the temples. The leaves can also be applied externally in poultice form to relieve sciatica. The expressed juice, in small quantities, was a noted remedy for nervous nightmare. Compresses saturated with a strong rue decoction, applied to the chest, have been used beneficially for chronic bronchitis.

Protection Prerequisite against Protective Plant

In large doses, rue can be toxic. Wear protective gloves when handling rue plants. The plant juices contain furanocoumarins, which sensitizes the skin to light and can cause dermatitis or blisters. Rue's mild toxicity can cause mood changes, sleep disorders, fatigue, dizziness, spasms, fainting, tongue swelling, clammy skin and phototoxicity. Its abortive properties may result in hemorrhaging and miscarriages, so it is contraindicated for women who are pregnant or nursing.

Herb of Enchantment

Rue has been used in both permitted and forbidden rituals since antiquity. The smoke of rue is known to purify an area, and Rabbis used it to expel dybbuks. Some folks sprinkle tea of rue around the home for protection or bathe in it to break spells. I do not believe in the following superstitions, which are not from Jewish sources. However, I find them amusing enough to include them. Rue mixed with sandalwood and lavender flowers is believed to be a lover's incense. Rue tea or incense is used to attract a man. Placing rue in a man's left shoe is believed to hold him and insure his fidelity. I do not recommend these superstitious practices, which may be included in the prohibition against practicing witchcraft. Yet, the legend of rue does live on in playing cards, where the symbol for the suit of clubs could very well be modeled after a rue-leaf.

Hands On:

I have personally treated the cough of my youngest son when he was a baby by rubbing medicated rue oil on his chest every evening. After one week the cough was completely gone.

Medicated Rue Oil

1. Collect two handfuls of nice rue leaves
2. Rinse the leaves and dry them with a dish towel
3. Place the rue leaves in a glass jar and cover them with olive oil
4. Place the glass jar in your windowsill for two weeks, shaking it occasionally
5. Strain the oil. Discard the rue leaves, as their healing properties have now been absorbed into the medicated rue oil.