This study deals with the public declaration by the Tosaphist R. Yitzhak ben Abraham (Riẓba) about his inability, to consummate his marriage during its first few years. Ephraim Elimelech Urbach considered this confession to be an expression of holiness and purity, and to the ability to dissociate sexuality from feelings of guilt and shame. This assessment reflects the pretensions of Judaic studies of the era to understand the characters and predilections of rabbinic figures at a remove of hundreds of years. This paper rejects Urbach’s conclusions, and maintains that the compunctions associated with nudity and sexuality are a modern phenomenon. In medieval Europe, men and women bathed together and this practice was considered perfectly acceptable in both Jewish and non-Jewish circles. Likewise, the intimate lives of married couples were not private. Consequently, Riẓba’s disclosure does not attest to his being holy or pure to an unusual degree.

This paper also thoroughly examines the manuscript that contains the disclosure and shows that Riẓba attributed his sexual failures to his first wife’s young age, and was not confessing to his own sexual disfunction. The study’s conclusions dovetail with present-day scepticism of psycho-historical analyses that presume human psychological universals that are not contextualized to the time and place of the parties involved.