



## **Racial Equity is Skin Deep: Exploring Bias in our Texts**

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## Round 1

### Bekhorot 45b

**Reish Lakish says:** A man who is **tall should not marry** a woman who is also **tall, lest there emerge from them** a child who is **extremely tall**. Similarly, a man who is a **dwarf should not marry** a woman who is also a **dwarf, lest there emerge from them** a child who is **exceptionally short**. A man whose skin is **pale should not marry** a woman whose skin is also **pale, lest there emerge from them** a child who is **extremely pale**. Likewise, a man whose skin is **dark should not marry** a woman whose skin is also **dark, lest there emerge from them** a child who is **extremely dark**.

### Moed Katan 9b

It was related that **Rav Beivai had a daughter**, and **he spread lime on her limb by limb**, which caused her hair to fall out and her skin to whiten. She became so beautiful that when marrying her off, **he took four hundred dinars for her**. **There was a certain gentile in his neighborhood who also had a daughter** and wanted to do this as well. **He spread her** entire body with lime all **at once, and she died**. That gentile **said: Beivai killed my daughter**. **Rav Nahman said: Rav Beivai, who regularly drinks beer, his daughters require** that they be **smear**ed with lime, as beer causes hair growth, **but we who do not drink beer, our daughters do not require** that

### בכורות מ"ה ב

אמר ר"ל גבוה לא ישא גבוהית שמא יצא מהן תורן ננס לא ישא ננסת שמא יצא מהם אצבעי לבן לא ישא לבנה שמא יצא מהם בוקק שחור לא ישא שחורה שמא יצא מהן טפוח:

### מועד קטן ט' ב

רב ביבי הוה ליה בריתא, טפלה אבר אבר. שקל בה ארבע מאה זוזי. הוה הווא גוי בשבבותיה דהוה ליה בריתא. טפלה בחד זמנא ומתה, אמר: קטלה ביבי לברתי. אמר רב נחמן: רב ביבי דשתי שיכרא — בעיין בנתיה טפלא, אנו דלא שתינו שיכרא — לא בעיין בנתין טפלא.

they be **smear**ed with lime, as they have little hair even without this treatment.

### Genesis 12:11

As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are.

### Ibn Ezra on Genesis 12:11:3

[BEHOLD NOW, I KNOW.] There were women as beautiful as Sarah in her native country, but in Egypt and the southern land there was none as beautiful. The reason for this is that people's appearance is shaped by the climate.

### בראשית י"ב:יא

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר הִקְרִיב לְבֹאֵ מִצְרַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר  
אֶל-שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ הֲנֵה-נָא יִדְעֵתִי כִּי אִשָּׁה  
יִפְתַּח-מְרָאָה אֹתָּהּ:

אבן עזרא על בראשית י"ב:יא:ג'  
וטעם הנה נא ידעתי. שהיה כיופי  
שרה בארצה רק במצרים וארץ הנגב  
לא היה כמוה כי הצורות משתנות  
בעבור האויר.

## Round 2

### Song of Songs 1:5

I am dark, but comely,  
O daughters of Jerusalem—  
Like the tents of Kedar,  
Like the pavilions of Solomon.

### שיר השירים א':ה'

שְׁחֹרָה אֲנִי וְנְאוֹה בָנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם כְּאֶהְלִי  
קָדָר כִּירִיעוֹת שְׁלֹמֹה:

### Rashi on Song of Songs 1:5:1

**I am black but comely, etc.** You, my friends, let me not be light in your eyes. Even if my husband has left me because of my blackness, for I am black because of the tanning of the sun, but I am comely with the shape of beautiful limbs. Though I am black like the tents of Keidar, which are blackened because of the rains, for they are always spread out in the wilderness, I am easily cleansed to become like the curtains of Shlomo. The allegory is: The congregation of Yisroel says to the nations, "I am black in my

רש"י על שיר השירים א':ה':א'  
שְׁחֹרָה אֲנִי וְנְאוֹה וּגו'. אַתֶּם רְעִיּוֹתַי,  
אֵל אֶקַּל בְּעֵינֵיכֶם אִם עֲזַבְנִי אִישִׁי  
מִפְּנֵי שְׁחֹרוֹת שְׁבִי, כִּי שְׁחֹרָה אֲנִי עַל  
יְדֵי שְׁזִיפַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, וְנְאוֹה אֲנִי בְּחֹתוֹךְ  
אֲבָרִים נְאִים. אִם אֲנִי שְׁחֹרָה כְּאֶהְלִי  
קָדָר הַמְשֹׁחֲרִים מִפְּנֵי הַגְּשָׁמִים, שְׁהֵם  
פְּרוּסִים תָּמִיד בַּמְדְּבָרוֹת, קָלָה אֲנִי  
לְהִתְכַבֵּס לְהִיּוֹת כִּירִיעוֹת שְׁלֹמֹה.  
דְּגָמָא הִיא זו: אוֹמְרַת כְּנֶסֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל  
לְאַמּוֹת: "שְׁחֹרָה אֲנִי בַּמַּעֲשֵׂי וְנְאוֹה

deeds [i.e., sins], but I am comely by virtue of the deeds of my ancestors, and even some of my deeds are comely. If I bear the iniquity of the [golden] calf, I can offset it with the merit of the acceptance of the Torah.” [Scripture] calls the nations, “the daughters בנות of Yerusholayim” because it is destined to become the metropolis for them all, as Yechezkeil prophesied, “I will give them to you as surrounding villages לבנות,” and similarly, “Ekron, and its suburbs ובנותיה.”

אני במעשה אבותי, ואף במעשי, יש מהם נאים, אם יש בי עון העגל, יש בי כנגדו זכות קבלת התורה. וקורא לאמות “בנות ירושלים” על שם שהיא עתידה לעשות מטרופולין לכלן, כמו שנבא יחזקאל “ונתתי אתהן לך לבנות”, כמו “עקרון ובנותיה”:

### Song of Songs 1:6

Don't stare at me because I am swarthy,  
Because the sun has gazed upon me.  
My mother's sons quarreled with me,  
They made me guard the vineyards;  
My own vineyard I did not guard.

### שיר השירים א'ו'

אל-תראוני שאני שחרחרת ששזפתני  
השמש בגי אמי נחרו-כי שמיני נטרה  
את-הפרמים פרמי שלי לא נטרתי:

### Rashi on Song of Songs 1:6:2

**That I am so black.** For my blackness and my ugliness are not from my mother's womb, but from the sun's tanning, for that blackness can easily be whitened by staying in the shade.

רש"י על שיר השירים א'ו':ב'  
שאני שחרחרת. לפי שאין שחרותי  
וכעורי ממעי אמי, אלא על ידי שזיפת  
השמש, שאותו שחרות נוח להתלבן  
כשיעמד בצל:

### Lamentations 4:7-8

Her elect were purer than snow,  
Whiter than milk;  
Their limbs were ruddier than coral,  
Their bodies were like sapphire. Now their  
faces are blacker than soot,  
They are not recognized in the streets;  
Their skin has shriveled on their bones,  
It has become dry as wood.

### איכה ד':ז'-ח'

זפו נזיריה משלג צחו מחלב אדמו עצם  
מפנינים ספיר גזרתם: {ס} חשך  
משחור תאדם לא נפרו בחוצות צפד  
עורם על-עצמם יבש היה  
קעץ: {ס}

### Genesis 8:18

So Noah came out, together with his sons,  
his wife, and his sons' wives.

### בראשית ח':י"ח

ויצא-נח ובניו ואשתו ונשי-בניו אתו:

### Chizkuni, Genesis 8:18:1

ויצא נח ובניו “Noach and his sons left the ark, etc.” Some commentators claim that although marital relations between the sexes had been permitted again, the manner in which the Torah writes the males exiting from the ark as if in a group is revealing. On the other hand, the Talmud in Sanhedrin 108 states that there were three creatures which violated the prohibition of sexual relations during their stay in the ark: the dog, the raven and Noach’s son Cham. All of them were punished for their misconduct. The dog is tied by a chain or leash to its owner. The raven is forced to spit after indulging in mating, and Cham’s skin, or that of his offspring, turned black.

### Sanhedrin 108b

**The Sages taught: Three** violated that directive and **engaged in intercourse** while **in the ark, and all of them were punished** for doing so. They are: The **dog, and the raven, and Ham**, son of Noah. The **dog** was punished in that it **is bound**; the **raven** was punished in that it **spits**, and **Ham was afflicted in** that **his skin** turned black.

חזקוני, בראשית ח'י"ח:א'  
ויצא נח ובניו י"מ אע"פ שהותרו  
בתשמיש כשיצאו מונה אותם על  
הסדר שהיו שם. תנו רבנן שלשה  
שימשו בתיבה: כלב ועורב וחם,  
וכולם לקו: כלב נקשר, עורב רק, חם  
לקה בעורו.

### סנהדרין ק"ח ב

ת"ר שלשה שמשו בתיבה וכולם לקו  
כלב ועורב וחם כלב נקשר עורב רק  
חם לקה בעורו

## Round 3

### Moed Katan 16b

The response to this admonishment is found in the verse, **as it is written:** “**Shiggaion of David, which he sang to the Lord, concerning the words of Cush the Benjaminite**” (Psalms 7:1). **Is Cush his name? Saul is his name. Rather**, this is a designation that indicates: **Just as a Cushite**, a native of the ancient kingdom of Cush in eastern Africa, **is distinguished by**

מועד קטן ט"ז ב  
היינו דכתיב: “שִׁגְיוֹן לְדָוִד אֲשֶׁר שָׁר לַיהוָה  
עַל דְּבַרֵי כוֹש בֶּן יְמִינִי”, וְכִי כוֹש שְׁמוֹ?  
וְהֵלֵא שְׂאוּל שְׁמוֹ! אֶלָּא: מָה כוֹשִׁי  
מְשׁוֹנָה בְּעוּרוֹ — אֵף שְׂאוּל מְשׁוֹנָה  
בְּמַעֲשָׂיו.

**his dark skin, so too, Saul was distinguished by his actions**, as he was absolutely righteous and performed many good deeds. Therefore, David uses the word *shiggaion* as an allusion to the error [*shegia*] that he had made when he sang a song of praise over Saul's downfall.

#### Moed Katan 16b

Similarly, you can explain the verse: “**Are you not as much Mine as the children of the Cushites, O children of Israel?**” (Amos 9:7). **Is their name Cushite? Israel is their name. Rather, just as a Cushite is distinguished by his dark skin, so too, the Jewish people are distinguished by their actions**, and they are different **from all the other nations**.

#### Jeremiah 38:7-13

Ebed-melech the Cushite, a eunuch who was in the king's palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah in the pit. The king was then sitting at the Benjamin Gate; so Ebed-melech left the king's palace, and spoke to the king: “O lord king, those men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah; they have put him down in the pit, to die there of hunger.” For there was no more bread in the city. Then the king instructed Ebed-melech the Cushite, “Take with you thirty men from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the pit before he dies.” So Ebed-melech took the men with him, and went to the king's palace, to a place below<sup>d</sup> the treasury. There they got worn cloths and rags, which they let down to Jeremiah in the pit by ropes. And Ebed-melech the Cushite called to Jeremiah, “Put the worn cloths and rags under your armpits, inside the ropes.” Jeremiah did so, and they pulled Jeremiah up by the ropes and got him out of the pit. And Jeremiah remained in the prison compound.

#### מועד קטן ט"ז ב

כִּי־צֵא בְדָבָר אֶתְּהָ אֹמֵר: “הֲלֹא כְּבָנַי כּוֹשִׁים אַתֶּם לִי בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל”, וְכִי כּוֹשִׁים שָׁמֹן? וְהֲלֹא יִשְׂרָאֵל שָׁמֹן! אֶלֶּא: מָה כּוֹשִׁי מְשׁוֹנָה בְּעוּרוֹ — אִף יִשְׂרָאֵל מְשׁוֹנֵן בְּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶן מִכָּל הָאוּמוֹת.

#### ירמיהו ל"ח:ז'-י"ג

וַיִּשְׁמַע עֲבַד־מֶלֶךְ הַכּוֹשִׁי אִישׁ סֹרִיס וְהוּא בְּבֵית הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי־נָתְנוּ אֶת־יֶרְמְיָהוּ אֶל־הַבּוֹר וְהַמֶּלֶךְ יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר בְּנֵי־מִן: וַיֵּצֵא עֲבַד־מֶלֶךְ מִבֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ לֵאמֹר: אֲדֹנָי הַמֶּלֶךְ הֲרָעוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לִירְמְיָהוּ הַנְּבִיא אֶת אֲשֶׁר־הִשְׁלִיכוּ אֶל־הַבּוֹר וַיָּמָת תַּחְתּוֹ מִפְּנֵי הָרָעֵב כִּי אֵין הַלֶּחֶם עוֹד בְּעִיר: וַיִּצְוֶה הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת עֲבַד־מֶלֶךְ הַכּוֹשִׁי לֵאמֹר קַח בְּיָדְךָ מִזֶּה שְׁלֵשִׁים אָנָשִׁים וְהַעֲלִית אֶת־יֶרְמְיָהוּ הַנְּבִיא מִן־הַבּוֹר בְּטָרֶם יָמוּת: וַיִּקַּח עֲבַד־מֶלֶךְ אֶת־הָאֲנָשִׁים בְּיָדוֹ וַיָּבֵא בֵּית־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־תַּחַת הָאוֹצָר וַיִּקַּח מִשָּׁם בָּלוּי (הַסְּחָבוֹת) [סְחָבוֹת] וּבְלוּי מִלְּחָיִם וַיִּשְׁלַחֵם אֶל־יֶרְמְיָהוּ אֶל־הַבּוֹר בְּחֻבְלָיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר עֲבַד־מֶלֶךְ הַכּוֹשִׁי אֶל־יֶרְמְיָהוּ שִׁים נָא בְּלוּאֵי הַסְּחָבוֹת וְהַמְּלָחִים תַּחַת אֲצִלּוֹת יָדֶיךָ מִתַּחַת לְחֻבְלָיִם וַיַּעַשׂ יֶרְמְיָהוּ

פֶּן: וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ אֶת־יְרֵמְיָהוּ בְּחִבְלִים וַיַּעֲלוּ  
 אֹתוֹ מִן־הַבּוֹר וַיָּשֶׁב יְרֵמְיָהוּ בְּחִצְרֵי  
 הַמְטָרָה: {ס}

**Jeremiah 39:16-19**

Go and say to Ebed-melech the Cushite:  
 “Thus said the LORD of Hosts, the God of  
 Israel: I am going to fulfill My words  
 concerning this city—for disaster, not for  
 good—and they shall come true on that day  
 in your presence. But I will save you on that  
 day—declares the LORD; you shall not be  
 delivered into the hands of the men you  
 dread. I will rescue you, and you shall not  
 fall by the sword. You shall escape with your  
 life,<sup>c</sup> because you trusted Me—declares the  
 LORD.”

**ירמיהו ל"ט:טז-י"ט**

הָלוֹךְ וְאָמַרְתָּ לְעֶבֶד־מֶלֶךְ הַכּוּשִׁי לֵאמֹר  
 כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַנִּנְיָ  
 מִבֵּי אֶת־דַּבְּרֵי אֶל־הָעִיר הַזֹּאת לְרָעָה וְלֹא  
 לְטוֹבָה וְהָיוּ לְפָנַי בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא: וְהִצַּלְתִּיךָ  
 בַּיּוֹם־הַהוּא נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְלֹא תִנָּתֵן בְּיַד  
 הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה יָגוּר מִפְּנֵיהֶם: כִּי  
 מָלַט אֶמְלִיטְךָ וּבַחֲרַב לֹא תִפֹּל וְהִיְתָה לְךָ  
 נַפְשׁוֹךָ לְשָׁלָל כִּי־בִטַחְתָּ בִּי נְאֻם־יְהוָה: {פ}

**Numbers 12:1-3**

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses  
 because of the Cushite woman he had taken  
 [into his household as his wife]: “He took a  
 Cushite woman!” They said, “Has יהוה  
 spoken only through Moses? Has [God] not  
 spoken through us as well?” יהוה heard it.  
 Now Moses himself was very humble, more  
 so than any other human being on earth.

**במדבר י"ב:א'-ג'**

וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל־אֹדוֹת  
 הָאִשָּׁה הַכּוּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי־אִשָּׁה  
 כְּשִׁית לָקַח: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרַק אֲדֹב־בְּמִשְׁחָה דִבַּר  
 יְהוָה הֲלֹא גַם־בָּנוּ דִבַּר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה:  
 וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲנּוּ מֵאֵד מְכַל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר  
 עַל־פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה: {ס}

**Rabbeinu Bahya, Bamidbar 12:1:2**

על אודות האשה הכושית, “on account of the  
 woman of Cushite origin.” The woman  
 in question was Tzipporah who was a  
 Midianite. Midianites were descendants  
 of the Ishmaelites, nomads, dwelling in  
 tents. We base this on Chabakuk 3,7:  
 “the tents of Cushan, shaken at the  
 pavilions of the land of Midian.” There  
 were no white-skinned people among the  
 Midianites due to the sun being very hot  
 in that country. The reason Miriam  
 spoke out was because Moses had  
 married a “black-skinned woman.”

**רבנו בחיי, במדבר י"ב:א':ב'**  
 על אודות האשה הכושית. היא  
 צפורה שהיא מדינית, ומדינים הם  
 ישמעאלים והם דרים באהלים,  
 כדכתיב (חבקוק ג':ז'-ח') ירגזו יריעות  
 ארץ מדין, ואין ביניהם לבן מפני  
 תוקף חמימות השמש. והטעם כי  
 אשה כושית לקח הוא הדבור שדברה  
 מרים, והיו חושבים שלא נמנע משה  
 מהיות עם צפורה אלא בשביל שאינה  
 יפה. ואונקלוס שתרגם אתתא

Miriam thought that the reason Moses had separated from Tzipporah was because he did not consider her attractive looking on account of the colour of her skin. If Onkelos translates the word כושית as שפירתא, “beautiful,” this is not to be taken at face value but is meant to save her embarrassment much as we call a blind person “as possessed of a good eyesight,” in order to save that person embarrassment. When the Torah writes immediately that Moses was very humble, this is the answer to Miriam’s suspicion, i.e. that Moses did not even know whether Tzipporah was beautiful or not. It is similar to Avraham who did not become aware of Sarah’s being physically attractive until they were at the boundary of Egypt (Genesis 12,11) [when he had been married to her for decades already. Ed.]

שפירתא, כנוי הוא דרך כבוד, כמו  
שקורין לעור סגי נהור. ולכך הזכיר  
והאיש משה ענו מאד כי הכתוב יעיד  
על ענותנותו שלא ידע בה אם היתה  
יפה אם לאו כענין הנזכר באברהם  
אבינו.

