I am Black, but Beautiful: Blacks and Jews in Jewish Literature

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"I am Black, But Beautiful: Blacks and Jews in Jewish Literature"

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the relationship between Blacks and Jews as reflected in selections of Jewish Literature. My three chapters are organized chronologically: beginning with selections from the Tanakh in Chapter One, followed by selections of Rabbinic Literature in Chapter Two, and concluding with modern selections from Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth in Chapter Three.

I begin in chapter one with an investigation of the Hebrew Bible, specifically focused on the texts of Number 12, Isaiah 18:1-2, and *Shir HaShirim* 1:5-6. I also utilize Rabbi David Goldenberg's extensive study on Cush to establish a location for this ancient land and the context of biblical perceptions of its people.

In chapter two I utilize selected texts from Rabbinic Literature: The Jerusalem Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud, Sifre, Midrash Rabbah, Pirke D'R. Eliezar, as well as other Midrashic texts. I found that the Rabbis are influenced by their socio-political reality living under the Romans; a reality which includes black slavery, social hierarchy and repression. Through the use of metaphor and allegory, the Rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash seek to define themselves in opposition to the Black Africans of the Roman Empire.

My final chapter, chapter three, takes a look at how these similar themes and literary devices manifest themselves in the stories of Bernard Malamud. His works become a literary exemplar of these themes and devices. I also investigate The Human Stain by Philip Roth. Both authors employ the utilizations of metaphor and allegory to describe this complicated relationship.

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2007, I took a course in Jewish Literature taught by Dr. Wendy Zierler. As part of the curriculum, we read several short stories written by Bernard Malamud, namely, "Angel Levine", "Black is my Favorite Color", and "The Jewbird". I was drawn by Malamud's creative use of metaphor and humor, as well as the overall dynamic between blacks and Jews he presented. The stories interested me so much that I decided to write my final paper about the relationship between blacks and Jews as seen through Malamud's eyes. That short, final paper for Dr. Zierler triggered a desire to read more literature that reflected this complicated social relationship, and thus, my thesis topic was born.

Even before that course, I have always been extremely interested in the relationship between blacks and Jews: we have so many points of similarity and yet our history is fraught with tension and wariness. We are minorities in America; we share slavery as a defining characteristic of our mutual ethnic identities; we share traditions which love and respect the Holy Scriptures.

I chose to expand on my interest by studying a sampling of literature of the Jewish People: the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, Midrash and some selected Jewish-American authors. Being Jewish and not Black, I felt it was most appropriate to try to understand this issue through my own tradition's eyes; as a non-black, it would be impossible for me to ever truly articulate that side of the relationship, no matter how extensive my research.

I have organized my chapters in chronological order, so that a reader may understand the recurrence of themes, literary devices, and values in the historical/socio-political period in which they occurred and thereby understand the context of the authors.

I begin in chapter one with an investigation of the Hebrew Bible, specifically focused on the texts of Number 12, Isaiah 18:1-2, and *Shir HaShirim* 1:5-6. I found in my research that the only dark-skinned people identified as such are the Cushites, which are dealt with in Numbers 12 and in Isaiah 18:1-2. I also utilize Rabbi David Goldenberg's extensive study on Cush to establish a location for this ancient land and the context of biblical perceptions of its people. *Shir HaShirim* is an interesting case: the woman in the text is not Cushite, yet she is identified as being *shachorah* – black. The study of this text allows us to get a fuller picture of how ancient Israelites perceived dark skin, void of any cultural baggage related to a designated ethnic group.

By studying the Black-Jewish relationship within the Hebrew Bible, I found that there was a tension running through each exemplary passage. The Cushites are viewed as kin – descendants of Ham, son of Noah, just as we are descendants of Shem, son of Noah – and yet they are viewed as Other. Overall, we shall see that Cushites – the Black of the Biblical world - are seen as *parve* (to mix a metaphor): neither totally favored nor totally rejected.

I continue to find this tension between kinship and Otherness in Chapter two's presentation of texts from the Talmud and Midrash. More to the point, I find that the neutral nature of the Black-Jewish relationship as seen within the Hebrew Bible takes a

distinctively negative turn within Rabbinic Literature. Building upon their ancient near eastern tradition which embraces the dichotomy between light and dark, the Rabbis are influenced by their socio-political reality living under the Romans; a reality which includes black slavery, social hierarchy and repression. Through the use of metaphor and allegory, the Rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash seek to define themselves in opposition to the Black Africans of the Roman Empire.

My final chapter, chapter three, takes a look at how these similar themes and literary devices manifest themselves in the stories of Bernard Malamud. His works become a literary exemplar of these themes and devices. The tension I identified in earlier texts remains, as do the utilizations of metaphor and allegory to describe this complicated relationship.

Chapter One: Cush and Comely: Biblical Texts on the Cushite

The words "Cush" and "Cushi" are found throughout the Hebrew Bible. In modern translations, these words are often translated as "Ethiopia" and "Ethiopian", respectively. Not every usage of these words points to the modern country of Ethiopia; rather, these English translations echo the ancient Greek and Latin understandings of a general area and its people, namely, Black Africa[1].

This chapter is interested in how Ancient Israelites understood the term. Is every reference to Cush a reference to Black Africa, and Cushites to Black Africans? Was Cush a specific land? Our first investigation, therefore, is to understand where the land of Cush was, as understood by the Hebrew Bible. Once that has been established, we can investigate the Israelites' views of the Cushites and thus the ancient relationship between Jews and Blacks.

By far, the most extensive and complete research endeavoring to answer this question has been that of David M. Goldenberg in his study published in 2003, *The Curse of Ham*. In an effort to understand the roots of racism, Goldenberg investigates ancient documents in a variety of languages. Before he begins his conversation about racism, he aims to pinpoint the location of the Ancient land of Cush, as well as to discern the Hebrew Bible's usages of the word distinguishing a geographical location and a more poetic meaning. It is this first section of Goldenberg's research that answers our question

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[1] David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam.*(New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2003), 17.

in the most complete and reliable way to date, and therefore it is the foundation of our own investigation.

Cush is an Egyptian word that first appears in texts in the twentieth century B.C.E.[2] In general, it describes the area of the Southern Nile Valley, whose boundaries varied over time. During the earlier dynasties of Ancient Egypt, Cush's borders remained between the first and second waterfalls (also called cataracts, see map at the end of this chapter) of the Nile, but later, during the biblical period, its borders extended down to the fourth waterfall, reaching well into East Central Africa.[3] By approximately 320 C.E., the borders of Cush ranged all the way south to the sixth waterfall of the Nile, near Aswan, which borders the Red Sea.[4]

From approximately 760 BCE until 320 CE, Cush boasted not only a vital civilization, but the hub of a kingdom. From approximately 760 BCE to 660 BCE, otherwise known in Egyptian history as the twenty-fifth dynasty, Cushite kings ruled Egypt.[5] The period holds a variety of names, such as the Ethiopian dynasty, the Nubian dynasty and the Cushite dynasty.

In much of the Hebrew Bible, Cush refers to this area of Southern Egypt and its people and, in fact, is often paralleled with Egypt itself.[6] Isaiah 43:3, for example, reads:

"For I am the Eternal your God,

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[2] Muchiki,1999 as cited by Goldenberg, 17.
[3] Goldenberg, 17.
[4] J.Simons, 1959 as cited by Goldenberg, 18.
[5] Torok, 1997 as cited by Goldenberg, 18.
[6] See also Isaiah 20:3-4, 45:14, Ezekiel 29:10, 30:4, Dan 11:43, Nah. 3:9 also cited by Goldenberg, 19.

The Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

I give Egypt as a ransom for you,

Cush and Seba in exchange for you."[7]

The Sebaites, as we shall see, share Cushite lineage and land, and as such are generally considered part of the Cushite people. We see this parallel relationship again in Psalm 68:32"Ambassadors will come from Egypt; Cush will quickly stretch its hands to God."

Over the course of its history, the borders of Cush are not limited to the Nile and its cataracts, and this is reflected in its definition within the Hebrew Bible. While we as moderns see the Red Sea as separating the geographic and ethnic divisions of Africa and Asia, it has not always been so. The Table of Nations, found in Genesis 10 and I Chronicles 1 lists the descendants of Cush as " Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah and Sabteka; the descendants of Rammah: Sheba and Dedan."[8] While Isaiah and Josephus seem to support a Seba location in Africa, according to Goldenberg's vast research, "there is a general agreement that the other names of Kush's descendants (according to some even Seba) correspond to names of peoples who inhabited areas not in Africa but in the southern and southwestern parts of the Arabian Peninsula."[9] This notion that Cush was not just in Africa but stretched over the boundary of the Red Sea is supported in the Palestinian Targum's translation of "Arabia" for the word "Kush" in Genesis 10:6 and I

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[7] My Own translation
[8] Genesis 10:7
[9] Goldenberg,18. Also cited:
Westermann,1984;Wenham,1994;Eph'al,1992;Abrahams,1961;Ross,1981

Chronicles 1:8.[10] It is also supported through linguistics, since "scholars now see a relationship between the respective families of languages and refer to a parent family as Afro-Asiatic (formerly called Hamito-Semitic)."[11] Indeed, ancient historians, such as Strabo and Herodotus, frequently identified the people and culture of the Arabian Peninsula with that of the Southern Nile as one and the same.[12]

It is now apparent that the land and people of Cush extended over time from the Southern Nile Valley, down into Eastern Central Africa and across the Red Sea into the Arabian Peninsula; it is unclear whether the peoples of one area migrated to another or if people of the ancient near east simply began grouping the separate areas into one. Linguistics seems to point to the former. There is one more part of the Ancient Near East that the Hebrew Bible also identifies as Cush: The Kushu tribes. These were a nomadic people of the Negev identified in ancient Egyptian and Hebrew texts alike.[13] Again, though it is unclear whether Cushites from Africa or the Arabian Peninsula migrated north to the Negev, "the existence of a Kushite people in this general area and references to it in the Bible have become well accepted in biblical scholarship."[14] Various scholars have identified these specific Kushu-Cushites as: Cushan in Habakkuk 3:7, King Cushan-

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[10] Goldenberg,19.
[11] Tucker, 1975 as cited in Goldenberg, 19.
[12] Goldenberg,19.
[13] Ibid.
[14] *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol.2 1936 also cited in Goldenberg, 20.

Rishatayim of Judges, chapter three; Zerah the Cushite, found in II Chronicles chapters fourteen and sixteen, as well as the Cushites of II Chronicles 21:16.[15]

In conclusion, establishing the ancient location of Cush is not as simple as pinpointing a location in modern-day Africa. This is due in part because the term 'Cush' reflects not only a land but also a people, forcing us to read our texts closely to distinguish between citations for the land of Cush and of Cushite peoples in areas throughout the ancient near east. We see that these ancient Cushites were not unlike the rest of their ancient brethren, and migrated throughout the near eastern area over time.

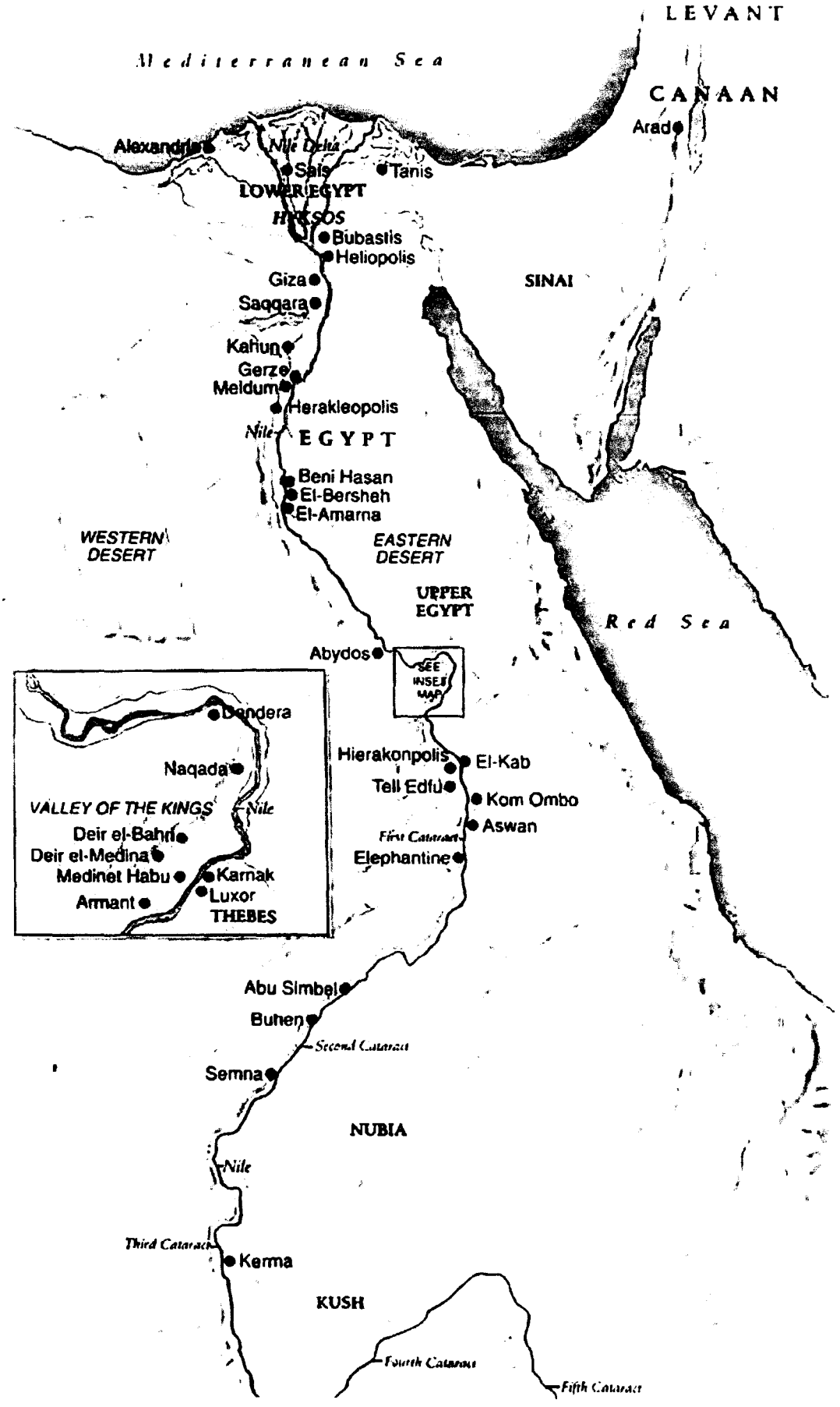
The ancient civilization of Cush existed for hundreds of years, and during that time, its borders grew in every direction: South, to the sixth Nile cataract located in Central East Africa; East, across the Red Sea throughout the Arabian Peninsula; and North, as a nomadic people throughout the Negev. While we see these areas as separate geographically and ethnically today, "the early Greek and Latin translations of the Bible do not distinguish between the different areas, translating them all as 'Ethiopia'",[16] and this view seems to be embraced by the ancient near east as well. It is perhaps because of Cush's seemingly endless and extensive borders that it is often depicted in ancient texts

[15] Na'aman, 1987; Hayes, 1988; Maisler, 1930 among many others. See note 25 in Goldernberg p. 220; texts cited from Goldenberg, 20.
[16] Goldenberg, 20.

as a place that is far flung, remote, "the ends of the earth."[17] It is from this perception that we can begin to identify how Cushites were understood in the Hebrew Bible.

Now that we have established the extensive boundaries of Cush- the land, we are able to investigate how the Hebrew Bible perceived the Cushite people. The main obstacle to this kind of research lies in the modern prejudices that saturate the vast majority of esteemed biblical commentaries. Throughout this section of our investigation, it will remain crucial to closely read the biblical text without applying an anachronistic, biased overlay. That being said, it is important when possible, to glean what can be used from these biased commentaries. As for their prejudiced worldview concerning black Africans, we shall discuss that topic thoroughly in the second chapter of this study.

[17] Ibid. 23-25


LEVANT
Mediterranean Sea
CANAAN
Arad
Alexandria
Nile Delta
Sais
Tanis
LOWER EGYPT
HYKSOS
Bubastis
Heliopolis
Giza
Saqqara
SINAI
Kahun
Gerze
Meidum
Herakleopolis
Nile
EGYPT
Beni Hasan
El-Bershah
El-Amarna
WESTERN DESERT
EASTERN DESERT
UPPER EGYPT
Red Sea
Abydos
SEE INSET MAP
Hierakonpolis
El-Kab
Tell Edfu
Kom Ombo
Aswan
First Cataract
Elephantine
Abu Simbel
Buhen
Second Cataract
Semna
NUBIA
Nile
Third Cataract
Kerma
KUSH
Fourth Cataract
Fifth Cataract
Dendera
Naqada
VALLEY OF THE KINGS
Nile
Deir el-Bahri
Deir el-Medina
Medinet Habu
Karnak
Luxor
Armant
THEBES

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I: The Cushite People

Contrary to what many biased commentaries would have us think, the Cushites are not perceived in a singular, specifically negative light. When studied in an objective way, the Hebrew Bible does not apply any special emphasis to Cush or its people. Some Cushites are cast as villains, such as King Cushan- Rishatayim[19]; however others, such as the Queen of Sheba[20] are seen as the best of allies.

We are first presented with the people of Cush in Genesis. According to the text, Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japeth. In Genesis 10, we find the so-called Table of Nations, several lengthy lineage lists. Within this Table, Ham is the progenitor of the peoples of, "Cush, Mitzraim, Put, and Canaan."[21] As these lists continue into chapter 11, we find that Shem is the progenitor of Terah, father of Abram, patriarch of the Israelites. The Israelites and the Cushites, therefore, are kindred; distant descendants of two brothers, both born to the symbol of universality, Noah.

Within the same biblical text that names these two peoples as kin, however, one of Ham's children, Canaan, is cursed by Noah for Ham's transgression when he sees his own father naked. It reads:

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[18] Map courtesy of "Ancient Egypt's Geography Page": http://www.sd91.bc.ca/webquests/egypt/map.gif ; Note location of Cataracts in reference to location of ancient Cush

[19] Judges 3:8

[20] I Kings 10; The Sebaites, whose land is often translated as Sheba, are direct descendants of Cush, as seen in the Table of Nations, Genesis 10 and I Chronicles 1. For more information, please see the earlier discussion of this topic in this paper, page 3.

[21] Genesis 10:6

"Cursed is Canaan, a slave of slaves he will be for his brothers…Blessed is Adonai, God of Shem and Canaan will be a slave to them. God will make Japeth lovely and he will dwell in the tents of Shem and Canaan will be a slave to them."[22]

These biblical verses have been interpreted in the past to support biased or oppressive social structures. That mode of interpretation, however, is self-serving, fitting an agenda rather than a simple reading of the text. For example, we shall see in the second chapter of this paper how the Rabbis impose their socio-political worldview onto this text in an effort to legitimize themselves and separate themselves from blacks within a Roman milieu.

What can be taken from this text belongs in part to the field of historical context; one must note which of Ham's sons is specifically targeted by the text for the curse: Canaan, progenitor of the Canaanites, sworn enemy of the Israelites. This curse is therefore an origin myth for the animosity between the two peoples as well as the Israelites' own legitimization of their settling the land of Canaan.

The other, more central piece which can be taken from our introduction to Ham and his line is the ambiguity with which dark-skinned peoples are treated by the Tanach. Ham is the father of Mitzraim and Canaan, two parts of Israel's main opposition. However, he is also the progenitor of Cush and Seba, who are portrayed both positively and negatively. Moreover, though *Mitzraim*, Egypt, is portrayed as one of Israel's main opponents in the biblical text, historically the two nations would become allies against

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[22] My own translation

Assyria, as mentioned earlier. It is precisely this tension, this sway between positive and negative portrayals of Blacks that permeate the Hebrew Bible.

Whether seen positively or negatively, all Cushite appearances are fragmentary. As the Hebrew Bible endeavors to tell the story of its people, the Israelites, other nations such as the Cushites, hold supporting literary roles. For example, though chapter 10 of I Kings illustrates the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon, the chapter is focused on Solomon. We are presented with only a few descriptive verses about the Queen.

Textual Investigation: Isaiah 18:1-2 and Numbers 12

Isaiah 18:1-2, "To a land far and remote"

The text which holds the most description of the Cushite people is, by far, Isaiah 18, and even this text only describes Cush in its first two verses, then repeats the same sentiment in the last verse. In it, Cush is described as a land "far and remote", which all at once colors the land of Cush as exotic and enticing but also as frightening and strange. This tension is introduced in the text's opening verse, which seems to indicate Cush as a land full of insects[23] but also full of rivers. Insects, which carry disease and mutilate crops, no doubt would have been understood negatively, while the advantages of many rivers – travel, trade, fertile land – would have been read positively.

[23] "*Eretz tziltzal k'nafaim*"; in NJPS as "the deep shadow of wings". In others as "buzzing wings", "whirring wings". All indicate the 'wings' are that of insects.

Isaiah 18:2, depending on the translation, reads "Go swift messengers" or "Go nimble messengers". In either case, the Cushites are obviously known for their speed as runners. Goldenberg writes, "The Kushite messengers are characterized by their speed, an attribute of the ancient Ethiopians noted also in Egyptian and Greek texts."[24] Goldenberg also quotes Heliodorus, the Greek author from the third century, who wrote that the ancient Ethiopians "have from nature the gift of running swiftly, which they train from childhood."[25] Knowing this information allows for seemingly small details of the Hebrew Bible to now add meaning. For example, King David's general, Joab, utilizes a Cushite runner in II Samuel 18. To an Israelite reader, this would be an obviously wise choice. However, without this telling description of Isaiah 18, Joab's choice of messenger reads as superfluous to a modern reader.

Verse 2 also speaks of a people "tall and smooth". Certainly, no matter one's bias, there is no way that this part of the verse could be seen negatively. Isaiah echoes his description of the Cushites as 'tall' later in the book, 45:14, where the Sebaites, of Cushite lineage, are described as "long of limb."[26] The Hebrew word, *morat*, 'smooth', could either refer to the look of the Cushites' dark skin or their seemingly hairless bodies. The second of these translations can be found in Koehler and Baumgartner's Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, which observes that this root, *mem-resh-tet*, can

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[24] Goldenberg, 31.
[25] *Aethiopica* 8.16.4 Text and translation from Fontes Historiae Nubiorum, ed.T Eide, T. Hagg, R.H. Pierce, L.Torok as cited by Goldenberg, 31.
[26] NJPS

also mean "to pull out hair, to tear out hair, to be without hair."[27] Goldenberg notes that characteristic; "Negroids tend to have less body hair then Caucasoid"[28] and evolutionarily speaking, less body hair would make living in the climate of Africa and the Middle East much more bearable. Science aside, it is clear that, in a text which contains both positive and negative characteristics, the Cushites are seen as a characteristically tall people with smooth skin.

Verse 2 also describes the Cushites as "a people feared far and wide." This description may be an indication of Cush being categorized as strange and frightening due to its remote, ends-of-the-earth location; however, it is more likely to be indicative of the Ethiopians' powerful reputation throughout the ancient world. In Jeremiah 46:9 and Ezekiel 38:5, the Cushite people are illustrated as warriors, ready with "helmet and shield." Other ancient documents attest that Cushite men worked as skilled mercenaries for Egypt in Canaan "in the fourteenth and tenth centuries B.C.E."[29] There were also "Kushite contingents in the Persian army of Xerxes."[30]

But the Cushites were viewed as more than simply skilled hired guns. As previously stated, Cushite kings ruled Egypt for one hundred years, beginning in the latter half of the 8th century, when First Isaiah prophesized. During this time, the Assyrian empire was expanding tremendously, causing Israel and Judah to often turn to Egypt as their ally

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[27] Koehler L. and Baumgartner W., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of The Old Testament* ed. M.E.J. Richardson E.J. Brill 1995, 634.
[28] Krantz, 1980 as cited by Goldenberg, 32.
[29] Herodutus as cited by Goldenberg, 34.

[30] Ibid.

against Assyrian vassalage[31]. Commentary on this part of the verse from the JPS Study Bible notes, "The Ethiopian ruler of Egypt may have been encouraging a revolt against the Assyrians."[32] In sum, we are able to gather a great deal of information from these two verses: the Cushite People seem to be known for their military prowess, for their speed, and for their tall, smooth bodies. We can also tell that the land of the Cushites is a remote land, full of rivers and insects.

Numbers 12, "The Cushite Woman"

Apart from Isaiah 18, other texts feature Cushites, but they do not provide nearly the same amount of descriptive information. On the contrary, some of these texts – which purposefully identify a person as Cushite – can be quite puzzling. We find such an example in the infamously nicknamed "Cushite Woman" incident of Number 12.

The narrative begins with a concentration on Moses' marriage to a Cushite, saying: "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he took for a wife, for he took a Cushite woman." For centuries, this narrative has been viewed through a biased lens; it has been generally accepted that Miriam is outraged that Moses has taken a black woman as wife when, in fact, her outrage could have other explanations. One explanation is that Miriam is outraged that Moses has married a foreigner, not however, that she is specifically a *black* foreigner. Another explanation is

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[31] Benjamin D. Sommer, "Isaiah" JPS Study Bible ed. Michael Fishbane (New York: Oxford Press 2004), 781.
[32] Sommer, 819.

that Miriam's anger is in fact aimed at the woman's race and that the text is color-centered.

Though Miriam speaks out against the Cushite before anything else, the marriage is never mentioned in this chapter again, or in any other chapter for that matter. The focus of the text is the second-guessing of Moses' leadership by Miriam and Aaron, along with their accompanying jealousy. God's answer to Miriam and Aaron, in fact, only takes issue with their questioning of Moses' leadership, completely disregarding Moses' marriage:

> "Hear these, my words: When a prophet of the Eternal arises among you I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout my household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Eternal. How then did you not shrink from speaking against my servant, Moses!?" (Numbers 12:6-8)

The marriage Miriam speaks of is one of the major reasons why this narrative is so confusing. The only wife of Moses the reader has been made aware of up to this chapter is Tzipora, who is only ever described as Midianite, not Cushite. [33] So, the question naturally arises: Who is this Cushite woman? We are never told explicitly. As a result of this apparent ellipsis, two explanations/interpretations are generally utilized in commentaries: The first explanation interprets "the Cushite woman" as Tzipora, and,

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[33] Exodus 2:21, 18:6

depending on the commentator, different explanations are given as to why Tzipora, a Midianite, is identified as a Cushite in this particular passage. Furthermore, traditional commentators, such as Ibn Ezra, try to explain why, if this is Tzipora, Miriam shows such anger so long after she has been married to her brother.

Another common interpretation is that Moses married a Cushite woman while in Egypt, and we readers were not made privy to that fact in the biblical text. In this case, Cush should be literally taken to describe Nubia, or modern-day Ethiopia.

No matter which explanation Miriam is using, it is clear that she sees this woman as Non-Israelite. The Biblical text makes this point apparent by repeating the Cushite woman's identity twice within the same verse. Goldenberg, along with other commentators such as W. Gunther Plaut,[34] Rabbi Yehuda HaChassid and Rabbi Elazar Rokeach[35] understand the woman's Non-Israelite heritage to be the source of Miriam's outrage. Rabbi Elazar Rokeach, for instance, understands Miriam's distress in the following way: "He (Moses) should have taken a wife from within the Jewish people, not from a foreign nation."[36] The Tanakh's total disregard of the marriage after this verse, coupled with similar xenophobic statements throughout the biblical text completely support the argument that Miriam's outrage belongs to general xenophobia against foreigners not a specific bias against black foreigners. The fact that God's rebuke completely ignores Moses' marriage perhaps supports an interpretation where Miriam and Aaron are questioning Moses' leadership.

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[34] *The Torah, a Modern Commentary* ed. W. Gunther Plaut (New York: UAHC Press 1981), 1098, 1101

[35] As cited onhttp://rchaimqoton.blogspot.com/2007/07/moses-black-wife.html

[36] Ibid.

Some could argue that Miriam's affliction, *tzoraat*, is actually a response to her complaint concerning the Cushite woman Moses had married. The Hebrew text reads that the affliction is *k'sheleg*, "like snow". Some translations actually read "white, like snow" or "snow-white."[37] One could contrast this description against the characteristically dark skin of a Cushite. Goldenberg points out, however, that the word 'white' is not part of the Hebrew text. Therefore, *tzoraat* is not like snow in color, "but to its characteristic flakiness."[38] Atalya Brenner also notes that '*k'sheleg*' "does not contain the term *lavan* and probably refers to the texture of psoriasis foci rather than to their colour" in her study, *Colour Terms in the Old Testament.*[39]

More poignantly, Goldenberg sees additional support of this point within the text itself:

> "The passage in Numbers actually provides evidence of a nonwhite color of the disease, as well as its flaky characteristic, for it describes the condition as similar to a 'dead [fetus] when it comes out of its mother's womb." The color of a fetus that has died in the womb is reddish, which turns brown-gray after a few days out of the womb. As for its flaky condition, a dead fetus in utero sheds its skin in large sheets."[40]

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[37] Some include: New American Standard Bible, American Standard Bible, Bible in Basic English, King James Bible, JPS
[38] Goldenberg p. 27
[39] Brenner, Atalya. *Colour Terms in the Old Testament.* (Sheffield 1982), 82
[40] Goldenberg, 28.

As truly disturbing as Goldenberg's research is, it nevertheless proves the point the text is making; the color of the Cushite's skin and the color of Miriam's *tzoraat* are not only unrelated to one another, they are irrelevant to the narrative.

Some of our tradition's greatest Torah scholars also interpret this episode as color irrelevant -not to be confused with unbiased - and their motivations are not clear-cut. Rashi, along with other great scholars such as Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, add Midrashic layers upon their interpretations of this narrative. These expansions of the biblical text seem to be born out of the same ellipsis mentioned earlier regarding the confusion of Moses marriage, but also out of a real prejudiced discomfort on behalf of our sages.

For example, though the text clearly states twice that Moses' wife is Cushite, Rashi interprets this description allegorically, writing, "Scripture teaches that everyone acknowledged her beauty just as everyone acknowledges a Cushite's blackness."[41] Rashi continues in this vein by arguing that the phrases "Cushite woman" and "beautiful in appearance" posses the same numeric value in Gematria.[42] In doing this, Rashi takes away any possibility in acknowledging the woman's ethnic validity and turns her identity into a poetic adjective.

Rashi's interpretation is a fine example of a reading that adheres to the first of the two commonly utilized interpretations mentioned earlier: the unnamed woman is none other than Tzipora; the adjective "Cushite", Rashi argues, is not to be taken literally.

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[41] Tanchuma Tzav 13

[42] Ibid., כ = 20 י = 10 ו = 6 פ = 80 ש = =300 ת =400 י = 10 מ =200 736 א = 1 ה = 5 - =736

Tzipora, in his opinion was not black at all – it was that her beauty could not be contended, just as a Cushite's blackness could not be contended.

Ibn Ezra also understands the unnamed woman in Numbers 12 is Tzipora, however he is more open to the possibility that she could have been dark-skinned. In his commentary, Ibn Ezra traces Tzipora's lineage to prove his point: "This is Tzipora, because she is Midianite, and the Midianites are Ishmaelites..." as shown in a prooftext from Habakkuk 3:7. She was not only of a tent-dwelling people, but also of a people coupled with an area called Cushan; more to the point, the JPS Jewish Study Bible commentary identifies Cushan as "being part of Midian."[43] Ibn Ezra concludes by pointing out that the heat of the sun in that region causes the Midianites to "not be white, and Tzipora was black and similar to a Cushite."

As if one mention of the unnamed Cushite woman wasn't enough to confuse readers, it is mentioned twice in the same verse. Because the biblical text as a whole is a work that is concise, terse and specific, any repetition piques interest; all the more so when that repetition occurs within one verse.

The repetition has triggered further commentary, including that of Rashi and his grandson, Rashbam. In Rashi's expansion, Moses has divorced Tzipora – again, called Cushite for her beauty and not her actual skin color - and it is this divorce that has sent Miriam into such an outrage. So to read the verse as Rashi understands it, "...for he had married a Cushite woman *and divorced her.*" The Midrashic basis of Rashi's expansion

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[43] *The Jewish Study Bible* ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Avi Brettler (New York: Oxford Press 1999), 308

people that are tall and smooth, and yet feared far and wide. They are a people who we regard simultaneously as our kin and the Other.

Song of Songs 1:5-6; Non-Cushite Blackness or The Color of Women

I examined two examples of the biblical perceptions of Cushites, but what about people who are dark-skinned yet not identified as Cushite? The only example of this can be found in the Song of Songs, *Shir HaShirim*, chapter 1 verses five through six. From these two verses, we see part of the ancient near east's definition of feminine beauty.

The verses read:

"Black I am *v'*lovely, daughters of Jerusalem –

Like the tents of Kedar

Like the pavilions of Solomon.

Do not look at me, that I am darkened

That the sun has blackened me.

The sons of my mother quarreled with me;

They placed me as a guard of the vineyards

My own vineyard I did not guard."[47]

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[47] My own translation with consultation of Marvin H. Pope, *The Anchor Bible: The Song of Songs* (New York: Doubleday 1977) 1, especially for the phrase 'The sun has blackened me"

stories.[46] Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, who characteristically interprets the biblical text plainly, takes little issue with calling the Cushite woman black. Lastly, Rashbam builds upon his own individual experience as a student both Rashi, who often expands the text and Rabbenu Tam who speaks plainly when he interprets the Cushite woman as indeed, a black woman. However, he uses Midrash to support his conclusion.

There is more about Miriam's outrage and her punishment that is confusing. For instance, if *tzoraat* is truly Miriam's punishment specifically pertaining to Moses' taking of a Cushite wife, why was it not mentioned in God's lengthy criticism of Miriam and Aaron? All the more so, if God is punishing Miriam for a racist statement she made against the Cushites than Numbers 12 stands as a rebuttal to prejudice, not a support of it.

The confusion which encourages such analysis and expansion lies in part with the ellipsis of the unnamed woman of a different ethnicity than Tzipora, but also in the ambiguity with which the Hebrew Bible treats Cushites. If every appearance of a Cushite in the Hebrew Bible showed them solely in a positive or negative light, our commentators as well as the readers would understand immediately how to perceive the anger Miriam expresses at the union between Moses and a 'Cushite'. This, however, is not the case; instead, we are presented with a portrayal of the Cushites both positive and negative: Cushites are allies and villains. Cush is a land full of insects but also of rivers. They are a

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[46] Abraham Melamed, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture* translated by Betty Sigler Rozen.(New York: Rutledge-Curzon 2003), 149

can be found in Tanchuma Tzav 13,[44] a text which will be discussed in the second chapter of this paper.

Interestingly enough, Rashbam expands the biblical text in a way that is similar to both Rashi and Ibn Ezra. Like Ibn Ezra, he uses Tzipora's lineage to support his interpretation; he also does not deny that the woman was indeed black. Like Rashi, part of Rashbam's interpretation stems from a Midrash, not the biblical text.[45] Though he gleans from the previous commentators, Rashbam comes to an entirely different conclusion. He concludes that the Cushite woman is not Tzipora, but rather, a Cushite queen Moses took as a wife during his forty year reign as the king of Cush. He argues that this is clear from the repetitive part of the verse, "for he took a Cushite woman." If Miriam had been speaking about Tzipora, "what is the need to explain 'for he took a Cushite woman'?" Tzipora "was not Cushite, because Cush is from the line of Ham and Midian is from the line Keturah that bore to Abraham."

All three of our commentators expand the meaning of Numbers 12 because it is such a confusing text, demanding an explanation. Each of these men approach the narrative with their own worldviews which are steeped in their own personal historical context, and as such, produce interpretations which are truly specific. Rashi, with his refusal to read the Cushite woman as truly black-skinned, echoes the social context of 11th century Western Europe, where contact with blacks was all but limited to travelers'

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[44] As cited by Torat Hayim, Hamakor Press 1991 p. 97 note 57
[45] Yalkut Shimoni 168

I have not translated the conjunctive *vav*, for this is the crux of my interpretive endeavor. This conjunction is ambiguous in the biblical Hebrew and remains so in translation. It can be understood adversely - "Black I am *but* lovely" – as it appears in the NJPS, King James, American Standard, Bible in Basic English as well as countless other translations. The *vav* can also be read as "and" – "Black I am, *and* Lovely" – as it appears in the New Revised Standard Version, and the Revised English Bible. There are certainly more translations that understand the *vav* adversely, however, these translations base their interpretation on the Greek which also understood the *vav* adversely. As more and more translators question the accepted Greek translation and take a closer look of their own into the Hebrew – as is the case for the NRSV and REB – reading the *vav* conjunctively is no longer totally out of bounds. Due to the text's vague nature, the maiden's response can be read either way - "as accepting the urban ideal of beauty or asserting her own rural idea of dark, sunburned beauty"[48] – no matter the case, volumes of ancient aesthetic values are contained within two verses of biblical poetry.

Within these two simple verses, no matter how the conjunctive *vav* is read, this poetry indicates "a dispute of class and of values between the village and city girls, between ethnic pride and assimilation."[49] The country girl, who lives among vineyards and is darkened by the sun, seems to challenge the women of Jerusalem – a major municipality. In doing so, she challenges their concepts of beauty and femininity.

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[48] Goldenberg, 81
[49] Ibid., 43

We are told that this woman has been "darkened by the sun" and is therefore different from the Cushites we have been studying in that she was not born black; she was made so with a rather dark suntan. In fact, according to Atalya Brenner's extensive study on color in the Hebrew Bible, the color the woman uses, *shachor*, originally was only ever applied to burnt things, from which it came to describe things that were 'dark'; therefore it is entirely accurate for the word to indicate "the color of sunburnt skin, that is, brown."[50] This definition is further supported with the maiden's usage of the word *shecharchoret* in the following verse; it is a diminutive form of *shachor* and therefore implies a color slightly lighter than the 'dark' of *shachor*.

We see then that darker skin was associated with rural life – those in the fields were darkened by the sun – while city dwellers, like the daughters of Jerusalem, were fairer, protected from the sun. This dichotomy and the values of beauty it imposes are concepts that were generally accepted in the ancient near east. According to Goldenberg, ancient Egyptian art is known to "depict Egyptian men in yellow or lighter colors than the normal reddish-brown, do so to indicate a type of individual who has led a sedentary life indoors." Or that differentiate between "chocolate-red" land owners and "chocolate" field workers.[51] This value judgment continues on into history, to the time of the Greeks. Greek culture, which place men in the public, outdoor and athletic sphere preferred men to have tan skin, while women who were delegated to the private sphere were considered beautiful if they possessed porcelain-white skin. This is reflected in their art as well, with

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[50] Brenner, 95-99
[51] Fisher as cited by Goldenberg, 81

men often being painted as dark or black, while women and goddesses were painted white.[52]

Lastly, this aesthetic ideal remains even into modern times, accepted by both whites and blacks. It is widely known that during the period of American slavery, lighter black slaves were used for the esteemed work within the master's house, while darker slaves worked the fields. This translated into the modern African-American community through the first half of the 20th century, where 'the brown-bag test' became the standard within the black community for measuring beauty. Meanwhile, within the white community, light skin was also preferred among women during American colonialism – the reasons obviously stemming from the desire to be as different from the slave class as possible.

So how are we to read the conjunctive *vav*, with all of this in mind? The truth is, the interpretation is left to the reader. If we wish to read the *vav* as "and", as Marvin Pope does, for example, we see the following verses are supportive of her beauty; she is "both black and beautiful, like a Bedouin tent."[53] This is echoed, albeit with more of a sense of protest by Marcia Falk: "She defies them to diminish her own self-esteem. No, she argues, I will not be judged by your standards, I am black AND beautiful."[54] The text lends itself equally to be understood adversely, as it has been by most translations for centuries. Whether the *vav* means 'but' or 'and' in many ways, is inconsequential; either

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[52] Goldenberg, 82
[53] Pope, 191
[54] Marcia Falk, *Love lyrics from the Bible: A translation and literary study of the Song of Songs*. (England: Sheffield 1982), 13

case is a direct challenge to the accepted norms of feminine beauty of the time; Or, as Melamed so succinctly writes:

> "The female voice in the Song of Songs takes a stand against such norms. Her opposition indicates just how rooted, how accepted they were…possibly she, the village girl, the true daughter of Israel, is speaking out against attempts of her city counterparts, the daughters of Jerusalem, to look like the gentiles, the fairer 'children of Japheth' and to accept their aesthetic standards, with all the theo-ethnic implications that stance implies…the ancient version of 'Black is beautiful'…"[55]

The confusing nature of these verses place the Song of Songs squarely among the other texts of the Hebrew Bible because it is uncertain. Cushites, black from birth, are treated well and not so well. Here we see that dark skin in women was not the accepted aesthetic norm, however, due to the vagueness of the poetic text, we are unable to tell whether the maiden agrees with the norm or disagrees with it.

One thing is clear when studying dark skin in the Hebrew Bible – it is all ambiguous.

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[55] Melamed, 43

Isaiah 18:1-2

(1)Ah!

A land of whirring[56] wings[57]

That is beyond rivers of Cush –

(2)That sends envoys by sea

And reed vessels upon the face of the water –

Go, swift messengers!

To a nation tall[58] and smooth,[59]

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[56] *Tziltzal*, root: Tzadee-lamed-tzadee-lamed; binyan piel
As noted in the Anchor Bible, this verb "has several connotations." It denotes a whirring or buzzing sound. This interpretation is also supported by the BDB. I chose 'whirring' because of its poetic alliteration with 'wings'.

[57] It is generally accepted that the text is referring to insects wings.

[58] *M'mooshach*, root: mem-shin-chaf sofit; binyan pual
This conjugation is only seen twice in the Tanach: in this verse and then again in Proverbs 13:12. The root family denotes that which is 'long or drawn out'; in the Proverbs reference it speaks of postponing – drawing out time, making time longer; while the implication when describing people, as in our text, is that they are long, or tall. The Ethiopians' above-average height is also supported by extrabiblical sources both from the ancient (Herodotus) and medieval eras. Though translated by the NJPS as "To a people thrust forth and away", I did not find any other translations or resources which support such a translation. I did find many translations, including that of the Anchor Bible, which support understanding this word as 'tall' and therefore based my translation upon such textual support.

[59] *Morat*, root: mem-resh-tet; binyan paal
This root translates "to make smooth, bare, bald, to scour, polish". It is utilized in a similar conjugation in I Kings 7:45 to describe the polished Temple vessels, here it

To a nation feared[60] -

From it and further.[61]

A nation *kav-kav*[62] and conquering[63]

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renders a rich description of the Cushites skin. Since it can mean 'smooth' related to polished or 'smooth' related to baldness, it is unclear whether the text is referring to the Cushites' burnished skin color or their bodies which had less hair; the latter is confirmed by scientific fact.
The BDB interprets the binyan of this verb as pual, thus: "was smoothed" or "was polished"; though the conjugation interpretation is different, the understanding remains the same.

[60] *Nora*, root: yud-resh-alef; binyan nifal
This root implies multiple translational possibilities as it connotes a spectrum of trepidation ranging from awe to fear. This conjugation is most often used in reference to God (Exodus 15:11, Job 37:22, Ps. 47:3 and 130:4 are just a few).
Here we see that Cush was a land and a people that were renown in its surrounding areas and beyond. Though this may hold a xenophobic connotation, it may also recall the fact that ancient Cush was recognized throughout the ancient near east as a military and metropolitan hub.

[61] *Va'hala*, adverb.
Literally, "out there, onwards, further, hence". A more literal translation of this phrase would be "from it and onwards". As is characteristic of the Tanach's treatment of Cush and the Cushites, it is bound up in imagery denoting distance, vastness and remoteness.

[62] Meaning of Hebrew uncertain.
This is, by far, the most difficult word to translate and understand within this chapter. This word is a hapax, meaning that this is the only time this word is seen in the entire Tanak, making it nearly impossible to understand in context.
The BDB translates this verse, "a mighty nation", taking *kav-kav* to mean "might…strength…meting out, conquering lands, literally of line, line'." The NJPS, on the other hand, understands *kav-kav* as onomatopoeia the Cushite language, which would have seem unintelligible to the ancient Israelites.
When not doubled as *kav-kav*, the word '*kav*' is defined by the BDB as 'line', specifically, the kind of line used when measuring, designing or building something. While I lean towards the BDB's understanding of "a mighty nation" due to the context of the rest of the verse, the NJPS's translation is not totally unfounded, and so I have decided to leave *kav-kav* as it is, vague and open to interpretation.

[63] *M'vusa*, root: bet-vav-samech

Its land, rivers cut through[64].

Literally, "down-treading, subjugation". This echoes the previous notion that Cush was a nation "feared" due to its military prowess in the ancient world, especially during the time period of First Isaiah.

[64] *Bazu* root: bet-zion-alef; binyan kal
Literally, "to divide, cut through". This particular translation was made with consideration for the related Arabic word, *b'za*, "to cleave".

Numbers 12:1-3

(1) Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses, because of[65] the Cushite[66] woman that he took as a wife, for he took a Cushite woman[67]. (2) They said[68], "Is it only through Moses The Eternal[69] has spoken? Is it not also through us he has spoken?"[70] The

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[65] According to the BDB, this is one of only three instances where this word is used in the plural. The other instances are Genesis 21:11 and II Samuel 13:16; all three instances refer to highly distressing matters. In Genesis 21:11, it refers to Abraham's mindset as he casts out Hagar and Ishmael: "*The thing distressed Abraham a great deal, for it concerned his son.*" In II Samuel 13:16, Tamar, who has just been raped by her brother Amnon, uses it as she pleads to not to be sent away. So it is clear that this noun was used purposefully to convey the gravity of Miriam and Aaron's distress.

[66] According to the BDB, Cush refers to the "land and people of the southern Nile valley extending from the Syene indefinitely to the South." But it can also refer to an "indeterminate, land or people, or including both." (pg. 469) Both of these definitions are supported by the research of David Goldenberg, cited in my chapter, and the word's many other appearances within the Hebrew Bible.

On a separate note, the only wife of Moses the reader has been made aware of is Tzipora, who is Midianite (Exodus 2:21) According to the JPS Study Bible, two explanations are therefore possible: The first explanation originally comes from Ibn Ezra. The Cushite woman is in fact Tzipora. In this case, Cush describes Cushan, a part of Midian described in Habakkuk 3:7. The second explanation is that Moses married a Cushite woman while in Egypt. In this case, Cush would describe Nubia, another name for the land of the southern Nile valley. No matter which explanation Miriam is using, it is clear that she sees this woman as Non-Israelite. The Biblical text makes this point clear by repeating Moses' perceived transgression twice in the same line. For a more detailed discussion on this topic, please see preceding chapter.

[67] Most translations interpret this repetitive part of the verse as the actual quote of Miriam. However, since this information is not overtly stated, I chose to interpret it as I did. It does not change the overall narrative's message or meaning.

[68] In contrast to verse 1, here we see that both Miriam and Aaron are speaking, as the verb is conjugated in the plural.

[69] 'The Eternal' will function as the English translation of the Hebrew word *yud-hay-vav-hay.* That is because the name for the Biblical God seems to be a derivative of the verb "to be"; this translation also allows for a non-gendered translated understanding.

[70] This is an interesting rhetorical question that the siblings pose because, in fact, The Eternal does not speak through Miriam throughout the entire Exodus narrative, and only speaks *to* Aaron a few times in Numbers. Due to the exchange between The Eternal and Moses in Exodus 4:14-16, Aaron acts as "spokesman to the people" however, as dictated in the Exodus passage, The Eternal speaks to Moses who then in turn, speaks to Aaron. Although Miriam is called a prophetess in Exodus 15:20, readers are never presented with explicit moments of prophecy. This is compounded by The Eternal's reaction in the

Eternal heard. (3) And the man, Moses was the humblest from all humanity upon the face of the earth.

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upcoming verses which I did not translate; it is this questioning of Moses' status that seems to be the crux of this incident and not his taking of a black woman.

Chapter Two: Reading Blackness in Rabbinic Texts

Though the ancient writers and its early readers viewed the Cushites as Other, it is clear to me that they did not see them as inferior. As Biblical times became Rabbinic times, however, the ambiguity towards the Black in Jewish texts takes a clearly negative turn. The reasons for this downward turn, as we shall see, are based on the political, economic and social changes taking place at this point in history.

After the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the sacrificial cult of the Temple evolved and was replaced with halachic Judaism under Rabbinic leadership working out of the Galilee region of modern-day Israel. As Rabbinic Judaism developed under Roman rule, it found itself subject to Roman politics, the Roman economy which included slave labor, and Roman societal values, all of which are reflected in the rabbinic literature of the time, namely, Talmud and Midrash. In this chapter, I will show examples of how blackness is perceived negatively by the rabbis and propose where this change in perception comes from. We shall see that the rabbis draw upon the primeval dichotomy between light and dark as reflections of good and evil and that they often prefer to allegorize dark skin, thus decreasing an actual Black's legitimacy. Moreover, I shall present in this chapter the roots from which modern Jewish bias grows regarding the black: how it connotes slavery, sexual immorality and bestial imagery. Lastly, I will show how the definitions of feminine beauty, discussed in the previous chapter, translate into the literature of the rabbis. All of these devices are born

out of the rabbis' need to define themselves in contrast to the Black they know as slaves and pagans within the oppressive Roman milieu.

Ancient Greece originally had no culture of superiority over blacks, or any skin color for that matter. They were viewed as "barbarians" – a word which originally held the neutral connotation of simply "non-Greek strangers."[71] After the Persian wars, however, Greek attitudes towards barbarians became purely negative, seeing them as inferior in light of the Greek victories over the multiple Persian invasions. Categorized a "sub-group of barbarians", attitudes towards blacks changed as well.[72] These values were transmitted through the centuries to Hellenistic-Roman culture, the host culture of Rabbinic Judaism.

Throughout its ancient history, slaves in the Middle East had come from Black Africa.[73] Though the majority of slaves in the Roman Empire were of Slavic and German origin, the black skin of the African slaves and former slaves caused them to stand out as people who had been sold into slavery and "thus 'black' and 'slave' became synonymous terms."[74] In the centuries that lay between the Cushite Woman of Numbers 12 and the literature of the rabbis, "the face of Middle Eastern slavery had grown much blacker. Jewish sources responded accordingly."[75]

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[71] Abraham Melamed, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture* translated by Betty Sigler Rozen. (New York: Rutledge-Curzon 2003), 62

[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid. 65

The Talmud and Midrashim not only reflect the political and economic realities of black slavery in the Roman Empire, but also the psychological needs of the rabbis. Oppressed under Roman rule, the rabbis 'Othered' Blacks in order to define and validate themselves and perhaps also to raise their validity in the eyes of their Roman oppressors. As Abraham Melamed writes:

> "Following rejection, there is a psychological need not only to prove to oneself and others that one is not inferior to those who think themselves superior, but also to find groups even lower in the normative order...In repressing those thought to be even lower than they are, two purposes are achieved: identification with the ruling oppressors and a salutary separation from those lower on the scale, placing themselves, at least relatively, in a higher position."[76]

Since blacks were already established as those "lower in the normative order" in the universally accepted scale utilized by Romans and Jews, they became the natural target for the rabbis in their literature. Add to this socio-psychological mix the fact that Black Africans were pagans, and the rabbis became even more legitimized in their subjugation of the black within their value systems in their literature.

Though the Hebrew Bible is ambiguous in its treatment of people with dark skin, we see quite clearly a dichotomy drawn between light and darkness as general principles; take, as a primary example, the creation narrative of Genesis:

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[76] Ibid. 32

"And God said let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day' and the darkness He called 'night' and there was evening and there was morning a first day. "[77]

And while people with dark skin are treated ambiguously within the Hebrew Bible, there are quite a few examples where light is associated with goodness and purity while darkness is associated with evil and lack of purity. One of the first plagues of the Exodus narrative, for example, was the plague of darkness. Within that same narrative, we also find that the final plague, the death of the first born, comes in "the middle of the night"[78] – the darkest of the dark hours.

This dichotomy and its accompanying associations can be found as a generally accepted understanding in all of the ancient cultures of the Middle East[79]: it is the sun god, Ra, for example, who ruled Ancient Egypt. These associations with light and darkness most likely "arises from primeval fears of the darkness and dangers of night, and the sense of relief and hope that came with the light and the rising sun."[80] Perhaps that is why, within the creation narrative of Genesis, the "lesser light" which rules the nighttime hours is named later within the Torah "*levanah*" – that a bit of 'whiteness' and thus goodness oversees the dark and fearful hours of the night.

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[77] Genesis 1:3-5, translation mine
[78] Exodus 11:4, 29
[79] Goldenberg, 74
[80] Melamed, 19

This general theme is so pervasive throughout the Hebrew Bible and its surrounding ancient milieu that it is clear that the rabbis were building upon literary concepts already accepted by their tradition, not solely relying their values from their socio-political situation under the Romans.

The sages take the ancient dichotomy concerning the principles of light and dark and then apply it to skin color. Where then, do they see themselves within the spectrum of skin coloring, which, in their eyes, is also a reflection of Good and Evil? R. Ishmael answers this clearly within the Mishnah:

"R. Ishmael said: The children of Israel, may I be their atonement, are like a box tree, neither too black nor too white, but in between." [81]

It is no surprise that R. Ishmael sees Jews as being "in between", or to mix a metaphor, quoting from a fairytale, the Jewish people are "just right." He accepts their physical reality, meaning that, as natives of the Middle East, they were most likely darker than their Romans oppressors and their German(*germani*, not actually from Germany, but used to describe white) slaves[82]; but R. Ishmael is also speaking about their spiritual and moral standing. In his eyes, Jews are neither totally evil nor totally perfect. They are in balance: not spiritually or morally bankrupt, yet able to improve – through observance of rabbinic law, of course.

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[81] Mishnah Taharot, Negaim 2:1 as quoted by Melamed

[82] Melamed, 33,39,60,64,68,90,101-102,104,109,251

While the rabbis understood light and darkness as metaphors for Good and Evil – and we shall see more of this later – they did not explicitly apply these same labels with regards to skin color; in other words, while the Rabbis saw themselves as "in between", they did not overtly use other peoples' skin color to make similar moralistic judgments.

Since the Rabbis saw themselves as 'just right' physically, it stands to reason that skin colors that were much lighter or much darker from their own would be perceived differently. The rabbis address this very topic in the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 58b:

> "If one sees a black, a very red person or a very white person, a hunchback, a dwarf or a dropsical person, he says: Blessed be He who makes different creatures. If he sees one with an amputated limb, or blind, or flat-headed, or lame, or smitten with boil, or pock-marked, he says: Blessed be the true Judge! - There is no contradiction; one blessing is said if he is so from birth, the other if he becomes so...Our rabbis taught: On seeing an elephant, an ape, or a longtailed ape, one says: Blessed is He who makes different creatures. If one sees beautiful creatures and beautiful trees, he says: Blessed is He who has such in His world."[83]

The blessing upon seeing a black (*shachor*) may seem like a positive blessing at first, but when read in context with the other blessings and their proper usage, we see that this is not the case. There is a clear distinction between physical anomalies, animals and good things. Being a black man or woman was considered by the rabbis to be a physical abnormality, for like a hunchback, these were people who were abnormal "from birth".

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[83] As cited by Melamed, 71

More than that, however, it is obvious from this text that blackness, like albinism or dwarfism, was considered both a grotesque anomaly (different from the 'beautiful creatures' mentioned just after) and is paralleled with wild, rare animals. We can see this because the blessing for seeing black person and an elephant are one and the same: "Blessed be He who makes different creatures". The blessing upon seeing one who is black-skinned is presented in opposition with the blessing to be recited "upon seeing beautiful creatures".

This argument is totally secured upon reading from the Babylonian Talmud, *Meseket Shabbat* 107b:

> "Levi as Rabi: How do we know that a wound... is permanent? – Because it is written 'Can a Cushite change his skin?' Just as the skin of the black cannot turn, so is a wound that does not turn (heal)."[84]

Black skin, likened to a wound, is presented as being in every way irregular and blemished.

I mentioned earlier that the rabbis explicitly saw themselves as 'just right' – both morally and physically – yet they did not dare make such overt judgments for others' skin colors. This blessing, as well as the others within this section relate to the "unfathomable wisdom of God, who made his creatures with some purpose: the rabbis' perception did not allow them to attribute to God the creation of phenomena as evil, negative or entirely without purpose."[85] So while the rabbis dare not impose the judgment that a black's skin

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[84] My own translation, with much reference to Melamed, 78
[85] Ibid. 72

represented evil or lack or purpose, they acknowledge that the creation of such a person is beyond their comprehension, one that could only be explained by the Creator and His master plan for the world.

Having a black face "from birth" was viewed by the Sages as an inexplicable physical abnormality; but the rabbis also understood that a man could "blacken his face" throughout his life's experience, a phrase which solely carries negative connotations. The rabbis write of ways a man can blacken his face in a literal sense, such as "the negative contexts of poverty, bodily weakness and disease..."[86]but they also understand it in a metaphorical sense, as appears in the Babylonian Talmud, Meseket Shabbat 152a: "What a man does in his youth blackens his face in old age."

Nowhere is blackness allegorized more than it is in the Midrashim of *Shir HaShirim*, the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs is full of black imagery, specifically, black hair and black skin. The rabbis' discomfort with the text already gave them several reasons to allegorize the poetry: its explicit sexual nature, its overt presentation of female sexuality and prowess, its seeming lack of a divine presence or sacred nature...add to this easiness a verse as strident and yet as vague as 1:5, "שְׁחוֹרָה אֲנִי וְנָאוָה"and the rabbis, with their socio-political worldview in tow, see no alternative but to allegorize.

The primary example of this can be found in Midrash Rabbah 1:5a and b. It reads, in part:

> "*'I am black but beautiful...*' Black I am in my deeds, but beautiful I am in the deeds of my fathers; *I am black but beautiful*, The Community of Israel said, I am black according to myself, but beautiful according to my Creator, as it is written

[86] Ibid. 16

> "Are you not like the children of Cush to me, Children of Israel?"(Amos 9:7) "As the children of Cush" – according to yourselves, but "You are to me as the Children of Israel" so says Adonai...another interpretation: Black I am in Egypt and beautiful I am in Egypt; Black I am in Egypt, "But they rebelled against me and they would not listen to me" (Ezek. 20:8), but I am Beautiful in Egypt through the blood of the Pesach and through the blood of circumcision, as it is written, "When I passed over you I saw you wallowing in your blood and I said to you: In your blood live" – this is the blood of the Pesach – "and I said to you in your blood live"(Ezek.16:6) – this is the blood of circumcision.....Black I am through the Spies, as it is said, "They spread an evil report of the land" (Numbers 13:32). But beautiful I am through Joshua and Caleb and it is said, "Except for Caleb son of Yafuna the elder" (Numbers 32:12).....Black I am through the kings of Israel but beautiful I am through the kings of Judah. If, in my black ones I was still so beautiful, all the more so am I (beautiful) through my prophets.[87]

While 1:5b reads in part:

"R. Levi bar Chita said three interpretations: Black I am all the days if the week but beautiful I am on Shabbat; Black I am all the days of the year but beautiful I am on Yom Kippur; Black I am through the ten tribes but beautiful I am through the tribes of Judah and Benjamin; Black I am in this world but beautiful I am in the world to come."[88]

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[87] The last few words of the last line suggest that instead of reading "*na'eh*" – beautiful – one should read the text as "*naveh*" – prophet. My own translation.

[88] My own translation

It is obvious that both of these texts reflect much of what I have already presented concerning the rabbinic, negative understanding of blackness. 'Black' in Midrash Rabbah 1:5a represents the deeds that were wrong, rebellious, and ungrateful, while the deeds that were faithful, appropriate and praise-worthy are 'beautiful'. Likewise, Rav Levi bar Chita in 1:5b understands the blackness presented in *Shir HaShirim* as a metaphor for that which is ordinary and unexceptional – its polar opposite being that which is sacred, honorable and eagerly desired like "the world to come", which the rabbis look forward to throughout their literature as a hopeful end to their harsh existence under the Roman Empire.

The rabbis consistently use black skin as a metaphor; however, they are not totally consistent in their negative interpretation of it. Take, for example, the vast amount of Midrashic material concerning a text discussed in the previous chapter: Numbers 12, otherwise known as the "Cushite Woman" text. Overall, the interpretations and expansions of this enigmatic text insist that 'Cushite' is used here as a metaphor or poetic adjective; as with Shir HaShirim, black skin is turned into a symbol rather than a reality. Interestingly enough, however, whereas the blackness of Shir HaShirim is interpreted negatively, the majority of midrashim on Numbers 12 understand the meaning of '*Cushit*' in way that could be seen as positive, in a back-handed complementary sort of way.

As mentioned in my pervious discussion on this text, part of what makes the biblical narrative so confusing is its ambiguity. It is unclear who the unnamed Cushite woman is; she could be Tzipora, Moses' only known wife thus far in the narrative, or a new wife altogether.

From the beginning of their discussion, it is clear that the rabbis of Sifre 99 understand the unnamed woman to be Tzipora. If they wish to interpret her in such a way, the rabbis must contend with an ellipsis: Tzipora has only been identified in the Tanak as Midianite, yet here the woman is clearly called Cushite twice. In order to compensate for this ellipsis, the rabbis turn the actual blackness of a Cushite's skin into a metaphor. This is an interpretive device we have seen before, however in this case, the rabbis are speaking about a woman already highly regarded in rabbinic tradition and therefore blackness becomes a positive, not a negative symbol – sort of.

> "Was she Cushite? Was she not Midianite? As it is said, 'The priest of Midian had seven daughters.'[89] So why does scripture say 'Cushite'? Just as a Cushite is different from all others, so too Tzipora was different from the other daughters, more beautiful from all the women..."[90]

Here 'Cushite' means 'different'; Tzipora stood out, in this case because of her beauty. This interpretation is repeated later in Sifre 99, this time in the context of understanding why the biblical text repeats itself, pointing out the woman is Cushite twice:

> "'For he had taken a Cushite woman...' Why(is this written) again?...You (may) have a wife that is beautiful in her physical beauty and not in her deeds; in her deeds and not in her physical beauty, such as we say, 'like a gold ring in a pig's nose is a beautiful woman without sense.'[91] This one (Tzipora) was lovely in her

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[89] Exodus 2:16
[90] My own translation
[91] Proverbs 11:22

beauty and lovely in her deeds, therefore we say, 'for he took a Cushite woman.'"[92]

We see that *Cushit* defines Tzipora's beauty, but also her righteousness, a theme echoed in BT Moed Katan: "But as a Cushite woman is different by her skin, Tzipora is different by her deeds."[93] While these interpretations are complimentary to Tzipora, it is clear that the rabbis are not being totally complimentary to dark-skinned people here. As we have already seen in our study of the blessings above[94] and shall see in our discussion of Ham below, *shoneh*, different, did not usually carry a positive connotation to the Sages. Here we see the backhanded compliment: Tzipora's beauty or righteousness was as unordinary as a Cushite's black skin. Both are abnormal – one in a positive way, one in a negative way. If understanding this interpretation from Tzipora's point of view, this interpretation is lovely. If seeing it from the point of view of a person with dark skin, however, it becomes less so.

This sort of back-handed complementary interpretation makes an appearance in a later work of Midrash, *Tanchuma*. Tanchuma Tzav 13 understands the usage of "Cushite" in Numbers 12 as a way of avoiding the 'evil eye'; "Because of her beauty she was called Kushite, as a man calls his son '*Kushi*' to ward off the evil eye."[95] This relates to an accepted superstition: telling a beautiful woman or child that they are beautiful directly attracts the evil eye. Therefore, one indentifies the beautiful person as something totally ugly, in this case, a Cushite, circumventing the evil eye's gaze. According to Tanchuma,

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[92] My own translation
[93] My own translation
[94] Pages 34-35
[95] As cited by Goldenberg, 58

Tzipora was so beautiful she was called Cushite – something totally unattractive - as to avoid the evil eye.

It is impossible to judge these interpretations of Numbers 12 as totally biased; the rabbis are attempting to harmonize an ambiguous text while remaining within their tradition and socio-political context. On the other hand, "their consistent and persistent difficulty with the literal meaning of the biblical '*cushi*' speaks for itself."[96]

The rabbinic literature of Talmud and Midrash do not delegate the negativity of blackness to the field of metaphor alone. Throughout the Jerusalem Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud, in Halachic and Aggadic midrashim, it is possible to find within the texts that which the modern West later uses to base its own negative stereotypes and biases of Blacks. It is within these rabbinic texts that we see a bridging between allegory and reality; parables meet worldviews and thus we see reflected in their literature the rabbis' perceived relationship to Blacks.

The true exemplar of this can be found in the "collections on the sin of Ham and the punishment of his son, Canaan"[97] which are found throughout Talmud and Midrash. As we recall, upon seeing his father, Noah, naked, Ham is cursed by Noah:

> "Cursed is Canaan, a slave of slaves he will be for his brothers…Blessed is Adonai, God of Shem and Canaan will be a slave to them. God will make Japeth

[96] Melamed, 111
[97] Melamed, 78

> lovely and he will dwell in the tents of Shem and Canaan will be a slave to them."[98]

As mentioned earlier, this text has been used for centuries to validate the denigration of Blacks. In particular, Christian and Muslim powers from medieval times through colonialism pointed to this text as their scriptural proof to legitimize the institution of black slavery, the seeds of which I have already shown to have been sown in the sociological-historical context of Ancient Greece and Rome.

The biblical text alone lends itself to rabbinic interpretation. The rabbis seem to be troubled by two questions: why is only Ham's fourth son, Canaan, punished? And why is his punishment slavery? Surely, it would make more sense to punish Ham himself, not one of his sons, let alone the youngest; additionally, his punishment should logically be related to nakedness or paternity in the very least, as these are directly related to his transgression, while slavery seems to be totally unrelated.

The rabbis answer these questions by way of Aggadic Midrashim. According to Bereshit Rabbah 36:7 and BT Sanhedrin 70a, Ham's sin was not that he simply saw Noah's nakedness, but rather, that he committed a much harsher crime. Bereshit Rabbah understands Ham's sin as castrating his father, while there is a dispute between Rav and Shumel in the BT as to whether Ham castrated his father or raped him. Neither of these offenses are mentioned in the biblical text, of course, but by expanding the biblical text in this way, the rabbis of Bereshit Rabbah and the BT accomplish several objectives for

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[98] My own translation

themselves: they make sense of a problematic text, manage to understand their socio-political situation and legitimize their worldview.

Both Bereshit Rabbah and BT Sanhedrin 70a reason that Canaan, Ham's fourth son, was punished and not Ham himself because Ham castrated his father. As we have seen, Noah had three sons; therefore, the rabbis reason, just as Ham prevented Noah from having a fourth son, so Ham's fourth son, Canaan, shall be punished. The rabbis continue down this path of "measure for measure": just as Ham castrated his father, so too will Ham's descendants be castrated – as eunuchs, common practice in ancient slavery, particularly among male slaves who worked in the presence of women.

There is a vast amount of Aggadah pertaining to the curse of Ham. *Meseket Sanhedrim* of the Babylonian Talmud reads:

"Our Rabbis taught: Three copulated in the ark, and they were all punished – the dog, the raven and Ham. The dog was doomed to be tied, the raven expectorates [his seed into his mate's mouth] and Ham was smitten (*lakhah*) in his skin."[99] While the Jerusalem Talmud, *Meseket Ta'anit* reads:

"Ham, the dog and the raven misbehaved (by having sexual relations in the ark). Ham went forth blackened. The dog went forth *dissulate*[100] in sexual conduct. The raven went forth different from other creatures."[101] Nowhere in the biblical text are we told that any of these creatures copulate in the ark. More to the point, the Torah does not explicitly state that having sexual relations within the ark was forbidden. In the cases of BT Sanhedrim 108b and JT Ta'anit 1:6, however, the rabbis argue that while this law is not

[99] 108b As translated by Melamed, 78
[100] Spelling error by Melamed
[101] 1:6 as translated by Melamed

explicit, it is implicit. In both verses where Noah's family enters the ark, the rabbis point out that the men are separated from the women: "Noah came with his sons, and his wife and his sons' wives with him into the ark because of the Great Flood."(Gen. 7:7) and "On that very same day Noah came and Shem and Ham and Japeth – the sons of Noah – and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons with him into the ark."(Ibid. 8:16)[102] And yet, when they exit the ark, they are coupled together: "Go out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and your sons' wives with you."[103] From this, the rabbis in both sources conclude, sexual intercourse was forbidden in the ark. One could further understand the rabbis' conclusion since God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" is given to the humans and animals immediately upon exiting the ark, but not before.[104]

From these two paradigm texts, we find three associations which become synonymous with the black within rabbinic literature and then later western literature: the first, which we have already seen is the general negative connotation. Ham's black skin is seen as a punishment of his lewd act, which presents the second association, sexual immorality. Lastly, both of these proof texts bridge a parallel between the black (Ham) and animals (the dog, the raven); also seen previously in our study of the blessings of BT Shabbat 107b. We see even more specific parallels in BT Nidah 17a and BT Sanhedrin 70a, both of which link Ham etymologically with the *hamor*, the donkey.[105] From this we see that to the rabbis there is no coincidence that it is Shechem, son of Hamor who rapes

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[102] My own translation
[103] Ibid. 8:16 my own translation
[104] Genesis 9:1,7
[105] Also cited in Melamed, 80

Dinah in Genesis 34; he is etymologically linked to violence (*hamas*) and sexual lewdness.

The phrasing from each Talmud is slightly vague and yet extremely telling. In the case of the Bavli, the dog is to be forever 'tied' – but what could that mean? On the one hand, perhaps it denotes the leashing of a dog to its master, that from the time of the ark onward, the dog which was once independent was now to be a servant to mankind. On the other hand, if we wish to understand the BT *baraita* in relation to its JT parallel[106], 'tied' could be a euphemism for the way in which a dog copulates. Both interpretive possibilities impose even more negative associations with Ham's black descendants: they are either to be understood as servants, tied to their (whiter) Jewish masters OR they are linked with sexual impropriety, "a humiliating form of copulation."[107] These sentiments are echoed loudly in Bereshit Rabbah 36:7, which includes a litany of commentaries connecting the sexual lewdness of the dog to Ham and his descendants. Sexual impropriety is echoed in the BT baraita's punishment of the raven as well.

Speaking of the raven, the JT's punishment of the raven is equally as vague yet as telling as the BT's punishment of the dog. The raven is to be '*shoneh*', different, from all the other animals. As with the need for the dog to be tied, we ask – what does this mean? As we have already seen in our discussion of Isaiah 18 in chapter one, as well as in the studies at the beginning of this chapter, 'different' held a distinctly negative connotation in the minds of the rabbis. While it is true that Rabbinic Judaism espouses as a major

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[106] "Ham, the dog and the raven misbehaved (by having sexual relations in the ark). Ham went forth blackened. The dog went forth *dissulate* in sexual conduct. The raven went for different from other creatures." See previous page for citation.
[107] Ibid. 81

tenant that Judaism is 'different' from the other nations or Shabbat is to be 'different' from the other days of the week – these notions of being different are distinctly separate values and are therefore described in other wording. '*Shoneh*' has its own connotation – it is not '*l'mavdil*', separate, in the way that is '*kodesh*', holy; it is *shoneh* - different, in a way that is as we have seen previously: abnormal, unclean, blemished, inferior, punished. So while it is unclear how the raven is cursed to be forever different from the other animals, it is clear that he is not to be different in a way that is complimentary. His blackness is a punishment; one that forces him to stand out among the 'normal' and 'good' birds, much like the black slaves and ex-slaves stood out among the crowds of white and lightly tanned faces of the rabbis' daily life.

Previously, I presented the rabbis' interpretations of Shir HaShirim in a purely metaphorical context. Now that we have seen that the rabbis utilize blackness as a simple metaphor (as in the Shir HaShirim study) and as a reflection of their own worldview (as we have seen in the discussion of Ham), I believe we are able to investigate some different Aggadic material based on the Shir HaShirim text that mixes metaphor and worldview.

It should come as no surprise by this point of our study that a black woman might be treated badly within rabbinic literature, after all, "In a society that designates both black and female as 'Other', one who is both will serve as the other's other."[108] Through certain midrashim and the interpretation of certain female biblical characters, it is

[108] Melamed, 77

obvious that the definitions of beauty discussed in chapter one carried over into the rabbis' time and are thus reflected in their literature.

The most significant midrash where this can be found comes from Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:31. It reads in part:

> "R. Isaac further said: It happened once that a lady had a *cushit* slave who went down with her companion to draw water from the spring, and she said to her companion 'Tomorrow master is going to divorce his wife and marry me.' 'Why?' said the other. 'Because,' she replied. 'he saw her hands all stained.' 'Foolish woman,' said the other, 'Listen to what you are saying. Here is his wife, whom he love exceedingly, and you say he is going to divorce her because once he saw her hands stained. How then will he endure you who are stained all over and black from the day of your birth!'"[109]

This story is meant to be taken as an allegory: the master is God, his wife is Israel and the black woman is the other nations of the world. Allegorically speaking then, the rabbis argue that, while Israel is 'stained'(read: sinning) temporarily, she can wash herself (by repenting and returning to God) and thus be desirable to her husband once more. The black woman (the other nations) can never be made clean and therefore will never be desired by him (God).

Though this is an allegory, it overtly presents us with the rabbis' definition of female beauty concerning skin color; a definition with which we have already been made

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[109] Translated into English by Maurice Simon. Socino Press 1939

familiar due to the study of Shir HaShirim in the previous chapter. Obviously, the desire for light skin in women has been transmitted from the time of the bible to the time of rabbinic literature. We can see this illustrated in the way the Sages characterize Sarah, the primary matriarch, within Midrash. Sarah is presented in Midrash Rabbah as being very white[110], and thus "beautiful"[111]. Abravnel, in his commentary during the 15th century, echoes this interpretation when he writes that Sarah is beautiful "...since her beauty is her whiteness."

Furthermore, the rabbis use Noah's sons to illuminate their aesthetic preferences, some of which we have already seen. Throughout Midrash, people are described as "Sons of Ham" or "Sons of Japeth" or "Sons of Shem" to describe their skin color and thus how beautiful they are. The exemplar can be found in a late midrashic collection, Pirke D'Rabi Eliezar, thought to be collected sometime between the 8th and 9th centuries:

> "God blessed Shem and his sons, black and lovely, and bequeathed to them all the inhabited land. He blessed Ham and his sons, black like the raven, and bequeathed to them the shore and the sea. He blessed Japeth and his sons, all of them white and beautiful, and bequeathed to them the wilderness and the fields..."[112]

It is with this late midrash that our study into the worldview and literature of the rabbis comes full circle; it stands as an excellent summary of all which has been discussed thus far. In it we find metaphor and reality: Jews - the 'sons of Shem' - accept their physical reality that they were darker than the "sons of Japeth" – the fair Europeans; seen earlier in R. Ishmael's statements of the box tree. They see themselves as 'just right' as "black

[110] Bereshit Rabbah 40:4 and 5
[111] Genesis 12:11
[112] Pirke D'Rabi Eliezar 24. My own translation

AND lovely" as opposed to the blacks, "the sons of Ham" who are paralleled negatively with the raven – an image we have also seen previously. Here we see the aesthetic hierarchy, which began in the biblical Song of Songs and has carried over to the rabbis' time: though the 'Sons of Shem' are lovely, they are not regarded as beautiful as the 'Sons of Japeth' who are whiter than they and thus 'beautiful'. This late Midrash illustrates all of the themes presented throughout the literature of the Sages: the dichotomy between darkness and lightness, the inferior position of the black, and their use of metaphor as a reflection of their socio-political worldview.

Roman rule influenced the way the rabbis saw the black in more ways than one; they were influenced in the way Roman culture viewed blacks, but also in their own need to oppress while being oppressed. As Jewish history continues on and Jews hover between being a minority religion but majority skin color, we will find that they continue to utilize the literary devices of the rabbis, and yet keep themselves open to a variety of other interpretive possibilities. We shall also find how balancing minority/majority status under a modern host culture amplifies latent tension within Jewish texts.

Chapter Three: Metaphor and Tension: A look at the Black-Jewish relationship within Modern Jewish American literature

"In practically every area of contact between the Negro and Jewish peoples some real or imagined grounds for antagonism exist." - Kenneth Clark

I have shown that living under Roman rule influenced the worldview of the rabbis and that this worldview is reflected in their literature. In this final chapter, we shall find that American Jews of the 20th century were equally as influenced by their experience living in and with White America. I will also show that, like the rabbis writing before them, Jewish American authors, as exemplified by Bernard Malamud, utilized metaphor and allegory in order to articulate an understanding of themselves and their relation to African-Americans.

As in the literature of the Tanakh and the Rabbis, many Jewish-American authors express both a kinship with the black and yet identify the black as Other. This psychological tension is only amplified in their literature by the real-life tension that grows between African-Americans and Jewish-Americans beginning in the second half of the 20th century; a tension, we shall see, that is primarily the result of post-WWII government-based programming which enabled Jewish-Americans to 'whiten' into mainstream society while purposefully keeping African-Americans out.

Lastly, I will show that knowingly or not, modern Jewish-American authors not only utilize the same literary devices, such as metaphor, but that they often echo the

Tanak and the Rabbis exactly in their specific allegories, sentiments, and characterizations. Just as we have seen in my previous chapter with the Rabbis, modern Jewish-American authors utilize these devices in order to distance themselves from a people regarded as inferior by mainstream society.

Just as the rabbis' perception of the black was formed out of their socio-economic position under the Romans, modern Jewish Americans' views of African Americans are due largely to the history of their socio-economic position within American society. Understanding this history is critical when studying authors such as Malamud, as it forms the basis of their point of view.

The History of the Tension

In America at the turn of the 20th century, the culture of mainstream, majority America was White America. Everything from neighborhoods to jobs to education was categorized and defined by one's ethnicity, skin color, economic background, and gender. This social hierarchy placed native-born, upper-class white men on top, followed by others with lessening degrees of Whiteness, economic status and so on. At the turn of the 20th century, Jews were on the lower end of this racial and economic scale. However, they were not there alone. As Karen Brodkin writes in her extensive study on Jews, Race and America, How Jews Became White Folks:

> "American anti-Semitism was part of a broader pattern of late nineteenth century racism against all southern and eastern European immigrants, as well as against Asian immigrants, not to mention African-Americans, Native Americans and

> Mexicans. These views justified all sorts of discriminatory treatment, including closing the doors, between 1882 and 1927, to immigration from Europe and Asia."[113]

This is not to say that Jews were totally unsuccessful in making substantial lives for themselves in the earlier half of the 20th century. Indeed, many Jews had great success, most clearly in the fields of "law, medicine, pharmacy and librarianship"[114] before WWII. These professions, however, must be understood in the context of their times. "In the 1930's they lacked the corporate-context they have today"[115], meaning that the majority of these doctors, pharmacists and lawyers were self-employed and primarily served a Jewish client-base.

Nowhere was prejudice, especially anti-Semitism, more alive in America during this time period than in higher education. Before the GI Bill, which will be discussed in detail later, college was truly a pursuit of the elite class, even among Jews themselves: "It was the children of Jewish businessmen, but not those of Jewish workers, who flocked to college."[116] But those Jewish kids who 'flocked' were met with obstacle after obstacle when it came to admission and their general college experience. This opposition towards Jewish students (and professors) was directly stated and widely accepted by college administrations. For example, A. Lawrence Lowell, once president of Harvard University

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[113] Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press 1994), 26

[114] Ibid. 33-34
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid. 34

(as well as a vice president of the Immigration Restriction League), was open about his opposition to Jews at Harvard, "and the Seven Sister schools had a reputation for 'flagrant discrimination'."[117] Or take Columbia's actions in 1919 to weed out Jewish applicants, which became so widely adopted that some aspects remain in universities' application processes today; though (we hope) not for their originally intended purpose. These included actions such as: an application that asks "for religion, father's name and birthplace, a photo and personal interview. Other techniques for excluding Jews, like a fixed class size, chapel requirement, and preference for children of alumni, were less obvious."[118]

A culture change occurred within White America with the onset of World War II. Anti-fascist and Anti-Nazi sentiments "led to a more inclusive version of whiteness…The 1940 census no long distinguished between native whites of native parentage from those…of immigrant parentage, so Euro-immigrants and their children were more securely white by submersion in an expanded notion of whiteness."[119] This was compounded by the post war economic boom, which demanded the need for more jobs in every field, including those previously closed to Jews.[120] The *piece de resistance* to the "How Jews became part of the White majority" puzzle is the GI Bill of 1944. In her extensive study, Brodkin refers to the Bill as the "biggest and best affirmative action

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[117] Ibid. 33
[118] Ibid. 31 Synott as cited by Brodkin
[119] Ibid. 36
[120] Ibid . 37

program in the history of our nation, and it was for Euromales."[121] She explains the Bill and her reasoning for calling it an Affirmative Action in detail and worth quoting:

> "The GI Bill of Rights, as the 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act is known, is arguably the most massive Affirmative Action program in American history. It was created to develop needed labor force skills and to provide those who had them with a lifestyle that reflected their value to the economy. The GI benefits that were ultimately extended to 16 million GIs included priority in jobs – that is, preferential hiring, but no one objected to it then –financial support during the job search, small loans for starting up businesses, and most important, low-interest home loans and educational benefits, which included tuition and living expenses…I call it Affirmative Action, because it was aimed at and disproportionately helped male, Euro-origin GIs."[122]

Included in that category were Jewish male veterans. The ideological and economical shift which occurred in America due to WWII enabled Jewish Americans to become part of the White, middle-class, which was quickly becoming the class of the greatest majority and would remain so well into the latter half of the 20th century.

While Jewish Americans were being given a hand up, African-Americans were deliberately and openly blocked from enjoying the fruits of the war effort, including Black war veterans. African-American soldiers served only under white officers, and

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[121] Ibid. 27
[122] Ibid. 38

were given a "disproportionate amount of dishonorable discharges"[123] – a categorization which renders a soldier ineligible for the GI Bill's benefits.

Meanwhile, on the home front,

> "Although there was a war-time labor shortage, black people were discriminated against when it came to well-paid defense industry jobs and housing…The military, the Veterans Administration, the U.S. Employment Service, and the Federal Housing Administration effectively denied African-American GIs access to their benefits and new education, occupational and residential opportunities."[124]

One of the Federal Housing Administration's core tenets was its belief in racial segregation: its underwriting manual "insisted on racially homogenous neighborhoods"[125], going so far as to forbid sales to Jews and Catholics before the War, along with African-Americans. These practices continued to shut African Americans out of the suburban boom of post-war America, and thus out of the mainstream middle-class experience now open to American Jews.

Jews became 'white' in many respects, and from there a distance grew between them and other minorities both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the white majority. This is not so different from the Jewish experience under Roman rule discussed earlier:

> "Following rejection, there is a psychological need not only to prove to oneself and others that one is not inferior to those who think themselves superior, but also

[123] Ibid. 43
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid. 47

> to find groups even lower in the normative order...In repressing those thought to be even lower than they are, two purposes are achieved: identification with the ruling oppressors and a salutary separation from those lower on the scale, placing themselves, at least relatively, in a higher position."[126]

As Jewish Americans were allowed entry to a more mainstream life experience, they wished to further distance themselves from being identified with the minority classes. This desire, however, was fraught with the tension of not actually being part of the 'ruling class' of the time; that is, Protestant. Jews, even with their white skin, are Jewish, and thus a minority, like African-Americans.

Though the specific details of this socio-economic situation in America are not stated overtly in the modern texts we will cover, knowledge of the author's historical context is crucial as it is the foundation of the underlying tension seen in each story. This tension, majority/minority status and distance which we saw in fair doses within the literature of the Tanach and the Sages, is one of the defining characteristics of the work of Bernard Malamud. Interestingly, Malamud also relies on a midrash-like use of metaphor and allegory. ONE LAST SENTENCE midrashric image sand metaphors surpriningly reappear in Malamud

The Work of Bernard Malamud: The modern literary exemplar of the Black-Jewish Relationship

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[126] Melamed, 32

Quite a few of Malamud's stories explore the complicated relationship between Blacks and Jews in Twentieth Century America. Malamud often does this by reversing the roles Blacks and Jews assign one another in society, by mixing religious and cultural metaphors and by (controversially) using the Black American as the metaphorical Jew. Stories like "Angel Levine" from 1955, and "Black is my Favorite Color" from 1963, are optimistic and hopeful in comparison with Malamud's later story, "The Tenants" from 1971. The outlooks of these stories very much mirror the relationship between these two peoples during the period of their publication. The two earlier stories seem to reflect hopeful questions which Malamud all but abandons by the time he writes "The Tenants": Are there pieces of 'us' in 'them'? If so, can we each see that? Can we trust one another, love one another, and live with one another in brotherhood? Malamud's questions in all three tales reflect the growing socio-economic gap between Blacks and Jews during this time in American history.

Black Social Workers, Jewish Welfare Recipients: The Power of Role Reversal

"Angel Levine" and "Black is My Favorite Color" are both constructed by reversing the assumed roles of Blacks and Jews in the mid-twentieth century. "Angel Levine" opens with two reversals within one situation:

Manishevitz, the main character, believes the black man sitting at his table is "a case worker from the Welfare Department - some came at night - for he had recently applied

for welfare."[127] Alexander Levine is there to offer his "humble assistance...in the best sense."[128] This situation breaks the mold of the stereotypical white-skinned social worker and the black-skinned welfare recipient. Moreover, "a Black intervening on a Jew's behalf subverts expectation (at least in an American setting)".[129]

Malamud also utilizes reversal in "Black is my Favorite Color". Again we see Malamud reversing the assumed power structure between the skin colors, making Nat Lime, the Jewish protagonist, the constant victim of Black rejection. What makes this power reversal so interesting is that, as we have discussed earlier, within the socio-economic realities of the story, the Jew is not the victim. The only one who allows for this power reversal is Nat Lime himself. "In America, the real victims are the Blacks: social context reverses the time-honored paradigm of Jews as outsiders. Yet the Jewish protagonist remains oblivious to American context, remains in his mind the eternal victim."[130] Lime is a successful business owner, his liquor store itself is part of the oppressing socio-economic system within which the Blacks of the story live, and yet, from Lime himself we are told, "It's my fate with colored people"[131] to be rejected,

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[127] Bernard Malamud, "Angel Levine" in *Bernard Malamud: The Complete Stories*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1997),159

[128]Ibid.

[129] Ethan Goffman, *Imagining Each Other: Blacks and Jews in Contemporary Literature* (New York: SUNY Press 2000), 69

[130]Ibid. 72

[131]Bernard Malamud, "Black is my Favorite Color" in *Bernard Malamud: The Complete Stories*.(New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1997), 331

opposed, distanced - to be seen as Other.

Within these specific storylines the role reversal, especially when established from the beginning, quickly allows for the suspension of disbelief. In a story like "Angel Levine" which includes things like angels and psychic healing, the quick establishment of this suspension eases the reader into the story. The role reversals also set the reader on edge, making them ready and alert to important messages, symbols and events. Lastly, and most importantly, reversing assumed roles forces each group to see pieces of themselves within the Other - the answer to one of the subtle questions Malamud poses to the reader of these stories, and an excellent transition into another of Malamud's literary tools.

Black Angels, Black Jews: The Mixing of Cultural and Religious Metaphors

The most obvious examples of Malamud's skill at mixing religious and cultural metaphors can be found within "Angel Levine". First and foremost, the fact that Alexander Levine is a black-skinned angel "is an anomaly in a Eurocentric religious construction"[132] of what angels (and all other religious figures) look like. Whether he knows it or not, Malamud echoes the sentiments and metaphoric understandings of the Black utilized by the Sages, as studied in the previous chapter. Malamud takes black skin, perceived in his time as inferior and 'bad', and aligns it with that which is superior, holy and good, i.e. angels, through metaphor and allegory, just as the Sages do with black skin as the object of desire in the Song of Songs.[133]

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[132] Goffman, 69

[133] See pages 30-32 of this paper

Malamud also subtly layers allusions to Biblical and Midrashic narratives. Manishevitz's initially refuses to believe that this black man is not only Jewish *and* an angel but also is an answer to his prayers only after he searches Alexander out, believes him and trusts him, are his prayers answered. It is as if Manishevitz's faith in Alexander is a test itself[134]; that only after he accepts and believes can he be redeemed. This framework echoes the many tests of Abraham found in Midrash related to the Akeda, where it is Abraham's faith that allows for his redemption.

Malamud continues to mix cultural and religious images as we read further on into the story. In his desperate seeking of Mr. Levine in the 'darkness' of Harlem, Manishevitz stumbles upon a *chevruta* of 4 black men, including one "boy, no older than thirteen".[135] They sit in a store-front shul, wearing kippot and swaying rhythmically as they study "The Holy Word"[136] from "the sacred scroll unrolled."[137], yet they are written as speaking a distinct Black-American dialect of English:

> "Neshoma," said bubble eyes, pointing to the word with a stubby finger. Now wat dat mean?"
>
> "That's the word that means soul," said the boy. He wore eyeglasses.
>
> "Let's git on wid de commentary," said the old man.
>
> "Ain't necessary," said the humpback. "Soul is immaterial substance. That's all. The soul is derived in that manner. The immateriality is derived from the substance, and they both, causally an' otherwise, derived from the soul. There can

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[134] Goffman, 69

[135] Malamud, "Angel Levine"(New York: Ferrar, Straus and Giroux 1983), 286-287

[136] Ibid.286

[137] Ibid.

be no higher."

"That's the highest."

"Over de top."[138]

This scene blends ethnicities and color lines to create a universalizing effect on the reader, as well as on Manishevitz. What matters most in this regard is the scene's dialogue, which focuses on the all-inclusiveness of God's Being and God's love. God has no color - "a spirit is a spirit"[139] and "God put the spirit in all things."[140] Malamud is answering some of his own questions here: we *can* recognize pieces of 'us' within 'them' and vice versa. Also at play here is Malamud's famously quoted notion that "everyone is a Jew", an idea that will be discussed at length later on.

Also worth pointing out in light of our previous study on Midrash is that Malamud includes a hunchback in his *chevruta* of four black men. We may recall that, according to the Berakhot 58b , one says the same blessing upon seeing a black man as one would say upon seeing a hunchback, "Blessed be He who creates different creatures". We may also recall that, according to the rabbis, there was a distinction between "different" creatures, such as rare animals and people with excessive shades of pgment, and "beautiful" trees and creatures. It is unclear whether Malamud knew of this Talmudic reference. Whether he knew or not, now that we readers know, it surely can add a layer of meaning onto our interpretation of the *chevruta* study.

Malamud is more subtle in his mixing of metaphors in "Black is my Favorite

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[138] Malamud, 286

[139]Ibid. 287

[140]Ibid.

Color", but he is still just as clever and as interesting. For a successful Jewish man at this time in America, there was no better way to show that he had 'made it' - that is, fully acculturated himself to American life - than to be seen out about town with a blonde *shiksa*. Nat Lime, however, tries to show how blended into the human race he is when he dates Ornita Harris, who is an African-American. Nat and Ornita's doomed courtship is the backdrop of Malamud's short story. Tragic events, such as Nat's store being robbed or his mother dying, are only referenced in passing – Nat's real focus is his infatuation with Ornita. The reader is left wondering, however, if Nat truly loves Ornita, or if he simply loves what she stands for, that being, his acceptance by black people and his own bias overcome. Like the black female of the Song of Songs, Ornita is metaphor for Nat Lime and Malamud; a construction of feminine beauty and blackness that is not necessarily seen for who she is.

In his short story, "The Jewbird", Malamud presents the reader with a totally different experience than that of "Angel Levine" or "Black is My Favorite Color", yet it is no less interesting. The almost-whimsical story presents us with a black bird, calling itself Mr. Schwartz, who flies into the window and thus the life of a frozen-foods salesmen named Cohen, his wife Edie and their son Morris. The Jewbird, Mr. Schwartz, is clearly a metaphor for a Yiddishkite-saturated-ethnicity Cohen wishes to ignore. He is a bird who eats herring and schmaltz and runs from "Anti-Semeets".[141] For example:

> "...I would rather have a human roof over my head. You know how it is at my age. I like the warm, the windows, the smell of cooking. I would also be glad to see once in a while the *Jewish Morning Journal* and have now and then a

[141] Malaumd, 145

schnapps because it helps my breathing, thanks God. But whatever you give me, you won't hear complaints."[142]

In light of our previous study into the literature of the rabbis, it is simply fascinating that Mr. Schwartz, the Jewbird, is a black bird, like a raven. Not only does this characterization blend black with Jew in a very physical way, but it reads entirely differently in light of the midrashim on Ham, the dog and the raven.[143]

When the Jew is the Black, and the Black is a Jew - What are we?

Bernard Malamud is famously quoted as saying, "I try to see the Jew as Universal Man. Every man is a Jew though he may not know it." Emily Miller Budick gives this statement context: "He (Malamud) wished to establish the Jew as a metaphor of spirituality and suffering, of grace achieved and denied."[144] Malamud practices what he preaches by allegorizing blacks as Jews, as seen in "Angel Levine" but also by universalizing the Other as he tries to do in "Black is my Favorite Color." These images are provocative, engaging and entertaining; however, they can also be quite problematic.

In "Angel Levine", the black man is literally the Jew in that Alexander Levine was a Jew all his life "willingly." This literal image moves into the metaphorical as Manishevitz exclaims at the story's climactic end: "A wonderful thing Fanny...Believe

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[142] Malamud, 148

[143] See the discussion in this paper's previous chapter, pages 34-38, with particular attention to the raven paid on pages 35 and 36

[144]Emily Miller Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation.* (England: Cambridge University Press 1998),13

me, there are Jews everywhere."[145] This exclamation is compounded with Malamud's final image in the story: of Levine's individualistic black feather trickling down and becoming white – an image he would understand as one becoming the other. This same image is reminiscent of the Rabbis' understandings that one can be "black" on the outside – that is inferior in some way on the surface, literally or figuratively – and yet also be "white" on the inside, with good deeds, faith, etc.

Even more interesting in light of our previous study, is that Alexander's black feather becomes white and then becomes snow – an image we have already seen within the Tanak and rabbinic literature with our study of Numbers 12, where Miriam's affliction of *tzoraat* is described as being *k'sheleg*, like snow. Thus Malamud's literature, like the Jewish literature before him, uses color-based metaphor and snow imagery to state his reality of the Jew, the black, and peoplehood.

Manishevitz's (and thus Malamud's) vague and provocative exclamation at the end of the story compromises ethnic identities. If Blacks are metaphorical Jews, than what does a real black man or woman become? As Emily Miller Budick writes,

> " For many Jewish American writers, in other words, the African American becomes a metaphor for their own eternal, internal strangeness...the image of the American black further reassures Jews that their difference, albeit moral rather than physical, will no more rub off from them than color from black people."[146]

The validity of the *actual* individual is replaced by an abstract concept - a metaphor,

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[145]Malamud, 289

[146]Budick, 121-122

something with which we are already all too familiar thanks to the two previous chapters of this paper. As seen in the literature of the Rabbis, we see the validity of the Black lessened due to the Jewish use of blackness as metaphor rather than an actual lived counterpart or ally; additionally, we continue to see the Jewish need to use Blackness as a metaphor.

By using metaphor, Malamud also dissolves the Other into a universal, all-encompassing identity: Levine's black feather turns white - not only a reference to white skin, but also possibly to total dissolution of race, the absence of all color - and then into totally dissolvable snow. Like the black *chevruta* mentioned earlier, this type of universalism can carry a positive message, but it also treads the line of total dissolution of the ethnic self. Malamud carries this idea further in "Black is my Favorite Color", where Nat Lime tries without success to prove to himself and to the reader that it is possible for there to be a universal understanding between blacks and Jews. Lime wishes to eat lunch at the same table as his black cleaning woman, Charity Quietness, however, she asserts her Otherness - her *actual* individual black identity, and insists upon eating her lunch in the bathroom. Lime wishes to meld their Otherness into one other, in what he sees as equality, however, Charity views this as condescending submersion of her true self, and therefore asserts the reality of her blackness.

Charity's actions at the end of "Black is My Favorite Color" also mark the tense ending to Malamud's tale. Unlike the redemptive hope which closes "Angel Levine", "Black is My Favorite Color" ends with the tension that will go on to saturate Malamud's later work, "The Tenants". The finals scenes of "Black is My Favorite Color" present the reader with a series of tense and unpleasant events, ending on an unsettling, though not

disturbing note. While walking Ornita home from their date, Nat is accosted by three black teens, who slap Ornita and graphically warn Nat not to take her out anymore; as a result, Ornita breaks up with Nat and refuses to take any of his calls. The story ends with Nat, arriving home to Charity Quietness, screaming and begging for her to come out of the bathroom and join him for lunch, and his final thought: "That's how it is. I give my heart and they kick me in the teeth."[147] The ending leaves the reader jilted, as Nat must have felt when dumped by Ornita; the tension arises violently out of nowhere and simply hangs there as the final word is read.

This tension remains hanging in the air, only to become weighted upon the reading of Malamud's 1971 work, *The Tenants*, which is "perhaps the most famous novel about black-Jewish relations".[148] Though there is some metaphorical imagery employed by Malamud in this story, the main characterizing component is this story's almost palpable tension. Similar to the tension felt in the literature of the Tanak and the Sages, Malamud continues to see kinship and Otherness reflected between black and Jew; however, though he seems to earnestly hope for the relationship to be saved, he all but abandons the possibility. The tension between black and Jew, as well as Malamud's own personal tension between his hopes for a salvaged relationship and the realities of that relationship are vividly portrayed in the novel's two different endings.

But before we can investigate the story's endings, we must look at the story itself. The novel's protagonists are the Jewish writer, Harry Lesser, and the black writer, Willie Spearmint. Both men live in an apartment building in New York City run by Irving

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[147] Malamud, 84

[148] Adam Meyer, *Black-Jewish Relations in African American and Jewish American Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography.* (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 2002),51

Levenspiel, who wishes to tear the building down. Upon finding one another in the building, the two writers seem to get along quite well, calling each other brothers as well as blending identities and mannerisms – a literary device we know by now as classically Malamud. This amity does not last for long, however, as the tale quickly becomes saturated with tension: sexual tension, racial tension, personal animosity. Willie dates a white Jewish woman, the "verging on beautiful"[149] Irene Bell, while Harry eventually has a one-time sexual encounter with Mary Kettlesmith, the black girlfriend of one of Willie's friends. The tension between the two men grows as they become angry and envious of one another's work, criticism, and lovers, eventually leading to a point when "all hell breaks loose".[150] Willie destroys the novel Harry has been working on for ten years, and throws Harry's typewriter out the window. Willie then gives up writing and totally disappears.

As mentioned earlier, Malamud offers two distinct endings to the novel. The first ending is obviously Malamud, still clutching dearly to a small piece of the optimism and universalism he shared with us in "Angel Levine." In the first ending, Harry Lesser imagines a double wedding ceremony: he and Mary along with Willie and Irene. Again, ethnicities and races are mixed, as Lesser and Mary are married by an African talisman, and Willie and Irene's union is officiated by a rabbi. Malamud drives this message home when all four dance happily together at their wedding reception.

Malamud's second ending is much more raw and striking. In it, Willie returns and begins to write again, only this time his work is overtly violent, anti-Semitic and often

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[149] Bernard Malamud, *The Tenants*. (New York: Ferar, Straus and Giroux. 1971),42
[150] Meyer, 51

aimed at Harry. In this ending, it is Harry who destroys Willie's typewriter, setting into motion a raw scene, where each man swears racial epithets and hurls weapons at the other. Harry's ax "slices through bone and brain"[151] while Willie, "the groaning black"[152] castrates the Jewish writer. Levenspiel, the landlord, perhaps also the voice of Malamud, takes up the entire last page of the novel, crying over and over again for "MERCY", with no ending punctuation.

The tension and the use of sexuality seen in *The Tenants* are not new associations to the black-Jewish relationship as used by Malamud. We have clearly seen them within the Tanak, Talmud and Midrash; only perhaps with Malamud these themes are amplified, making his work and excellent culmination themes that echoed throughout Jewish literature. His investigation of the bond between blacks and Jews refuses to give up all hope, yet remains realistic.

The Relationship Continues: A brief look at Philip Roth

Aside from Bernard Malamud, many other Jewish-American authors present their own perceptions of the dynamic between blacks and Jews, so much so that Adam Meyer has compiled a rather thorough annotated bibliography on the topic: *Black-Jewish Relationships in African American and Jewish American Fiction*, published in 2002.

A specific author found in this anthology, not surprisingly is Philip Roth. Roth's work clearly displays the palapable tension that has been the undercurrent throughout all of the Jewish literature I have presented thus far. Just as in the work of the Sages and Malamud, Roth's work reflects his social-political reality, namely, the growing animosity

[151] Malamud, *The Tenants*, 230
[152] Ibid.

between Blacks and Jews that characterized the 1980's and 1990's.

Roth presents his perception of the Black-Jewish relationship primarily in his 'Nathan Zukerman' novels Unbound[153], The Anatomy Lesson[154], The Counterlife[155], American Pastoral[156], and The Human Stain[157]. Sometimes, Zukerman is the protagonist in these novels as is the case in American Pastoral; other times he is simply the narrator, the catalyst for another person's story as seen in The Human Stain. Like Malamud, Roth does an impeccable job weaving the identities of his black and Jewish characters together only to be torn apart. A prime example of this can be found within Roth's novel, The Human Stain. In this novel, the identities of a black and a Jewish man are literally interwoven in the protagonist, Prof. Cole Silk – a black man who has been passing as a Jew almost his entire life. There is a tension that is almost tangible as the reader tries to figure out Silk's great secret as the story progresses; a tension that is balanced by Silk's own struggle within himself, as he faces his true identity.

Struggles with one's identity is the at the core of Roth's novel. Within characters such as Coleman and his mistress, Faunia Farley, Roth presents us with the same indecision we have seen throughout Jewish literature; who are 'we' in relation to 'them'? Over the course of his life, Silk was torn between knowing who he is and showing that true identity to others, similar to the Rabbis' dilemma living under Roman rule. After he has died and Nathan Zuckerman digs into his past, Zuckerman searches for the same answers, along with the reader.

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[153] Published in 1981
[154] Published in 1983
[155] Published in 1986
[156] Published in 1997
[157] Published in 2000

I find the most interesting personal struggle with identity to be that Faunia, documented vividly not quite half-way through the novel:

> "The caw. The noisy caw. Listen. Just listen. Oh, I love it. Staying in touch like that...The other calls, I don't know what they mean. Maybe nothing. Sometimes it's a quick call. Sometimes it's throaty. Don't want to confuse it with a raven's call. Crows mate with crows and ravens mate with ravens...Everybody who says they're ugly scavenger birds – and most everybody does – is nuts. I think they're beautiful. Oh yes, very beautiful. Their sleekness. Their shades. It's so black in there you can see purple in there...Ravens do the soaring, crows just seem to know where they're going. They don't just fly around as far as I can tell. Let the ravens soar. Let the ravens do the soaring. Let the ravens pile up the miles and break the records ad get the prizes. The crows have to get from one place to another.....I am a crow! I know it. I know it!"[158]

This snippet is even more interesting now that we have read the Midrashim on Noah, which included multiple images of the raven. Faunia's internal struggle goes on for five pages, discerning between crows and ravens and figuring out with which she identifies.[159] Just like Malamud, Roth's work seems to reflect the social realities of America.

To call the relationship between Blacks and Jews in America 'complicated' would surely be an understatement. Both groups have been pushed to the margins of American society at one time or another. At times in our respective histories, we have sought the other out as an ally; however the majority of our shared history seems to be built upon

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[158] Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin 2000), 167, 169
[159] Roth, 165-169

"real or imagined grounds for antagonism." Modern Jewish-American authors, such as Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth, investigate this complicated relationship within the deceptively simplistic framework of the novel and the short story.

Our authors, whether they are conscious of it or not, often echo the themes and literary devices utilized in past Jewish literature when they present the reader with their perceptions of the black and the black-Jewish relationship. Bernard Malamud, and to an extent, Philip Roth embrace metaphor in order to define for themselves the social-political situation of the America they know. Just as the rabbis struggle between seeing the black in terms of sexual immorality, violence and evil as well as kin, so too are these ideas reflected in Jewish literature well into the turn of the millennium. Modern authors such as Roth and Malamud seem to hold onto a semblance of hope that the relationship – perhaps at a breaking point[160] - can still be healed.

[160] See Malamud's loss of hope in the ending of *The Tenants*.

Conclusion

"...they find themselves, both in affirming and resisting each other, drawn into patterns of mutual self-construction. Each uses the other's materials. Each formulates positions (whether in approval or disaffection) in terms of the other...This produces a mutuality of cultural construction, which is not the ostensible intention of any of the interacting parties, but which is, nonetheless, the result of their attempting to define themselves through resistance to each other."[161] - Emily Miller Budick

This quote by Emily Miller Budick speaks volumes to the black-Jewish relationship as it evolves in Jewish literature. Within our literature, Jews have sought to culturally define ourselves, often creating an exaggerated or totally false cultural definition for blacks. These falsified constructions influence the relationship between our two peoples, breeding a distance full of animosity and mistrust.

We have seen that the ancient Israelites viewed the blacks they knew, Cushites, as kin. The Cushites, like the Israelites were descendants of Noah; however, we have also read that Ham, their progenitor, is cursed – setting into play a tension that underlies almost every literary interaction between blacks and Jews. This tension defines our bond as kin, yet Other, from each other.

I believe that the texts which I have presented from the Hebrew Bible reveal the ancient Israelite perception of blacks as ambiguous at best. For while Ham's line is

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[161]Budick, 57

cursed within the Noah narrative, the reader is also presented with Cushite characters presented in purely positive ways, such as the Queen of Sheba. Isaiah 18:1-2, in only two verses, gives us the longest and most detailed description of the Israelite perception of the Cushite; it is a description that is neither totally positive nor totally negative. The Cushites are presented as "tall and handsome", with great military prowess yet they inhabit an insect-infested land which lies at the 'ends of the earth'.

The vague text of Numbers 12 does not help us get a clear vision of how the Cushites were tolerated. All we know from the text is that Miriam and Aaron are outraged with Moses and Miriam is stricken with the affliction of *tzoraat*. Perhaps if the Tanakh were clearer in other narratives of how Cushites were perceived, Numbers 12 would help refute or support interpretive possibilities; however it cannot because elsewhere the Hebrew Bible remains neutral in its representation of the Cushites and the ancient Israelites' relationship with them.

The only other instance where a person is identified as black is found within *Shir HaShirim.* However the female figure is not identified as a Cushite. Instead, she is an eager lover, beseeching her beloved to cast aside cultural aesthetic norms of the day and see her – the sunburned country girl – as the beautiful and lovely woman she feels she is.

In a later period, Jews find themselves under oppressive Roman rule, with an exposure to a different social hierarchy and its accompanying value systems. Already accustomed to the dichotomy between light and dark and its associations with good and evil, the Rabbinic writers of the Talmud and Midrash assign aesthetic and social values to skin color. Facing their own physical reality - Romans on one side, Black Africans on the

other, the Rabbis place themselves in the middle - as 'just right' – both in terms of their complexion and their moral and spiritual standing. This enables the rabbis to accept their physical reality – having darker skin than the Romans – while also constructing for themselves a new psychological reality: one where their minority status is placed, albeit only relatively, higher than that of the black slaves and former slaves of the Roman Empire.

These themes are reflected in the Halachic and Aggadic material of the Babylonian Talmud and Palestinian Talmud. Halachic material concretizes a biased values system, as seen in the blessings from BT Berekot 58b which parallels the experience of seeing a black person with that of seeing a hunchback and an ape. Aggadic material, as seen in *Shir HaShirim Rabbah*, utilizes metaphor and allegory to talk about darkness and black skin in abstract terms. Through these texts, Blackness becomes a symbol: of evil, abnormality and sexual immorality. By turning Blackness into a symbol, the rabbis obscure the validity of actual Black people.

My final investigation into Jewish literature's reflection of the black-Jewish relationship focused on modern American authors, especially with Bernard Malamud. I was surprised to find the same tension first introduced within the Hebrew Bible still to be alive and well in his short stories. I was equally surprised to find, in the words of Kohelet, that "there is nothing new under the sun."[162] Malamud employs the exact same symbols and value judgments in their stories as the rabbis did in Midrash and as presented in the

[162] Ecclesiastes 1:9

Hebrew Bible.

Malamud begins his endeavor with the optimistic work "Angel Levine", and continues his search for a universalistic brotherhood of Man in the slightly more jaded, "Black is my Favorite Color," before concluding with a work of all-out despair in The Tenants. His two more hopeful works explore the Black/Jewish issue in three ways which : by reversing the assumed roles of the races, by mixing racial and cultural images and by portraying his Black characters as metaphorical Jews, sometimes creating a *dissolving* form of universalism as opposed to one which is *inclusive*. We see in Malamud the same desire to play with race and metaphor as we saw in Midrash.

Throughout these stories, Malamud seems to be asking questions of the reader, his characters and perhaps even himself relating to the possibility of recognizing ourselves in the Other and thus creating a more harmonious world, despite the socio-economic realities that keep us apart. It is clear from his writing that Bernard Malamud feels that Blacks and Jews do, in fact, recognize pieces of us in each other; the result of that recognition however, is the variable in his equation.

Though some of Malamud's imagery and message can be controversial, his literary discussion on this often-fraught topic remains endearing, entertaining, provocative and above all, honest. Some critics have argued that Malamud approached these two stories with an all-too hopeful naiveté,[163] however, all I am capable of

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[163] Cynthia Ozick, *Art and Ardor*. (New York: Knopf 1983) As quoted in Goffman, 68

Also: Goffman, pages 72-75

identifying is a genuine questioning of the possibility for two "Others" to reach a plane of amity and understanding; one that, with time, gets more and more jaded by the unfortunate realities of our existence together which, in the end, only drive us further apart.

My research has shown me that the foundation of the relationship between Blacks and Jews, at least as seen from the Jewish perspective, is one that is founded on a unique kind of tension: as far back as we are able to recount, Jews have seen the Black as kin, for many reasons, and yet also have identified the Black as the quintessential Other, again for numerous reasons.

The Jewish literary attitude towards the black begins ambiguously within the Hebrew Bible. Under Roman rule in the Rabbinic period, the Jewish perception of the black takes a distinctly negative downturn. The Modern Jewish American authors we have examined seem to be conflicted in their perceptions of African Americans: hopeful for amity yet realistically conscious of the friction due to the modern American experience. Throughout all of these differing eras and attitudes, Jewish authors, knowingly or not, have employed the same general understandings, values, examples and literary devices. Over and over, no matter the time period, dark skin is the subject of aesthetic value judgments – particularly when concerning women; we have seen parallels drawn between blacks and animals, blacks and violence, and blacks and sexual aggressiveness and depravity.

On a more positive note, not all of the aesthetic value judgments have been

negative: some sources call dark skin beautiful and handsome. Some sources have created cultural constructions of the black that are strong, tall and the representative of goodness in a world far from good.

I conclude from my research and the examples stated above that the Jewish literary perception of the black and our relationship to them is dependent on the socio-political reality of the time. Literature is a product of history; and history has a way of reinventing yet essentially remaining the same. The repetitive use by Jewish authors of the same themes and devices only proves my final point: that the relationship between blacks and Jews, our perceptions of one another and the ways in which we investigate these topics, are fraught, tense, and timeless. As Emily Miller Budick points out, when we create cultural constructions of the Other "in resistance to each other" we are in reality, simply defining ourselves.

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