FROM OTHER TO BROTHER: BLACKNESS IN THE JEWISH IMAGINATION

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Number of chapters: 3 + Conclusion

What the goal of the thesis was:

This thesis explored the question of Jewish versus Black Otherness, as well as Self versus Other, through the lens of the varied understandings of blackness throughout Jewish literature.

How is it divided:

The thesis moves from blackness as imagined by the bible and during the rabbinic period in chapter 1, to blackness as imagined by the American and Israeli poets of the early 20th century, to blackness as written about by Jews of Color in the late 20th-early 21st century.

What kinds of material were used:

The thesis uses biblical text with rabbinic commentaries (Parshanut, Midrash, Talmud), as well as modern Hebrew poetry, and contemporary Jewish literature.

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Chapter 1: Kush and Blackness in the Rabbinic Imagination

ותדבר מרים ואהרן במשה על אדות האשה הכשית אשר לקח כי אשה כשית לקח

> *And Miriam and Aaron spoke maliciously against Moses about the Kushite woman he married because it was a Kushite woman he married.*[1]

In the above verse from the Book of Numbers, the second of relatively few biblical references to a Kushite person and the first and only reference to a Kushite woman appears. With no other textual reference to a Kushite woman to provide context as to the meaning of the descriptor "כושית," the verse gives rise to a number of questions. Does the אישה כושית signify a specific person? Is כושית an indicator of ethnic origin? If it is an indicator of ethnic origin, how can this be – as we know that Moses married Zipporah, described in Exodus as the daughter of a Midianite priest?[2] Does כושית describe the color of this woman's skin? Essentially, this verse begs the question: does the adjective signify a place of origin or a specific person's characteristics or both?

The abundant rabbinic commentary on this ambiguous verse from the Book of Numbers forms a significant basis for understanding the Hebrew Bible's view of black Africans, in particular, and of blackness, in general. In addition to the word כוש, the biblical text refers to dark-skinned people in several other ways, including using the word שחור. Sometimes these descriptors seem to refer to intrinsic ethnic identity, while others refer to skin darkened by environmental causes (e.g., tanning, sun-exposure or a nomadic

[1] Numbers 12:1. The English translation is my own.
[2] See Exodus 2:21.

lifestyle). While the rabbis express disdain for both intrinsic or ethnic blackness and environmentally darkened skin, they demonstrate greater disfavor for natural blackness.

In order to fully understand the Hebrew Bible's view of black Africans through its use of the word Kush, though, we must first understand from where these black Africans came, in other words, what geographical region this term designates. In addition to using the term Kush as an adjective to describe skin color, the Biblical authors also use this word to describe the place from where such dark-skinned people originate. David Goldenberg explains that Greek and Latin translations of the Hebrew Bible translate the word Kush as "Ethiopia," which comes to stand in for all of black Africa. However, such an understanding incorrectly ascribes one location as Kush. Goldenberg posits that "Kush was the Egyptian name for the area to the south of Egypt extending deep into Central Africa" and that "its border with Egypt ranged from between the first and second [waterfalls] of the Nile during the early Egyptian dynasties down to the fourth waterfall in the biblical period."[3] Ultimately, the understanding of the precise scope of the Kushite Empire differs from ancient language to ancient language and between biblical texts.

A Talmudic debate over the interpretation of the expanse of the empire of Kush as understood in the Book of Esther demonstrates the varied understandings of the location of this land. In Esther 1:1, we read:

> ויהי בימי אחשורוש הוא אחשורוש המלך מהדו ועד כוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה
>
> And it came to be in the days of Achashverosh – he was Achashverosh, the King from Hodu to Kush, one hundred and twenty-seven realms.[4]

[3] David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 17.
[4] Esther 1:1. The English translation is my own.

Interpreting the word Kush, Rav asserts that Hodu (India) and Kush (Ethiopia[5]) lie at opposite ends of the earth, meaning that Achashverosh ruled over the entire world.[6] Shmuel, on the other hand, argued that Hodu and Kush were next to one another, but that, because Achashverosh ruled over both, it was as though he ruled over the entire world. Rav and Shmuel further parse the meaning of Hodu and Kush as they explain that Achashverosh ruled over an entire side of the river – from Tifsach to Azah. Again, they fall on respective sides of the debate with Rav asserting that Tifsach and Azah lay at opposite ends of the earth and Shmuel asserting that Tifsach and Azah were next to each other. Thus, Rav and Shmuel exemplify the difficulty the Rabbis experience in pointedly ascribing an agreed-upon location to the land of Kush – though, as in this case, they typically[7] locate Kush somewhere in black Africa.

It is from this location in black Africa, then, that the Kushites described by the Hebrew bible originate. Much like the differing opinions as to the precise location of Kush as a place, the rabbinic commentators' understandings of the word Kush as an adjective to describe a person vary tremendously. In their commentary on Numbers 12:1, the rabbinic commentators quibble over whether the unnamed Kushite woman is actually

[5] David Goldenberg notes that modern translations of the Hebrew Bible often translate most often translate Kush as Ethiopia (Goldenberg 17).
[6] This explanation of the geographical expanse comes from BT Megillah 11a as noted by David Goldenberg (Goldenberg 224n67).
[7] David Goldenberg notes that there are several Biblical references to the land of Kush as somewhere outside of Africa. Genesis 10:7 lists the Table of Nations as "the descendants of Kush: Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah, and Sabteka; the descendants of Rammah: Sheba and Dedan." Some scholars group these descendants together and locate their shared origin in Africa and others locate the same descendants' origin in "southern and southwestern parts of the Arabian Peninsula." However, by grouping the descendants together as Kush, such a conclusion suggests that, though the locations from which the descendants come may be different, their "ethnic stock" may not be different (Goldenberg 18).

Zipporah, whom the biblical text describes as Moses' wife.[8] Whether or not the commentators believe the Kushite woman is, in fact, Zipporah, they each try to further explain why the text calls her Kushite by hypothesizing as to the meaning of this adjective.

Rashi begins his commentary on the phrase "the Kushite woman" from Numbers 12:1 by asserting that the text uses the word Kushite as a metaphor for Moses' wife's beauty. He explains that, just as everyone knew how dark a Kushite person's skin is, so, too, they understood the intensity of Zipporah's beauty. He tightens the link between Kush and beauty by explaining that the *gematria* – the numerical value of a word – of "כוש" and "יפת-מראה" are equivalent. Though Rashi draws a metaphorical equivalence between the intensity of Zipporah's beauty and the darkness of the skin of Kushites, he does not view such darkness in a positive light. Lest the reader be confused that Rashi thinks describing someone as Kushite is a compliment, in another comment on the same phrase, Rashi explains that "the Kushite woman" is described as Kushite for the same reason that a man would call his beautiful son a Kushite: so that the evil eye will not take control of him. Because one uses the word Kush as the opposite of beautiful in the instance of warding off the evil eye, Rashi establishes that to be Kushite is to be undesirable, to be the opposite of beautiful.

Rashi's understanding of the link between Zipporah's beauty and the term Kush is similar to the link created by Sifre 99:3. The midrash reads:

> ר' אליעזר בנו של רבי יוסי הגלילי אומר צפורה צפו וראו מה נאה: האשה הכושית, וכי כושית היתה והלא מדיינית היתה שנאמר ולכהן מדין שבע בנות ומה ת"ל כושית אלא מה כושי משונה בעורו כך צפורה משונה בנויה יותר

[8] See Exodus 2:21.

מכל הנשים.

> R. Eliezer, son of R. Yosi Ha'Galilah says: "Zipporah – observe and see how beautiful she is."
>
> "The Kushite woman" – Was she [a Kushite]? Was she not a Midianite? As it is written, "And the Midianite priest had seven daughters" (Exodus 2:16). Why does the verse say "Kushite" then? Because, just as a Kushite's skin is different, so, too, Zipporah's beauty was different – she was more beautiful than all the other women.[9]

The Sifre text tries to eliminate the confusion created by Exodus 2:16 describing Zipporah as Midianite and Numbers 12:1, which refers to Moses' wife (accepted as Zipporah), as Kushite, which one might mistake for ethnicity rather than a reverse metaphor for beauty. The text raises the question: if Zipporah is understood as a beautiful woman and identified as being of Midianite origin, as per Exodus 2:16, why, then, would Numbers 12:1 call her Kushite? Like Rashi, the text explains that, just as a Kushite person is different because of the color of his skin, so, too, was Zipporah's appearance different – specifically, more beautiful – than all of the other women. Thus, both Rashi's commentary on the phrase "the Kushite woman" and the Sifre text on the meaning of the same phrase establish that Kushite describes a darkness of skin color incongruent with actual beauty and that the term only appears with reference to Moses' wife in Numbers 12:1 as a metaphor for the salience of her beauty.

Ibn Ezra takes a slightly different route in explaining the incongruence between Moses' wife's description as Midianite in Exodus 2:16 and as Kushite in Numbers 12:1. Ibn Ezra takes issues with Rashi's claim that the biblical text uses Kushite to express the opposite of beauty, though he does ultimately conclude that the darkness of Kushite skin is undesirable. Ibn Ezra focuses his comments on explaining precisely the nature of

[9] Sifre 99:3:1-2. The English translation is my own.

Aaron and Miriam's objection with regard to Moses' wife. In the beginning of his commentary on Numbers 12:1, Ibn Ezra explains the euphemistic habit of using a positive description in place of a negative one, such as when one refers to a blind person as being abundant in brightness. However, he states that one cannot refer to someone honorable using a dishonorable turn of phrase (e.g., describing someone who is beautiful as "Kushite").

Consequently, instead of understanding Moses' wife's description as Kushite as an indicator of her beauty as Rashi does, Ibn Ezra likens the Midianites to the Kushites in terms of their manner of dwelling and their consequential dark skin color. Ibn Ezra asserts that Midianites were Ishmaelites and that they lived in tents. He then references Habakuk 3:7, which describes the tents of the Kushites, and draws a connection between the tents of the Middianites and the tents of the Kushites. Further, because of the heat of the sun in the land of Midian, Ibn Ezra suggests that Midianites have no whiteness at all in their skin tone. Because Midianites are so dark – like Kushites – and because Zipporah is Middianite, Ibn Ezra posits that the text calls Zipporah Kushite to describe her darkness. He then suggests that Aaron and Miriam speak out against their brother, Moses, for ceasing to have marital relations with Zipporah because of her lack of beauty. David Goldenberg notes that many scholars see Aaron and Miriam's disapproval of Zipporah's blackness or their insulting her by likening her to a black person as an "ancient example of racism."[10] While such an assessment of the biblical narrative may be a projection of "modern day assumptions and prejudices into the biblical text,"[11] the

[10] Goldenberg 27.
[11] Ibid.

Rashi and Ibn Ezra clearly display a racist outlook on darkness by establishing dark skin as the opposite of beauty.

While Rashi and Ibn Ezra's commentaries point to their ingrained racism, Ibn Kaspi's more straightforward approach to explaining Moses' wife's designation as Kushite seems to stand apart in its lack of outward disdain for the designation of Kush. Ibn Kaspi rejects Onkelos' translation of Kushite as beautiful and Rashi's use of that translation to suggest that the text uses the term Kushite as a euphemism for beauty. Ibn Kaspi expresses outrage at the idea that one could interpret any biblical word as meaning the opposite of what it actually says. He points out that, if one uses such a technique in one's translation, one could ultimately interpret the phrase "and you shall love Adonai your God" as "and you shall hate Adonai your God." Ultimately, Ibn Kaspi concludes that Numbers 12:1 can only be interpreted as meaning that Moses married a woman of Kushite origin. In other words, when the text reads that Moses "married a Kushite woman," it does not refer to Zipporah but rather to another wife, whom he married after marrying Zipporah. Ibn Kaspi explains the repetition of Moses' having married a Kushite woman as emphasizing this event, which had not been mentioned by the bible prior to Numbers 12:1. Though Ibn Kaspi's interpretation of Kushite as a literal descriptor of the woman's ethnicity dispels some of the racism found in Rashi and Ibn Ezra's commentary, such rabbinic neutrality is short-lived.

In the Song of Songs 1:5-6, the female protagonist's beauty is juxtaposed with her dark skin color. Here, the biblical text uses the word שחורה (rather than כושית) – another way of describing dark skin tone. The text reads:

שחורה אני ונאוה בנות ירושלם כאהלי קדר כיריעות שלמה:
אל תראוני שאני שחרחרת ששזפתני השמש בני אמי נחרו בי שמני

נטרה את הכרמים כרמי שלי לא נטרתי:

> I am black but[12] pretty, Daughters of Jerusalem; like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.
> Do not look at me as though I am black-skinned, as though the sun has tanned me.[13]

As in his explanation of Numbers 12:1, Rashi once again confirms the idea that there is something inherently lesser about those naturally of black skin tone. In his commentary, Rashi creates a juxtaposition between the tents of Kedar and the curtains of Solomon. Rashi describes the tents of Kedar as becoming black because of the rain and the curtains of Solomon as being easily cleansed. Because the text likens the protagonist to both images, Rashi suggests that her blackness is not her natural skin color – or, a sign of her ethnicity – but simply a consequence of her over-exposure to the sun. Rashi solidifies his assessment of her ethnicity as non-black in his explanation of the following verse. In explicating the phrase שאני שחרחרת, Rashi explains that the protagonist's blackness and her ugliness do not come from her mother's belly but merely from the tanning of the sun, a kind of blackness that can become white by staying in the shade. Here, Rashi not only makes firm the value difference between tanned skinned and ethnically black skin but he also notes that tanned skin can become white, further enforcing the idea that white skin connotes purity and is, therefore, better than black skin. Implicit in Rashi's description is an important class distinction. The protagonist in this verse becomes dark from her work outside in the fields of her vineyard. Her dark skin, then, is a consequence

[12] David Goldenberg notes that some modern biblical scholars choose to translate the ו as "and" instead of "but," favoring a positive – rather than advertorial – relationship between the protagonist's skin color and her beauty (Goldenberg 80). However, Goldenberg also notes that the verse clearly illustrates that "lighter-skinned women were preferred among the urban elite as implied by the daughters of Jerusalem" (Goldenberg 82), which is why I have rendered the ו as "but" instead of "and."

[13] This translation is my own.

of her manual labor. Whiteness – a consequence of being of high enough class to have others labor in the field on one's behalf – becomes a marker of higher class and a primacy is clearly placed on fair skin over dark skin.

A passage from Leviticus Rabbah helps illustrate the way in which Midrash Rabbah perpetuates the rabbinic association between blackness and lowliness by ascribing connotations of slavery and lower class status to blacks. The beginning of Leviticus Rabbah 4:1 quotes from Ecclesiastes 3:16, which describes wickedness existing in a place of justice and in the place of righteousness:

> נפש כי תחטא בשגגה מכל מצות ה' זש"ה ועוד ראיתי תחת השמש מקום המשפט וגו', רבי אליעזר ור' יהושע ר"א אומר מקום המשפט שמה הרשע מקום שסנהדרי גדולה יושבת וחותכת דיניהם של ישראל שמה הרשע שמה ויבאו כל שרי מלך בבל וישבו בשער התוך ששם חותכין את ההלכה, במתלא אמר הן די תליא מרי זייניה, כולבא רעיא תלא קולתי'

> "If one should sin [through error]" (Leviticus 4:2) – "*And again I saw under the sun that, in the place of justice, there was wickedness there, and, in the place of righteousness, there was wickedness there*" (Ecclesiastes 3:16). . . . R. Eliezer said: "The place where the Great Sanhedrin of Israel sat and decided the judgments of Israel – *there was wickedness there*; there *the princes of the King of Babylon came and sat at the middle gate*" (Jeremiah 34:3). What is the middle gate? This is the place where they decided law. In poetry it is said: "Where the master hangs up his armor, there the shepherd hangs up his water bottle."[14]

The question, then, becomes how something that can appear in a place where it does not belong (e.g., wickedness in a place of righteousness). In order to explain this concept and explicate the verse, R. Eliezer brings a proverb that explains that the shepherd hangs up his pitcher in the same location that the master hangs up his armor. The phrase used for shepherd is כולבא רעיא, which M. Margulies "thinks . . . means 'black shepherd' with

[14] Leviticus Rabbah 4:1. The English translation is my own. The discussion above adds on David Goldenberg's discussion of this source (Goldenberg 119-120).

the connotation of common shepherd."[15] In this midrash, the rabbis demonstrate their propensity towards associating blackness with lowly class by designating the position of commoner as that of the black shepherd.

As in Song of Songs 1:5-6, a midrash from Genesis Rabbah also points to the idea that, with reference to a person, the Rabbis often used the adjective Kushite to describe a person with dark skin, rather than to specifically identify a person as of Ethiopian descent. This midrash expands upon the story found in Genesis 39:1 in which Potifar, described as an Egyptian (**איש מצרי**) buys Joseph, an Israelite from the Ishmaelites. The author tries to further explicate why it is that an Egyptian could sell an Israelite:

בכל מקום גרמני מוכר כושי וכאן כושי מוכר גרמני.

> "An Egyptian man" . . . Everywhere a white-skinned man[16] sells a dark-skinned man and here a dark-skinned man sells a white-skinned man.[17]

For the reader, this midrash presents the same question that the Rabbis ask of Numbers 12:1 – if we know that Potifar is, indeed, an Egyptian, why then would the midrashic author describe him as a Kushite? Potifar cannot be at once Egyptian and Ethiopian. From this source, then, we once again discover that the word Kushite, in addition to describing an Ethiopian, specifically, can describe a dark-skinned person, generally. Moreover, the Rabbis clear outrage at the idea that a dark-skinned person – a Kushite, who should always be in the position of slave and not owner – could sell a light-skinned

[15] Ibid.

[16] The word **גרמני** can be understood more generally as meaning that such a person is white-skinned.

[17] Genesis Rabbah 86:3. The English translation is my own. This discussion expands upon David Goldenberg's mention (Goldenberg 118) of this source as an example of the Rabbis' use of Kushite as a general descriptor for dark skin.

person demonstrates the rabbinic notion that Kushites were to be of a slave class second to those with white skin of Western descent.

A discussion from the Babylonian Talmud helps solidify the Rabbis' disdain for dark-skinned people. When expounding upon potential physical disqualifiers for the priesthood, the Rabbis list dark skin amongst unacceptable characteristics. Dark-skinned men find themselves on a list with those who are deaf, dumb, or drunk. The Rabbis describe the dark-skinned as כושי. In further explicating their understanding of כושי, the Rabbis describe the כושי as one who is אוכמא, or black like a raven.[18] Here, dark-skin disqualifies a person from achieving the highest status of holiness amongst a community. White skin becomes a marker of holiness, while dark-skin becomes a marker of blemish, further suggesting the Rabbis disdain for dark skin, as designated by the descriptor כושי.

Thus, we see that the word כושי takes on multifarious and complex meanings in both the biblical text and the rabbinic imagination. While some texts use כושי to designate ethnic origin or geographical location, many others use the word to connote dark skin. Consistently, all rabbinic references to כושים allude to an undesirable skin tone that causes one to be impure and/or of lesser class. The Rabbis create a hierarchy wherein white skin is to be desired and wherein those with black skin are to be made Other.

As we move through the centuries, the question of the Kushite continues to live in the imagination of Hebrew literature. No longer referring to the Ethiopian, כוש comes to

[18] BT Chullin 63a discusses the difference between the black (אוכמא) raven and the white raven.

refer to the black Other – as imagined by American and Israeli poets – of the early twentieth century: the American "Negro."[19] From the biblical and rabbinic discussions of the Kushite, we see that the Rabbis situate themselves and those involved in Israelite or Jewish life apart from the Kushite. How, then, will these poets situate themselves? Is the Kushite still completely outside of Jewish life? Can the Jew take on the voice of the Kushite through his own experience of Otherness? When will that voice sound authentically black and when will that voice further feed into the racism perpetuated by rabbinic literature?

[19] Henceforth, I will render כּוּשׁ as Negro in poetic translation and direct discussion of poetic translation; while, in all other discussion, I will use the more contemporarily scholarly-accepted term African American.

Chapter 2: Kush and Blackness as Other in Hebrew Poetry

Chapter One articulated the manifold ways that the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature understood the Kushite, in particular, and blackness, in general. As the Rabbis created a hierarchy of spiritual worth based on skin color, they did so standing outside of the subject they tried to identify and understand. In their discussions of the Kushite and blackness, the Rabbis convey no sense of wanting to empathize with a black Other or understand blackness from anything more than a distanced need for ritual purity. Many centuries later, though, Hebrew literature reprised its discussion of the Kushite and blackness, but, now, with exceedingly different intent.

Daniel Boyarin understands rabbinic midrash "as a form of literature that constantly endeavors to interpret the past and to recast it in light of the present."[20] We may understand Modern Hebrew poetry as a contemporary attempt at continuing this endeavor to reinterpret a past and, out of that reinterpreted past, to create meaning in the present.[21] While many of the American and Israeli poets who wrote about the black experience in the early 20th century certainly exhibit some prejudices, their poetry represents a seemingly more sincere and arguably less sinister attempt to understand their subject. Rather than creating categories of racial difference in order to create a racial hierarchy, these authors – even at their most prejudicial – seem to want to resonate, as Jews, with the experience of Otherness they find in African American life. They draw on

[20] This text appears in: Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), 19. My original reading comes from page 35 in Dr. Wendy Zierler's article, "'On Account of the Cushite Woman That Moses Took': Race and Gender in Modern Hebrew Poems About Numbers 12," in *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, 19 (Spring 2010): 34-61, print.
[21] Zierler, 34.

Jewish culture, from methods of biblical interpretation to liturgical reference, to try to recreate the voice of a black Other from the lens of the Jewish Other. It as is they have a unique ability to locate the voice of the black Other because of their own community's Otherness in American life in the early to mid-20th century. The authors explored in this chapter write from various perspectives – both in third and first person – and with varied intent – sometimes because African American themes simply lend themselves well to the lyrical poetic form and other times out of a desire to speak truth to the power of anti-racism. However, even when they fail to truly enter the world of their subjects or when they over-appropriate the African American experience as their own, these poets seek to find the shared – and even equal – humanity between the black and white man through the lens of the Jew.

Yitzhak Silberschlag, an American immigrant originally from Galicia, came to the world of Hebrew poetry with a traditional European education and the desire to be part of a literary elite.[22] For the duration of his literary career, for Silberschlag, the classical "remained the hallmark of his intellectual world . . . whether ancient Greece or ancient Israel or the 'classic' modern literary idiom forged by Hebrew writers at the turn of the twentieth century."[23] It is with this outlook that Silberschlag composed his poems on American culture, placing him on the more removed end of the spectrum of resonance with his literary subjects. Though the title of the section from which the poems explored in this chapter, "*Ha'ahava*" and "*Ha'or ha'shachor,*" come is "*Mi'pi ha-Kushim*" – literally, "from the mouths of Negroes" – Silberschlag writes from a distanced third

[22] Alan Mintz, *Sanctuary in the Wilderness: A Critical Introduction to American Hebrew* Poetry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 255.
[23] Mintz, 256-257.

person voice and with ardent commitment to poetic lyricism over realistic exploration. Silberschlag's primary concern seems to be his poetic form, which he sticks to at the expense of finding his way beyond a rather un-nuanced, flat representation of his subjects and with the result of "reproducing stereotypical attribute(s) of African Americans."[24] His own biases and simplistic understanding of the black man's essence prevent Silberschlag from authentically locating the voice of the black man. Ultimately, though, while his descriptions of African Americans may be overly simplistic and stereotypical, thematically, Silberschlag does succeed in capturing the experience of suffering common to both the African American and Jewish experiences, which he uses to suggest the shared humanity between men of different races. Additionally, as he layers his own tradition – that of the Hebrew bible and Midrashic form – onto this tale about the black Other, Silberschlag finds the links between Jewish and black Otherness.

In "*Ha'or ha'shachor*," Silberschlag writes an etiological myth about the origin of the color of black skin.[25] The poem begins with a statement containing midrashic undertones:

> *Elohim lo hishlim et briyat ha'adam*
> *b'vat-rosh. Kashah niso ha'maftir*
> *mikol nes she'kadam.*
>
> God didn't finish the creation of man with the nod of a head.
> His closing miracle was more difficult than any miracle that came before it.[26]

[24] Steven Katz, *Red, Black, and Jew: New Frontiers in Hebrew Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 142.
[25] Katz, 143.
[26] Yitzhak Silberschlag, "Ha'or ha'shachor," in *Aleh olam, b'shir* (New York: Ogen Press, 1946), 114. All translations of Hebrew poetry are my own, in consultation with Dr. Wendy Zierler, unless otherwise noted.

The poem, while overall an etiological myth, also resonates with the project of the rabbinic midrash: to fill in the holes of the biblical narrative. Here, because Silberschlag references the creation story, he subtly hints that the story as told by the biblical text is not complete and answers a lingering question with his poem. "What is missing from the creation story?" Silberschlag asks in his opening stanza. He answers by suggesting that the traditional creation story demands still further explanation of God's last miracle – for Silberschlag, the creation of racial difference. His subtle reference to the creation story found in the Hebrew bible as he begins his tale, as discussed below, joins him into the chain of midrashic tradition. Thus, Silberschlag weaves together elements of the Jewish literary form of midrash with the folk form of the etiological myth with the intention of ultimately capturing something of the Otherness of the African American through his own tradition of Otherness – Judaism.

The very suffering that exists at the heart of both the Jewish and African American experience is the theme upon which Silberschlag expands in his retelling of the creation story. The second stanza of the poem outlines the creation of man's face. Throughout this stanza, Silberschlag uses word play to link sensory organs with the actions in which they allow man to engage. For each organ he names, though, Silberschlag ascribes to that organ an ability which he describes using a similar-sounding word that casts a shadow of gloom or darkness over the potentially liberating nature of sensory ability. Because man's face is created before racial difference, Silberschlag's ordering of events suggests that all men are created as experiencing the same suffering – whether Jew or black. The first line of the stanza sets this dark tone as God molds man's face into existence:

Ko tzar Elohim et tzurat adam ha'afilah.

Thus God molded the model of the late blooming man.[27]

Silberschlag describes man as blooming into being using the word "*ha'afilah*." While Silberschlag's specific usage connotes blossoming and coming into being, the same root without the *yud* would connote darkness and obscurity. Hence, Silberschlag casts a shadow of gloom over man's entrance into the world from the outset.

With each body part described, Silberschlag develops the theme of suffering by layering an additional sense of despair onto man's creation using resonate sounds:

B'shifulei ha'rosh kavah kli achilah,
l'ma'an yashpil adam l'adamah
v'yakim b'dimah v'yakim bi'd'mamah
kemah.
B'si ha'rosh sam ta'ah'mei ri'I'yah
l'ma'an yinaseh adam lit'mo'ah
al shemetz ha'noi v'al shefah ha'no'ha
bi'm'sibo.

In the bottom part of the head, God affixed a tool for eating,
in order to lower man to the earth.
And he will raise up in tear and will raise up in silence, the wheat.
And at the peak of the head, God placed the twins of sight,
so that man should be raised up to be amazed by a little bit of beauty and an abundance of suffering.[28]

When describing the chin, Silberschlag uses word play with the root *shin-fey-lamed* to make a connection between the bottom of the face ("*shifulei ha'rosh*") – the part of the face that allows man to eat – and being lowered to the ground, or humiliated ("*yashpil*"). This link between eating and humiliation through lowering to the ground comes from the creation story found in Genesis. In Genesis, God punishes man for the sin of having eaten from forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden by requiring that man work the earth in

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

order to be able to eat.[29] Through the use of this root in different conjugations, Silberschlag both creates an intertextual reference to the biblical creation story and cloaks man's ability to sustain himself in a shroud of consequential humiliation. Similarly, though the peaks of the head – the eyes – may raise man up to be amazed by beauty, these same peaks raise man up to see the abundance of suffering in the world. Silberschlag defines a little bit of beauty as "*shemetz ha'noi*" and a lot of pain "*shefah ha'no'ha*". Though these phrases are two sides of the same sound, they convey completely opposite meanings and cast man further into darkness by requiring that he see more suffering than beauty. By pairing the sounds and roots used to describe these body parts with the sounds and roots used to describe the actions, they perform Silberschag clearly expounds upon the shared suffering found amongst all of humanity.

While Silberschlag begins by locating the shared experience between all men, at the end of the poem, though, when Silberschlag explains how Negros acquired black skin, he falls into stereotypical cultural generalizations and ultimately uses the same technique first used to create resonance to create dissonance. After molding man's face, Silberschlag writes that, as the sun comes up, God uses the colors of the dawn to give each nation a skin color but that the Negro people does not show up for their anointing:

Li'v'sof ya'ad yom l'tzivaim.
u'ch'mo shacharo alah
v'yar ni'go'hot na'im
b'mitz'ha'lah,
v'yitbol bam mach'chol-k'samim
v'yimsach amim al amim.

Ulam am ha'kushim lo va.

In the end, He designated a day for the colors

[29] Genesis 3:17.

and, just as the dawn rose, so He saw the beautiful brightness in the joy,
and He painted nations on nations.

But the nation of the Negroes did not come.

Silberschlag uses the word "*kushim*" to refer to the Negro people. And what is it that causes this people to become black? According to Silberschlag's myth, it their laziness and inability to show up that causes b

lack people to become black. Silberschlag depicts the Negro nation as asleep on a cloud during this formative moment in creation:

Ad she'matzah al matzha avei rom
et ha'am-ha'kushim ha'nam l'lo ni'ah
v'cholem chalom.

Until [God's emissaries, Rafael and Gavriel] found
the Negro nation sleeping without movement on a bed of clouds
dreaming a dream.

Once again, Silberschlag locates his own tradition within his description of the Other, as he writes the ministering angels of the Hebrew Bible, Rafael and Gavriel, into his myth. And, yet, at the same time that he overlays Jewish culture onto the Negro story, Silberschlag uses the stereotype of African American laziness to explain the origin of black skin color.

At the end of the poem, Silberschlag employs yet another African American stereotype in his explanation of what causes the Negro nation to become black: ignorance. While at the beginning of the poem Silberschlag employed word play to describe the similarities between all of humanity, here, he presents this last stereotype through the use of word play:

Az tza'ak Elohim:
"Hisog achor."
Ulam am-ha'kushim dimah lishmoah:

"Himok shachor."
V'yishchar oro v'yishchar afko s'chor-s'chor.

And so God screamed:
"Retreat backward."
But the nation of Negroes imagined they heard:
"Rot black."
And his skin darkened and his horizon darkened dizzily.

Silberschlag pairs the sounds of the Hebrew used to describe the misunderstanding that ultimately causes the Negro to turn black. God's command uses the words "*hisog achor*," the vowel sounds and conjugation of which are mirrored by what the Negro hears: "*himok shachor*." Thus, the very poetic technique that Silberschlag once used to point to humanity's commonality now becomes the tool through which Silberschlag perpetuates racial prejudice. This ultimately causes Silberschlag to fall prey to his own biases in the creation of a problematic etiological myth, which obscures Silberschlag's ability to truly enter into the experience of the Other in a deep and nuanced way and to authentically capture the voice of the black Other.

The poem "*Ha'ahava*" follows a similar trajectory. Like "*Ha'or ha'shachor*," Silberschlag begins the poem with an image of humanity dwelling together:

B'she'k'var ha'yamim
neh'che'neh ha'ish ha'shachor
mei'ahavat ha'ish ha'tzachor
Yachad tzadu v'yachad danu,
yachad zadu v'yachad chagu
b'she'k'var ha'yamim.

In bygone days,
the black man derived enjoyment
from the brotherhood of the white man.
Together they hunted, together they fished,
together they schemed, together they celebrated.
In bygone days.[30]

[30] Silberschlag, "*Ha'ahava*h," 119-120.

Again, Silberschlag uses language to convey theme. Repetitively using dyads of simple, two-letter roots conjugated in the same *binyan* in the same tense (e.g., "*tzadu*" and "*danu*"; "*zadu*" and "*chagu*"), he emphasizes both the togetherness/coupling and similarity of the black man and the white man. Additionally, rather than simply using a pronoun to refer to the two races, Silberschlag uses language to further emphasize togetherness through the use of the Hebrew word meaning together or united – "*yachad*" – to describe how the two races went about their activities. The beginning of the poem, then, expresses Silberschlag's seeming belief in the principal of racial equality, even as it paints a rather naïve picture of the world.

As in "*Ha'or ha'shachor*," "*Ha'ahavah*" also ends with Silberschlag having failed to emerge out of stereotype and locate an authentic Negro voice in his writing. In his effort to create an etiology for the roots of prejudice, Silberschlag tells the tale of the united black and white man encountering two packages in front of them on one of their happy jaunts together. One package is larger than the other. The larger contains a hoe, a plow, and a shovel – trappings of enslavement and symbols of perpetual labor and toil. The smaller package contains a pen, with which its opener will be able to re-write history in his favor. When the two men both move towards the packages, the black man arrives first ("*ha'shachur kadam*") and opens the larger package. While one could see Silberschlag's explanation for the root of prejudice as the arbitrary loss of a footrace, there is a more ingrained prejudice working within his explanation. Though the opening of the packages was arbitrary, the black man's win in the race was not; it is due to an essential part of his being. The reader may understand that Silberschlag stereotypes the black man by describing him as more athletic than the white man, as able to run faster,

which allows him to open the bigger box containing the implements that will ensure his enslavement to the white man. Hence, as in his other etiological myth poem, Silberschlag once again uses stereotype to explain the roots of suffering (in this case, being the victim of racial prejudice) in the black experience. The perceived – if untrue – shortcomings of the black man cause his own suffering.

While he wrote across an even greater divide than Yitzhak Silberschlag, European poet Moshe Ben-Meir, manages to better give voice to the black Other when he takes the Negro maidservant as the subject of his poetry. In "*Tefilat Ishah Kushit*," Ben-Meir tries to understand the anguish experienced by a Negro maidservant at the hand of her white oppressor. He uses the physicality of her body to convey her emotional pain. The poem describes the protagonist's body in vivid detail – her thick, black lips; her wide thighs; her black melons and their white milkness. She bemoans the emotional pain she experiences as she uses her body to sustain her white employers, reminiscent of the vivid descriptions of physical torment found in black slave narratives. Vivid though its imagery is, however, the poem is not based on Ben-Meir's experience of African American culture, as most of the poems in the volume in which it is found were written while Ben-Meir still lived in Europe.[31] Underneath the title to this particular poem, Ben-Meir writes: "*b'ekvot reportgiyah me'eit* Ted Poston." Before beginning to write, Ben-Meir makes clear the distance from which he writes about his subject: the poem is not based on Ben-Meir's own experience but only upon a newspaper article written by Ted Poston, a journalist covering the civil rights movement.[32] And, yet, even across such a divide, Ben-Meir comes to his subject with a desire to know her intimately. He uses his

[31] Katz, 156.
[32] Ibid.

own language but he places it in her mouth, and, while the words are words of Hebrew, his style mirrors that of a black slave narrative. Though in a tongue not her own, the words Ben-Meir voices through the mouth of his *ishah kushit* are easy to understand, conversational even – like a Negro spiritual. At the same time, even in the relatively simple language, he masterfully threads Jewish liturgical and biblical references throughout the poem, using his own cultural context in a way that remains true to the voice of his subject.

The poem begins with the subject beseeching God as to when her suffering will end. Within lines of the poem's opening, Ben-Meir makes reference to the inhumanity uniquely experienced by the Negro:

> *Hem omrim: sh'chorah*
> *Ein lah z'chut adam*
> *Hem omrim: lo-k'sheirah*
> *l'shevet b'rakevet al yadam.*
>
> They say: she is black.
> She doesn't have human rights.
> They say: she is not fit
> to sit next to them on the train.[33]

Ben-Meir sets up a clear insider-outsider divide, using a specific pronoun – "*hem"* – to name the white outsider who judges the lowly black maidservant. However, Ben-Meir leaves his subject pronoun-less, subsuming her identity into the adjective that describes her. Unnamed, she becomes nothing more than the color of her skin. He paints his subject into a familiar scene – albeit one lifted out of a newspaper article about a bus boycott – rather than imagining his subject in the unrealistic narratives created by poets

[33] Moshe Ben-Meir, "*Tefilat Ishah Kushit*" in Tzlil *Va'Tzel: Shirim v'Agadot* (New York: Ogen Press, 1958), 94.

like Yitzhak Silberschlag. He keeps her words terse and repetitive. In these initial verses, his subject names her oppressor twice. He also uses an ABAB rhyme scheme that gives song to the poem, reminiscent of the terse, repetitive nature of Negro spirituals.

While remaining true to his subject's voice, though, Ben-Meir locates his own tradition within his writing. His subject calls out to God in a way simultaneously reminiscent of black slavery narratives and of the Psalms of the Hebrew bible. In the third stanza of the poem, the subject wails:

> *Esa kapai eilecha, El.*
> *Habet u'r'eih – ha'kapayim ha'eleh ha'sh'chorot.*
> *B'hen alush pitam.*
> *Lechem-chukam sh'yasimu v'fihem*
> *Hem u'v'naihem u'v'noteichem.*
> *V'ain ani ch'sheirah lashevet itam!?*
>
> I lift up my palms to you, God.
> Behold! and see these black palms –
> In them, I kneed their bread.
> Their daily bread that they place in their mouths
> Them and their sons and their sons' sons.
> And I'm not fit to sit next to them!?[34]

The first line of the stanza references Psalm 121's opening line, in which the psalm's narrator lifts up his eyes ("*esa einai*"[35]) to the mountains in search of God's help. Here, though, Ben-Meir has his narrator lift up her palms ("*esa kapai*") in her call for God's help, their blackness the physical evidence of her struggle. Immediately, she expresses righteous indignation over the irony in the fact that the blackness of the very palms that knead the bread that feeds the mouths of her masters and their offspring is the physical evidence they point to in discriminating against her. Ben-Meir seems to be playing on the irony intrinsic in the idea of "biting the hand that feeds you." Ben-Meir does not

[34] Ibid.
[35] Psalm 121:1

merely describe the bread that his subject needs as *lechem* but as "*lechem-chukam*" – daily bread. In so doing, he links together the reference to his own bible with a reference to the Christian Bible found in the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke: "Give us this day our daily bread."[36] The subject thus simultaneously utters the words of Ben-Meir's bible in her own language and the words of her own bible.

Ben-Meir continues to seamlessly paint a picture of black struggle through the language of Judaism by mirroring the language of the Tachanun service. Ben-Meir ingeniously uses the language of the Jewish liturgy of personal supplication to God to express his subject's angst. As she cries out to God to take notice of her, her beseeching follows the pattern of Tachanun. She moves from "*ha'beit u'r'eih*" (Behold! and see) to the more polite "*ha'bitah, El*" (Look, God). Similarly, the Tachanun service moves from "*ha'beit na, rachem na al'amecha*" (Please look, please swiftly have compassion for your People) to "*ha'bitah v'ah'neinu b'eit tzarah*" ("Look and answer us in a time of trouble!).[37] Not only does Ben-Meir follow the linguistic pattern of Tachanun, he borrows the theme of the passage, as well. Just as the Jew who supplicates himself in prayers begs God to take notice snf have compassion on him and to take notice of him in a moment of trouble, the protagonist of Ben-Meir's poem desires that God take notice of her struggle and release her from the tyranny of her master.

Throughout the poem, Ben-Meir paints a picture of his protagonist's tormented corporeality. In the last stanza, though, in addition to continuing to give her master

[36] Matthew 9:11 and Luke 11:3.
[37] Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Siddur* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), 148-149.

strength, the maidservant takes note of both the inherent strength and humanity in her physicality:

> *V'halavi zeh, halavi ha'lavan, halavan*
> *kachah lavan ch'mo she'adom dami.*
> *di'sain b'saram, rivah chiyutam.*
>
> And my milkness, my white milkness,
> it is as white as my blood is red
> It fattened their flesh, it quenched their thirst.[38]

Though originally focused on the blackness of her skin and the racially specific qualities of her lips and thighs, in this last stanza, Ben-Meir acknowledges the whiteness of her breast milk and the redness of her blood. Underneath her blackness, the part of her physical being that allows her master to thrive is white, as white as her blood is red. In one of the most famous autobiographical slave narratives, former slave and abolitionist, Harriet Jacobs, writes: "My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each."[39] Jacobs at once acknowledges her master's strength while giving voice to her own power. Similarly, Ben-Meir's protagonist recognizes her own humanity in the context of her master's strength. Ben-Meir ultimately manages to remain true to the voice of his subject, creating a narrative lacking in fanciful stereotype, substantive in earnest exploration, and that does not appropriate her experience as his own.

Like Moshe Ben-Meir, Reuven Avinoam (1905-1974), though American-born, also wrote his poetry about an American black Other from a great remove, in this

[38] Ben-Meir, 95.
[39] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001), 73.

case, in his adopted homeland of Israel, where he settled in 1929.[40] In his poem, "*B'tzel shachor-or,*" as the title of the poem suggests, Avinoam places his white narrator in the shadow of his black subject. Written in first person, this poem is written from the perspective of the white narrator, rather than the black subject. Steven Katz asserts that Avinoam "focus[es] on the Black man as a fountainhead of artistic inspiration, as a muse to inspire the poet."[41] An alternative reading of the poem suggests that any "artistic inspiration" that Avinoam – or his white narrator – draw from the black subject of the poem is actually employed to turn the tables and cast the white man in the position of slave with the black man in a position of power. Though laden with potentially stereotypical imagery, the message of the poem transcends the limitations of Avinoam's prejudiced subjectivity: the song of the black man teaches the white man to find his own voice. In this way, as Katz concedes, Avinoam succeeds in "accepting the black man as equally human"[42] to the white man, promoting a subtle, if not explicit, anti-racist message.

The poem begins by reversing the typical power dynamic. Rather than provide an image of a black man enslaved to a white owner, Avinoam causes the white narrator's attention to captured by his black subject:

> *V'ani ba'avotot-kolecha, kushi sh'chor-or, nimshachti*
> *El mikdashecha-me'at, tzrifcha anav v'dal*
> *asher mi'bein k'talav shir-reten li kasam*
> *midei erev b'arbo.*
>
> And I, in the ropes of your voice, you dark-skinned negro, I am
> drawn to your tiny sanctuary, your humble, poor hut.
> that between its walls a murmuring song enchants me

[40] Katz, 149.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

every evening.[43]

In these first verses, the black man is the agent in the poem, taking the white man as his "enchanted" audience. Here we find the image of a white man tied in the ropes of the black man, rather than the more typical image of a black man tied up in the ropes of his white master. The ropes here, however, are metaphorical and positive, rather than literal and destructive to either man's basic humanity. The white poet speaker is held in thrall by the inspiration of the black singer.

While the opening image does reverse an anticipated power dynamic with an uncommon image of white man in the grasps of black man, these opening lines validate Katz's assertion that the white poet narrator sees his black subject as foremost a "muse to inspire the poet." Katz's argument, though, that the white poet ultimately expresses a "sense of subordination" to the black poet is true only insofar as he yields his power to his muse, but the focus of the poem seems to remain the white experience, as evidenced by the language in these first few lines. The first line begins with an emphatic "I statement" and ends with the beginning of the second sentence of the opening image: a lingering verb conjugated in the first person. From the outset, as Avinoam begins the image with the "I" and ends the image with the "I", the white narrator remains central to the reader's experience, even if not the one in control of his destiny. Additionally, Avinoam curiously refers to the black man's meager hut as "*mikdashecha me'at*" ("your tiny sanctuary"), a reference to God's promise to the Israelite people in Ezekiel 11:16 that God will remain a tiny sanctuary ("*mikdash me'at*") to them, even in exile. The concept

[43] Reuven Avinoam, Reuven, *Shirim U'Phoemot* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh Publishing, 1950), 172.

of the *mikdash me'at* becomes central to a Jewish understanding of the importance of the synagogue and house of study, also called the *mikdash me'at*. While this is the only explicitly Jewish image found in the poem, its presence does call into question Avinoam's ability to sublimate the white voice (in this case, the Jewish voice) in favor of his black subject's voice. Writing about the subject in Hebrew may necessarily Judaize the black experience, but this particular description seems out of place in the context of the rest of the poem's imagery and may distract the reader from the black subject's cultural context. Quickly, though, the reader's concern about the white narrator's focus on self over subject is somewhat allayed by the description of the white narrator as prisoner to the black man:

Ad ba ha'yom, nit'aiti vo sh'vui shir-lib'cha.

Until the coming of day, I was lost in the song, a prisoner of your heart's song.[44]

With this unequivocal statement, Avinoam makes the power dynamic he wants to re-cast explicit: the black subject has complete control over the white narrator, whom Avinoam describes as a prisoner ("*sh'vui*") of the black subject.

The stanzas that follow cause the reader to fluctuate between wondering whether Avinoam's understanding of the black experience is limited to vaguely stereotypical aesthetic observations or whether his revelations about the black man's difficult history transcend that prejudice and point to his sense of their shared humanity. Avinoam, through the voice of the white narrator, spends a great deal of time describing the black man and his hut. In so doing, he employs certain stereotypical images:

Notifah z'hav-damah al kirzulei roshecha ha'agalgal
Ad ki hichtim k'tzei-chat'm'cha rahav-soled v'santercha-kalal.

[44] Ibid.

> The [shadow of broken day] dripped golden blood on the rounded curls of your head.
> Until it made the end of your wide pug-nose and your polished chin orange.[45]

Rather than focus on the emotional core of what makes the black man's song enchanting to the white narrator, Avinoam focuses on a stereotypical description of the black subject as having frizzy hair ("rounded curls of your head") and a "wide pug-nose." These observations distract from Avinoam's potential message about shared humanity between black and white men by making the black subject so physically foreign to the white narrator. Avinoam also describes the song of the black subject as a "Mammie song" that recalls the Alabaman landscape of his youth and mourns the rape of his sister. Avinoam's focus on literal description, even if poetic, obscures his greater message.

On the other hand, the white narrator's attention eventually moves beyond these stereotypes as the sunset through which he views the black man changes his skin color from black to orange. In this liminal space, the wash of sunset seems to allow the white narrator to focus on the black man's words and identify his suffering and his humanity. Through the song, the white narrator learns of the "suffering silent and insult that screams out black" that the black man internalized in through his experience of his sister's rape ("*ve'enut dim'matah-v'elbonah ham'tza'akah sh'chorot*"[46]). The narrator also takes note of the black man's hope for redemption through his belief in his ability to experience union with the Divine as he goes out "rowing and flying upon the Divine heavens" ("*taizei shoet v'ooof al p'nei sh'mei-Yah*"[47]). Through the song, the white narrator comes

[45] Ibid.
[46] Avinoam, 173.
[47] Ibid.

closer to understanding the black man's sorrow and humanity, rather than merely focusing on his foreign physicality:

> *Sha'ah va hitamtani yen-atavt'cha, ho eved ben-chorin*
> *Ashet kitaftah y'raishat avdut-dorot*
> *Ach gam hiskalta d'ror likro l'nafsh'cha ha'l'vanah*
>
> That hour during which I was made to taste the wine of your sadness; oh, freed slave,
> who shouldered the legacy of generations of slavery –
> you learned to call your white soul free

Here, while the white narrator acknowledges the pain of the black man, he identifies the purity of the black man's soul, seeing beyond his physicality. That white soul makes the black man a human being in the eyes of the white narrator, a human being with the same soul as him.

The poem eventually concludes with an image that helps make Avinoam's ideological aim more concrete and ultimately reinforces the intrinsic artistic power of the black man. As the white narrator promises to remember the black subject he has encountered, he focuses on the lesson gained from his time watching the man sing during sunset:

> *Sha'ah va he'elatztani b'shircha tahor v'chen*
> *b'histalchev b'cha ha'lev ha'ma'amin:*
> *Sha'ah va ilaftani l'shorer shirat-nafshi*
> *b'tom u'v'emet.*
>
> That hour during which you exulted me in your pure and honest song
> in which the faithful heart ignited within you.
> In which you trained me to sing the song of my soul
> in honesty and in truth.

Avinoam thus drives home a message about the ways in which the black man's honesty and simplicity help the white man uncover what is truly in his own heart. The slave becomes the master when Avinoam makes the black man the teacher of the white man.

The black man's albeit unwitting role as teacher/mentor commands the white narrator's respect. That said, the black man does not actively subjugate the white narrator or rob him of his agency; rather, his song invites the White man into a beneficial – if hierarchical – relationship in which the black subject enables the white narrator to find his own voice. With this closing image, despite the stereotypes that precede it, Avinoam makes his belief in the shared humanity between black and white man clear: both men hold a song, a truth, in their souls.

We conclude our study of 20th century Hebrew poetry about blackness with a study of Ephraim Listizky, a poet whose background and purported poetic project set him apart from his colleagues. Born in 1885 in Minsk, Lisitzky studied in yeshiva before eventually emigrating to New Orleans, by way of Canada.[48] Lisitzky arrived as a poor, Eastern European immigrant whose own bewildering sense of being a Jewish Other made him recoil at the virulent Southern racism he encountered in New Orleans. Able to locate his own suffering in his encounters with that racism, Lisitzky turned to Negro spirituals and sermons about the bible, re-shaping them in an effort to identify the "common sorrows of . . . the Negroes and the Jews."[49] He turned his expansions and re-writings of this black literary history into a volume of poems, written mostly in the 1940s, entitled "*Be'ohalei Kush*" ("In the Tents of Kush"). While most Southern Jews hoped to assert their whiteness in an effort to blend in with their white Christian neighbors,[50] Lisitzky used his poetry to convey a staunchly anti-racist message by asserting the likeness of the Jew and the black man. In his poem "*Va'tidaber Miryam,*" a re-imagining of the Exodus

[48] Zierler, 36.
[49] Zierler, 37-38.
[50] Zierler, 38.

story, Lisitzky makes his ideological project abundantly clear to the reader through the voice of God, who says:

> *Shimi el l'vavecha: lo v'tzivoi nivchan*
> *Ada, ma'a lot rucho lo vo ne'e'rach shivchan.*
> *Yesh v'nefesh sh'chorah shochnah v'guf tzahor,*
> *Yesh v'nefesh tz'chorah shochnah v'guf shachor!*
>
> Pay heed to this: It is not by the color of one's skin that one is judged
> It is the qualities of one's spirit that are assessed.
> There are black souls that reside in a body that is white,
> And there are white souls that reside in a body that is black![51]

Not only does Lisitzky state emphatically that skin color has nothing to do with a person's spiritual worth and that there are both evil white people and pure-hearted black people, he puts these words in the mouth of God, the final judge. These lines from this poem can be understood as Lisitzky's anthem: he firmly believes that racism is misguided and, despite physical differences, all men are created and judged equally.

In the same way that Reuven Avinoam uses his poetry to reverse a power dynamic, in his poem, "*Haskitu kol ha'pa'amon*," Lisitzky turns the image of the master's plantation on its head by making God the master of a plantation. In so doing, Lisitzky insists that first and foremost one needs to be responsible to God. As is Lisitzky's project, the poem's form mirrors a Negro spiritual. It begins with the injunction to ring the liberty bell:

> *Haskitu kol ha'pa'amon*
> *ha'm'tzaltzel be'eyal*
> *Haskitu kol ha'pa'amon*
> *Ha'm'tzaltzel k'voha al!*
> *Ben meshek Elohim hu zeh*

---

[51] The Hebrew poem can be found here: Ephraim Lisitzky, "*Va'tidaber Miryam,*" in *Be'ohalei Kush: Shirim* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1953), 126. The English translation above comes from page 45 of Dr. Wendy Zierler's article.

ha'm'tzaltzel ve'ezuz.

Ring the liberty bell –
loudly ringing
Ring the liberty bell –
ringing to on high.
He who rings the bell strongly
is an angel on God's farm.[52]

Lisitzky keeps his language brief and repetitive, rhyming the B lines of these couplets to one another and repeating the A line verbatim. The beginning of the poem takes the cadence of a Negro spiritual, which helps locate Negro culture within Lisitzky's writing. Lisitzky also sets the scene for a re-imagined plantation. Lisitzky refers to the one who rings the bell as "*ben meshek,*" which connotes a farm. The imagery of the farm, then, evokes the setting of a slave plantation for the reader. In an unexpected twist, though, this ringer – the one who will guide the workers to judgment later in the poem – is not a slave master, but an angel of God, who is the Master of this heavenly plantation.

The next stanza opens with the poem's speaker inviting the Negro workers ("*kushim poalim*"[53]) to whom the narrative is addressed to bring the fruits of the harvest to the scales on God's farm. Lisitzky uses the commanding verb "**יאתו**" ("come") when addressing the workers, a verb also found in a *piyyut* in the *musaf* of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy. Thus, Lisitzky brings together the Jewish form of the sung liturgical poem, the *piyyut,* with the form of the black spiritual. Through this form and within this narrative, Lisitzky inserts an explicit message about racial equality:

Moznayim l'ven meshek El –
u'moznayim tzedek hem!
Bam yiskol, mishkal ne'eman.
Amal ish ish k'mo

[52] Lisitzky, "*Haskitu kol ha'pa'amon,*" 19.
[53] Ibid.

L'fihem aroch ya'aroch.

The angel of God's farm has scales
these are the scales of justice.
On them he weighs a faithful measure.
The work of each man,
verily he will compare each man's yield.[54]

When the Negro workers come before their master, before God, they are each judged equally – each man's yield is considered in the gathering of a sacrifice to God, regardless of his skin tone. The scales are not just any scales. They are the scales of justice ("*moznayim tzedek*"). As Lisitzky creates this image of black workers contributing to a Divine sacrifice, with each man's work being verily considered, he points to the equal worth in the work of all men. Lisitzky further elucidates his belief in racial equality in the next stanza with his description of God's attitude towards the workers' compensation:

Et p'tako ha'geish yagish az
La'ba'al Adonai
Et p'tako hagesh yagish lo
V'shilmo s'charo dei
Lo yigra mi's'char po'alo
Eloha ad m'um.

Whoa – he will bring the note to God, the master.
Whoa – he will bring the note to him –
And God will pay it fully.
God will not diminish the salary of his worker at all.

Lisitzky writes that God will not diminish the salary of his worker ("*lo yigra mi's'char po'alo*"). Unlike on the white slave master's plantation, where the black slave works only for the benefit of his white master, here, on Lisitzky's re-imagined plantation, the black worker will be compensated directly for his work. Not only will he be compensated but his compensation will also not be diminished on account of his race.

[54] Ibid.

Lisitzky provides one final reversal of the typical slave narrative at the end of his poem. Unlike the slave master who would have gathered the fruits of the harvest at the expense of his slaves, taking advantage of their toil, the gift the black workers in Lisitsky's poem give to God is gathered without ill-intent towards others:

> *Ha'y'vul, l'Eloha na'a'vah*
> *Asinu lo v'tom.*
>
> Our gift to God pleases –
> we did it for God completely.

The word Lisitzky uses to express the completion of the Divine offering is "*tom*" which, in addition to wholeness, also signifies that the gift is blamelessly holy. At the conclusion of the poem, the black workers have completed their work and offered a sacrifice without blemish to God. Not only is the offering considered whole because the ministering angels discarded the rotten fruit that would have disqualified it, but it also considered complete because each worker's contribution to the sacrifice was judged equally and compensated wholly without regard to his race. Thus, the poem juxtaposes the image of harvest on a black slave plantation with the image of the Jewish Divine sacrifice and, through this grafting of one culture onto another, he articulates the shared humanity amongst all men.

The way in which Lisitzky writes himself into a black narrative can best be seen in his poem, "*Amah Kushit*." The poem is distinctly of the Negro culture about which Lisitzky writes, as he uses the image of a woman, specifically, the mother, a figure held in "special reverence" in black poetry. In the poem, Lisitzky writes about a black

maidservant who nurses the son of her master as a child and who then comes back to abuse her when he grows up:[55]

Amah kushit, l'avicha
ne'evdah l'ad
Amah kushit, ben g'virti
chaltza l'cha shad.
Tigdal, tihyeh k'avicha:
ta'avid k'avir
Tze'etza'ei l'cha yanchil

Negro maidservant – for your father she was perpetually enslaved
Negro maidservant – son of my master, she bears her breast for you
You will grow up, you will be like your father.
You will enslave someone like a flame
My offspring will be granted to you.[56]

Like "*Haskitu kol ha'pa'amon,*" the repetition of the A line and rhyming of the B line at the beginning of "*Amah kushit*" give the poem a sense of similar rhythm to a black slave song. The poem, in fact, closely resembles black poet J.W. Johnson's "The Black Mammy" in content. In "The Black Mammy," J.W. Johnson's poem provides imagery of a black nursemaid who nurses the children that become her people's oppressors:

O foster-mother in whose arms there lay
The race whose sons are masters of the land!
In times of old
It was thy breast that nourished them to strength.[57]

Lisitzky mimics Johnson's language by matching "foster-mother" with "*amah kushit*" (Negro maidservant). He borrows the content directly, creating his own Negro maidservant who bears her breast ("*chaltza l'cha shad*") to suckle her master's sons. Why, though, does Lisitzky choose the image of a mother? Even as he recreates a

[55] Katz, 126.
[56] Lisitzky, "*Amah Kushit,*" 55.
[57] James Wheldon Johnson, "The Black Mammy," http://poetry.poetryx.com/poems/15654.

traditionally Black narrative, Lisitzky actually wrestles with his own history. Lisitzky lost his own mother in early childhood,[58] making the question of maternity and his own broken childhood the perfect place for him to find commonality with the black maidservant who struggles with her role as a mother in perpetuating brokenness in her own community by raising her oppressors. Hence, the poem represents Lisitzky's attempt to both map his own experiences onto his perception of black culture.

In keeping with the way in which he took an image (the slave plantation) and played with its opposite (God's heavenly farm) in "*Haskitu kol ha'pa'amon,*" in this poem, Lisitzky plays with the image of the milk the Negro maidservant uses to nurse her charge. While theoretically a mark of sustenance and nourishment, Lisitzky ascribes to this woman's milk a sense of cursedness:

> *Mishad amah m'to'avah*
> *Motz kil'latah eim chalava*
>
> From the breast of the abominable maid servant
> The husk of her curse with her milk[59]

Just as Johnson identifies the potential strength in the Negro foster-mother's milk, so, too, does Lisitzky identify that strength, which he represents through the image of a husk ("*motz*"). However, that strength buckles under the curse that comes from the milk, as the milk is what nourishes future oppressors. In other words, while the reader would typically assume that a mother's milk is a good thing, Lisitzky points out its poisonous potential. He ends the poem, though, with the potential for blessing in the milk, if only the milk can find it's way into the mouth of a child "in whose generation a redeemer will

[58] Katz, 126.
[59] Lisitzky, 55.

arise for the dark-skinned people" ("*lu chi tigdal go'eil takum l'v'nei am k'dar or*").[60] With this final image, Lisitzky reinforces his persistent hope for the dawn of racial equality and the end of baseless racism.

At the end of the first chapter, we asked whether the Kushite (or, more fittingly, the black man) was still completely outside of Jewish life. Clearly, in the imaginings of the modern Hebrew poets discussed in this chapter, the black man enters Jewish life in a more accepting way than he does in the writings of the Rabbis, even becoming a vehicle through which the poets explore their own sense of Otherness. We also asked whether the Jew can truly take on the voice of the black man in a way that sounds authentically black without further feeding into the racism perpetuated by rabbinic literature. As noted above, many of the poets, in an effort to depict their black subjects, do feed into racial prejudices. So, perhaps the question is not whether or not these writers can authentically give voice to the black man – as no one can truly give voice to something he is not. Instead, we can best understand the project of these Hebrew poets as an attempt to use the concept of the black Other to locate their own voice, both to express their own internalized feelings of isolation as Jews and to express their hopes for racial equality.

As the second chapter of our exploration closes, and we move to the end of the 20th century and a new cultural milieu, we are now faced with a new question: what happens when the black man is the Jew? How can the black Jew help solidify the idea that black Otherness and Jewish Otherness, though they echo one another, are distinct?

[60] Lisitzky, 57.

Chapter 3: Black and Jewish – Is All Otherness The Same?

The end of the 20th century brings with it increased visibility of interracial (and, therefore, Jewish-black) marriage. The Civil Rights movement gives rise to alliances between Jews and blacks in America. At the same time in Israel, the Sephardi/Mizrahi community gains visibility in the public and the political discourse., while the waves of Jewish Ethiopian immigration to Israel brings a population of Africans into the heart of the Jewish people. Thus, at the outset of the 21st century, the Jewish community becomes multi-cultural and mutli-colored. It is forced to realize that it does not speak with a homogenous voice – within what may have formerly identified itself as a white community, there are non-white voices. This realization and the writings and activism of Jews of Color complicate the question of what the Jewish community has to say about blackness. As explored in the last chapter, the American and Israeli Hebrew poets of the 20th century who wrote about blackness sometimes tried to graft the Jewish experience of Otherness onto the black experience of Otherness. Curiously, though, Jews of Color articulate an experience of double alienation, not completely fitting into the black or the Jewish communities. Two modern black Jewish writers, Gadi Yavrakan and Rebecca Walker, express that to be a black Jew is to dwell uncomfortably in both worlds. This suggests that, though blacks and white Jews can find their shared humanity perhaps more easily than non-Jewish whites and blacks, the ways in which blacks and Jews experience their Otherness is distinct. Note that in some cases, the assumption of shared experience and empathy has yielded a backlash born of false expectation, with some militant blacks deeply resenting the so-called black-Jewish alliance, and Jews standing in judgment of

their black brethren for failing to follow the Jewish model of model minority-hood. You might want to account for this somewhere or in a footnote. This final chapter seeks to use the writings of two contemporary writers as they uncover the idea that to be Jew is to be one kind of Other and to be black is to be another. Both writers offer a glimpse of the distinct nature of black and white Jewish Otherness.

Rebecca Walker was born on November 1969 in Jackson, Mississippi – in her own words, "seventeen months after Dr. King was shot"[61] – to the black author Alice Walker and the white Civil Rights lawyer Mel Leventhal. From the first page of her autobiography, *Black, White, and Jewish*, Walker articulates an inability to feel grounded due to feeling neither fully Jewish nor fully black. One of the first images from her life that she shares is a memory of standing on her aunt's porch realizing that she has no sense of how she found herself there: "I do not remember the name of my dead uncle's wife. One her porch I stand blankly between her outstretched arms, my head spinning, suddenly unsure even of the ground upon which I stand. Who am I and why am I here?[62] Walker's description of her "spinning" head and her uncertainty about the ground "upon which [she] stands" immediately place her in limbo, in a place of unknowing. This sense of being ungrounded evokes the key question Walker tries to answer but whose answer remains elusive throughout her narrative: "Who am I?"

This lack of rootedness pervades Walker's writing. At the beginning of the narrative, she asserts that she is more comfortable in airports than "in either of the houses

[61] Rebecca Walker, *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001), 12.
[62] Walker, 1.

[she] call[s] Home."[63] It is the liminal space of the airport – that it is "blank, undemanding" – that gives Walker a sense of familiarity. Never quite fitting into any of the worlds she finds herself in, Walker seems to be most comfortable being in limbo or in transit. She describes her understanding of home as "coming and going, going and coming."[64] Walker attributes this feeling of being between worlds to the multiple identities she occupies: "Black. White. Nigger. Jew. That makes me the tragic mulatta caught between both worlds like the proverbial deer in the headlights."[65] (Walker 13) As she weaves together within one list both the positive and negative names by which she is identified, Walker attributes her sense of living "in between both worlds" to her multiple identities. Ultimately, as Walker struggles to fully exist in either the Jewish world of her father or the black world of her mother, Walker forms a new sense of self, based on her rootlessness. She writes that, as an adult, she fails to stick to any kind of routines. She says she is "not rooted in the everyday" and that she feels that beyond not being able to find ground to stand on, she actually cannot *allow* herself to "stand on some kind of ground."[66] In a way, Walker finds it easier to craft a singular identity out of rootlessness and transience than to try to craft that same singular identity out of two opposite sides of a coin that never seem to meet – her Jewish and black selves.

Based on her experiences of feeling out of place in both the black and Jewish communities, Walker wonders aloud whether she could even conceive of a singular black Jewish identity. She recounts the story of a white Jewish classmate at Yale asking her if she was really both black and Jewish, which he followed with the question, "How can

[63] Walker, 3.
[64] Walker, 5.
[65] Walker, 13.
[66] Walker, 167.

that be possible?"[67] His limited understanding of what it means to be Jewish causes her to doubt not just the abstract possibility of black Jewishness but also the concrete possibility of her black Jewishness. Replaying the event in her mind, Walker asks a simple question of herself, changing her classmate's words ever so slightly: "Am I possible?" Her inability to locate herself in either world makes sense given this event in which a person with whom she theoretically shares identity doubts her ability to share his community.

And the event with her Yale schoolmate is not singular in Walker's life. Time after time, she experiences alienation as a black child in a Jewish community. In the world of her white father, Walker notices that her blackness creates discomfort for her Jewish relatives. Writing about a visit with her paternal grandmother during early childhood, Walker hones in on her Grandmother's latent racism towards her mother: "Mama seems nervous, angry. I think this is because Grandma doesn't look at Mama. When she talks to Mama, she looks at me."[68] While not outrightly racist towards her black mother, Walker senses her grandmother's discomfort with her mother's blackness and internalizes a message that to be black is to not be Jewish. When she goes to visit her great-grandmother, Walker receives similar treatment, as her great-grandmother refuses to look at her when she asks her a question. Walker knows that she hears her asking because "her face looks tight."[69] Walker recognizes somehow that to be Jewish she cannot also be black. She also learns that white Jews cannot see past her black skin, which makes her uncomfortable amongst her fellow Jews.

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[67] Walker, 25.
[68] Walker, 16.
[69] Walker, 35.

Walker suffers similar shunning as a Jewish child in the black community. Ever unsure of herself in school, Walker takes comfort in her academic abilities. Yet, when she excels in school, her academic excellence makes her not quite black enough – and a little too Jewish – to be fully accepted by her black classmates. Walker recalls a poignant moment of self-realization in an elementary school math class: "When I answer all the questions correctly in Mrs. Thompson's math class, it does not occur to me that I am taking something away from the other, darker-skinned girls, that I am doing something to them that feels like betrayal."[70] Here, Walker identifies the idea that, if she is going to be considered black enough by her classmates, she cannot also be smart. When she answers questions – and talks to white boys – she calls into question her allegiance to the black community. Beyond simply not fitting in with her black classmates, Walker gives voice to her feeling that, when she occupies the Jewish part of her identity – or the non-black part – she betrays the other part of her identity. Walker begins to call this feeling of lacking whiteness, which she says she most experiences as "a lack of some attribute or another."[71] Rather than being able to positively identify the white Jewish parts of herself, to be white – and, therefore, to be Jewish – means simply to be not black enough.

Throughout her writing, Walker writes about the need to mask one part of herself in order to occupy another. When she runs into a white cousin in her late 20s, Walker realizes that he only knows her in the context of her whiteness, that "keeping a part of [herself] back is what [she's] done to cope for the last twenty years, opting instead to be partially known, reservedly intimate."[72] The idea of being "bicultural" like her Jewish

[70] Walker, 41.
[71] Walker, 305.
[72] Walker, 49.

uncle (married to an Italian Catholic girl) feels "unfamiliar" to Walker.[73] Hers is an experience in which her black and Jewish worlds collide but never reside easily with one another. She cannot find a way to move seamlessly between worlds and refers to the two parts of her identity as "universes that never overlap."[74] Her inability to fully inhabit either universe stems from the alienation she finds there. Walker describes herself as "always standing outside the gate, wanting to be let in."[75] Walker correctly identifies that it is not enough for her to self-identify. In order for her to feel fully black or fully Jewish – or fully both – she has to depend on the gatekeepers of these communities, which she will never be, as the insiders of these worlds see her as an interloper, an outsider. On the final page of her autobiography, Walker expresses a sense of hope that she will one day emerge out of the grasps of others' definitions of her identity and write her own personal narrative as she wonders what happens when "we put down the scripts written by history and memory."[76] Inherent in her final musing is the question of who gets to arbitrate an individual identity, who gets to tell us what we are and are not.

The question of naming arises in the poetry of Gadi Yavrakan. Gadi Yavrakan writes his poem, "*Shemot rabbim*" at the age of 21, after having immigrated from Ethiopia to Israel. In the poem, Yavrakan calls attention to his inability to feel part of either his Ethiopian or Jewish homelands. Yavrakan places his difficulty in the context of the derogatory names he is called by both the Ethiopian and Jewish communities:

B'golah karu li Yihudon
B'artzi korim li Kushon
B'golah karku li zar.

[73] Walker, 45.
[74] Walker, 117.
[75] Walker, 188.
[76] Walker, 307.

B'eretz korim li muzar.

In Exile, they call me little Yid
In Israel, they call me little Negro
In Exile, they call me stranger.
In Israel, they call me strange.[77]

Yavrakon links the alienation he experiences in the black community and the Jewish community through the use of the diminutives "Yihudon" and "Kushon."

Yet, the alienation he experiences in these two places is not quite the same – in one place he is a stranger ("*zar*") and in another he is strange ("*muzar*"). Though the words come from the same Hebrew root and both express a sense of Otherness, the Otherness they express is differently tinged. In Exile in Ethiopia, he experiences himself as entirely out of place, a stranger in what is technically his homeland. While perhaps slightly more at home in Israel, his blackness still makes him strange to the predominately white, Ashkenazi-controlled Jewish community there.

Like Walker, Yavrakan does not want to be called either Jew or black. He wants to be seen as uniquely himself. He wonders, though, who will be able to understand him and to whom he will be able to explain that he already has a name – the one given to him by his mother and father ("*shmi ha'prati she'natnu li imi v'avi*"). Also, like Walker, Yavrakan's poem portrays an acute absence of community and sense of being alone, alienated as a black man in the Jewish community and as a Jew in the black community:

L'an ani elech?
L'mi ani asbir?
Mi yavin et hisbiri?

To where I am going?
To whom will I explain?

[77] Gadi Yavrakan, "*Shemot rabbim*."
< www.vanleer.org.il/Data/UploadedFiles/video/37/handout.rtf>, #8.

Who will understand my explanation –
of my being a black Jew?[78]

Yavrakan creates an image of himself wandering without direction. He does not quite know where he seeks to land, in what community he will find acceptance. He also expresses uncertainty that anyone in either community will entirely understand him or see beyond the part of him they identify as Other.

In the end, though, instead of succumbing to a lack of identity, like Walker,, Yavrakan wants to transcend the two alienated parts of himself and be seen for the essence of who he is: a person with an identity that is more complicated than his race and religion, a person with a soul and a specific, unique identity. He ends his poem with the repetition of his desire to be called by his proper name:

V'shuv mivakesh she'karu li
V'shmi ha'prati

And again I beseech that they will call me
By my proper name.[79]

Yavrakan's use of the word "*prati*," which means personal (versus "*shem mishpaha*," or family name) elicits for the reader not just the idea of his first name – Gadi – but also the idea of a fitting name. The poem ends with a sense of tension. Though Yavrakan himself knows that fitting, proper name, nobody else can seem to call him by anything other than his race or religion. Ironically, Yavrakan's inability to fit into his communities comes from his communities' inability to see the identity that best befits him: the one that is neither black nor Jewish but is exclusively himself.

[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.

Both Walker's and Yavrakan's writing about their experiences of alienation clearly uncovers the fact that a white Jewish sense of Otherness is not the same as a black sense of Otherness, which is yet still not the same as a black Jewish sense of Otherness. Three times alienated, these writers have trouble finding acceptance in any of the potential worlds they could occupy. Not quite Jewish and not quite black, these individuals identify themselves as living in a liminal space where they have trouble putting down roots in any one community, not to speak of two.

Conclusion

We are now at the end of our journey of exploration of Jewish understandings of blackness. We have come a long way from the overt racism that pervades the biblical and rabbinic understandings of blackness, expounded upon in Chapter 1. As we finish our exploration, let us review from where we have come. At the outset of the paper, the Jewish community encountered blackness as completely alien and undesirable. While כושי could certainly designate ethnic origin or geographical location (i.e., Ethiopian/African), the Rabbis layered on top of these basic meanings a more problematic definition of blackness. The possibility arises that the adjective כושי may refer to something other than ethnicity, as Tzipporah, formerly identified by the biblical text as a Midianite is called an כושית אישה in Numbers 12:1. Through their commentaries on this verse, the Rabbis conclude that the attribution of blackness to Moses' wife, Tzipporah, could have been nothing more than a reverse euphemism for her beauty: as black as a Kushite is black is as beautiful as Tzipporah was beautiful. Beyond their attitudes toward the Kushite, in particular, though, the Rabbis took an intensely negative attitude towards the dark-skinned in general, as evidenced by their commentaries on Song of Songs 1:5-6, in which they approve of the protagonist's black skin only in so far as she can correct it and become white again, a return to the more desirable state. In the rabbinic imagination, dark skin represented low class and/or ritual impurity.

The rabid racism so apparent in the Rabbis writings gave rise to the question of how 20th century Jews would later come to encounter their African American neighbors

when their tradition left them with such a staunch legacy of racism. The early 20th century American and Israeli poets explored in Chapter 2 sought to rise out of that tradition of racism and to re-imagine the black man in the context of the shared suffering of Jews and blacks. Though these authors sometimes fell prey to racial stereotype in their effort to locate an image of the black man through a Jewish lens, for the most part, each author, in his own way, expressed his hope for a world free of racial prejudice. These poets found their own voices through the voice of the black man, a subject whose experience of alienation reverberated through the chambers of their memories of Jewish alienation.

Finally, the challenges these authors encountered fully folding together a Jewish and black experience of Otherness gave rise to the question asked in Chapter 3: is the alienation experienced by Jews the same as that experienced by blacks? Looking at the writings of black Jews, who experienced double – sometimes triple – alienation in distinct ways, we concluded that, though they have what in common, the tenor of black alienation is, in fact, distinct from the tenor of Jewish alienation. As they could not find acceptance either as blacks or as Jews, these authors showed us the way in which black and Jewish identities diverge.

So, why does this matter? And, if the questions of Self versus Other and voice lie at the heart of the questions raised by this thesis, it seems only natural to ask why this matters to me. Growing up as a Southern, white, Jewish girl, it was my encounter with the black community of New Orleans that ultimately enabled me to see past my feelings of alienation and to own my racial privilege. I spent the first eighteen years of my life relatively sheltered from the idea that my experience of the world as a white woman

would be any different that of my black peer. The summer after high school, though, I taught with a college preparatory program for gifted, under-resourced middle school students, an experience which cracked open my understanding of race and privilege. The program in which I taught predominately served African American children. As I met the children in my classroom and learned about the incredible disparity in the educational system in New Orleans, I realized that my whiteness had afforded me opportunities that would never have been available to me as a black child. I struggled with whether to attribute race to the difference between my experience and my students' experiences of the world. Ultimately, I found that race unavoidable as a root case. Yes, I had experienced alienation as Southern Jew. Yes, I had experienced alienation as an academically and artistically oriented nerd in a sea of jocks and cheerleaders. But my experience of alienation was not the same as my black students' experiences of alienation. Doors remained closed to these students that would forever be open to me as a person who could pass as white.

Out of these revelations, I realized that it was no longer useful to me to pretend to live in a color-blind world. I also realized that, if I sought to give to someone else's experience voice – a potentially pedantic and infantilizing, if impossible, enterprise – or empower the disenfranchised, I would fall into a kind of latent racism that assumed that I had more inherent ability and power than my black students. I learned that the best way I could speak truth to power was to put aside my own feelings of alienation as a woman, a Jew, and an academic and to better understand the space I occupied as a wealthy white person. I learned how to own my privilege. I learned how to stop apologizing for my privilege. I learned how to create space at the table of self-realization and self-

actualization. As I did so, I saw the invisible become visible through the realization of their individual self-worth and collective power, rather than through my misplaced benevolence.

Knowing how I feel about race and class and Otherness and privilege, though, did not satisfy my desire to understand my relationship to my black neighbors. As a future rabbi, I wanted to explore what my tradition had to say about blackness and find a way out of rabbinic racism and towards a more nuanced Jewish understanding of blackness through the words of black Jews themselves. And, so, the three chapters of this thesis took form. While the racism of the rabbis disturbed me, I found hope in the project of the 20th century American and Israeli poets as they sought to heal that rabbinic racism. Finally, I found satisfaction in nuancing the question of voice and cultural appropriation by analyzing the writings of Rebecca Walker and Gadi Yavrakan, as well as telling my own story of encountering my racial privilege. I hope that the next as-yet-unwritten chapter of this story involves a generation of Jews who seek to know themselves and to know Others without misappropriating the experiences of others as their own and who come to that understanding by sharing themselves and sharing their stories with each other.

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Appendix: Hebrew Poems

1. Eisig Silberschlag – *"Ha'or ha'shachor"*

ה

הָעוֹר הַשָּׁחוֹר

אֱלֹהִים לֹא הִשְׁלִים אֶת בְּרִיאַת הָאָדָם
בְּבַת־רֹאשׁ. קָשָׁה נִסּוֹ הַמַּפְטִיר
מִכָּל נַס שֶׁקָּדַם.
(עַל כֵּן מִתְהַלְּכִים בַּכְּפָר וּבָעִיר
אֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר מַעוֹדָם לֹא כָּלוּ
וְלָעַד לֹא יִכְלוּ).

כֹּה צָר אֱלֹהִים אֶת צוּרַת אָדָם הָאֲפִילָה:
בְּשִׁפּוּלֵי הָרֹאשׁ קָבַע כְּלִי אֲכִילָה,
לְמַעַן יַשְׁפִּיל אָדָם לָאֲדָמָה
וְיָקִים בְּדִמְעָה וְיָקִים בְּדָמָה
קָמָה.
בְּשִׁיא הָרֹאשׁ שָׂם תָּאֲמֵי־רְאִיָּה,
לְמַעַן יִנָּשֵׂא אָדָם לִתְמֹהַּ
עַל שָׁמָיִם הַנּוֹי וְעַל שָׂפַע הַנּוֹי
בְּמִסְבּוֹ.
עַל גִּסֵּי הָרֹאשׁ נָטָה קְנֵי־שְׂמִיעָה,
לְמַעַן יָגִיס אָדָם אֶת לִבּוֹ
לְהַקְשִׁיב לִרְנַּת מוֹתוֹ בְּאִבּוֹ.
לְבָסוֹף יַעַד יוֹם לִצְבָעִים.
וּכְמוֹ שַׁחֲרוּ עָלָה,
וַיֵּרָא נְהוֹת נָעִים

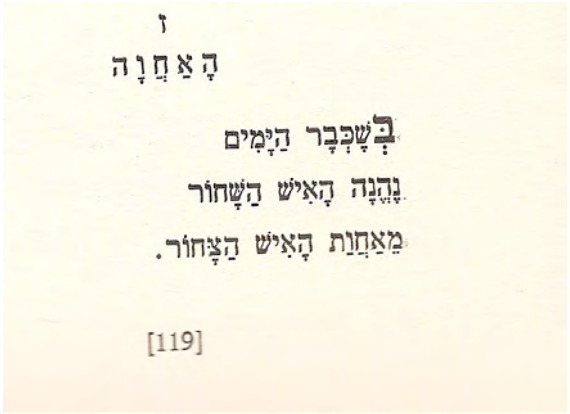
בְּמִצְהָלָה,
וַיִּטְבֹּל בָּם מַכְחוֹל־קְטָמִים
וַיִּמְשַׁח עַמִּים עַל עַמִּים.

אוּלָם עַם הַכּוּשִׁים לֹא בָא.
חִכָּה אֱלֹהִים שָׁלֹשׁ שָׁעוֹת וַחֲצִי שָׁעָה,
אוּלָם עַם הַכּוּשִׁים לֹא בָא.
וְהַיּוֹם גָּדוֹל
וְהַחֹם גָּדוֹל.
קִוָּה אֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלַאכְתּוֹ וְלָפוּשׁ בַּצַּל.
קִוָּה לַשָּׁוְא. אָז צִוָּה אֶת שְׁלִיחָיו רְפָאֵל וְגַבְרִיאֵל
לְהָרִיץ אֶת עַם הַכּוּשִׁים הַנַּעְדָּר.
טָס וְתָר, טָס וְתָר
וּוּג הַכְּרוּבִים עַל אַפְסֵי הָרָקִיעַ,
עַד שֶׁמָּצָא עַל מַצַּע עָבִי רוֹם
אֶת עַם־הַכּוּשִׁים הַנָּם לְלֹא נִיעַ
וְחוֹלֵם חֲלוֹם
עַל אָדָם אָפֹר וְעַל אָדָם אָדֹם
בְּעוֹלָם כָּחֹל וְכָתֹם.

מִמַּצַּע כַּנְפֵי אֵשׁ
נֵעוֹר וְנִתְעָשֵׁשׁ.
בְּדַרְגַע נִקְהַל בַּהֲמוֹנָיו הָרוֹהִים
עַל אֱלֹהִים.
כְּסָא הַכָּבוֹד נִוּוַע

בַּדְּחָק. אָז צָעַק אֱלֹהִים:
„הִסּוֹג אָחוֹר."
אוּלָם עַם הַכּוּשִׁים דְּמָה לִשְׁמֹעַ:
„הִמּוֹק שָׁחוֹר."
וַיִּשְׁחַר עוֹרוֹ וַיִּשְׁחַר אַפְקוֹ סְחוֹר־סְחוֹר.

2. Eisig Silberschlag – “*Ha’ahavah*”

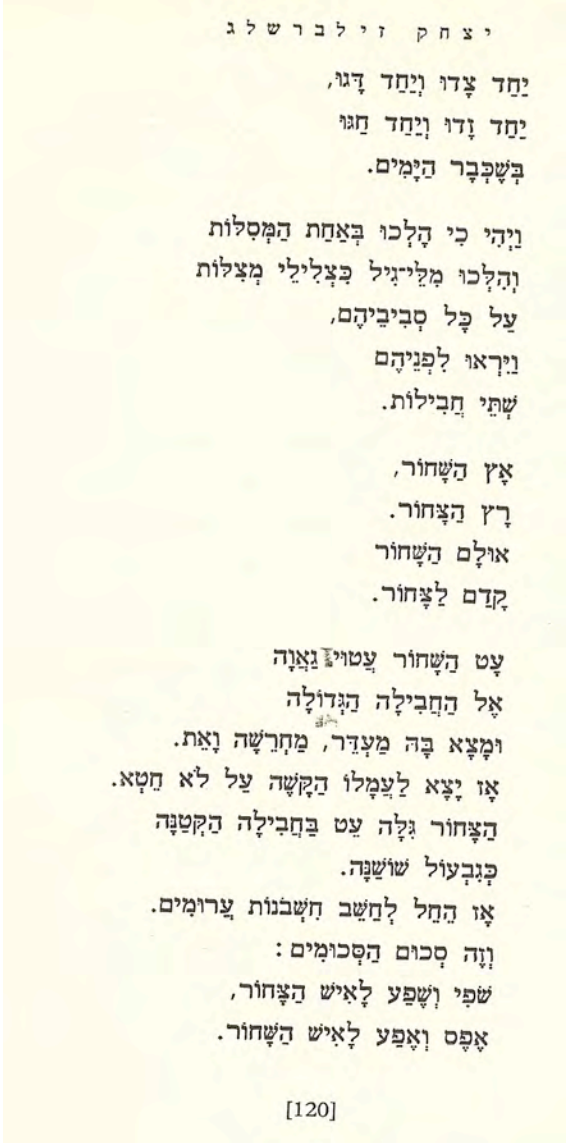


ז

הָ אַ חֲוָ ה

בְּשָׁכְבָר הַיָּמִים
נֶהֱנָה הָאִישׁ הַשָּׁחוֹר
מֵאַהֲוַת הָאִישׁ הַצָּחוֹר.

[119]



י צ ח ק ז י ל ב ר ש ל ג

יַחַד צָדוּ וְיַחַד דָּגוּ,
יַחַד זָדוּ וְיַחַד חָגוּ
בְּשָׁכְבָר הַיָּמִים.

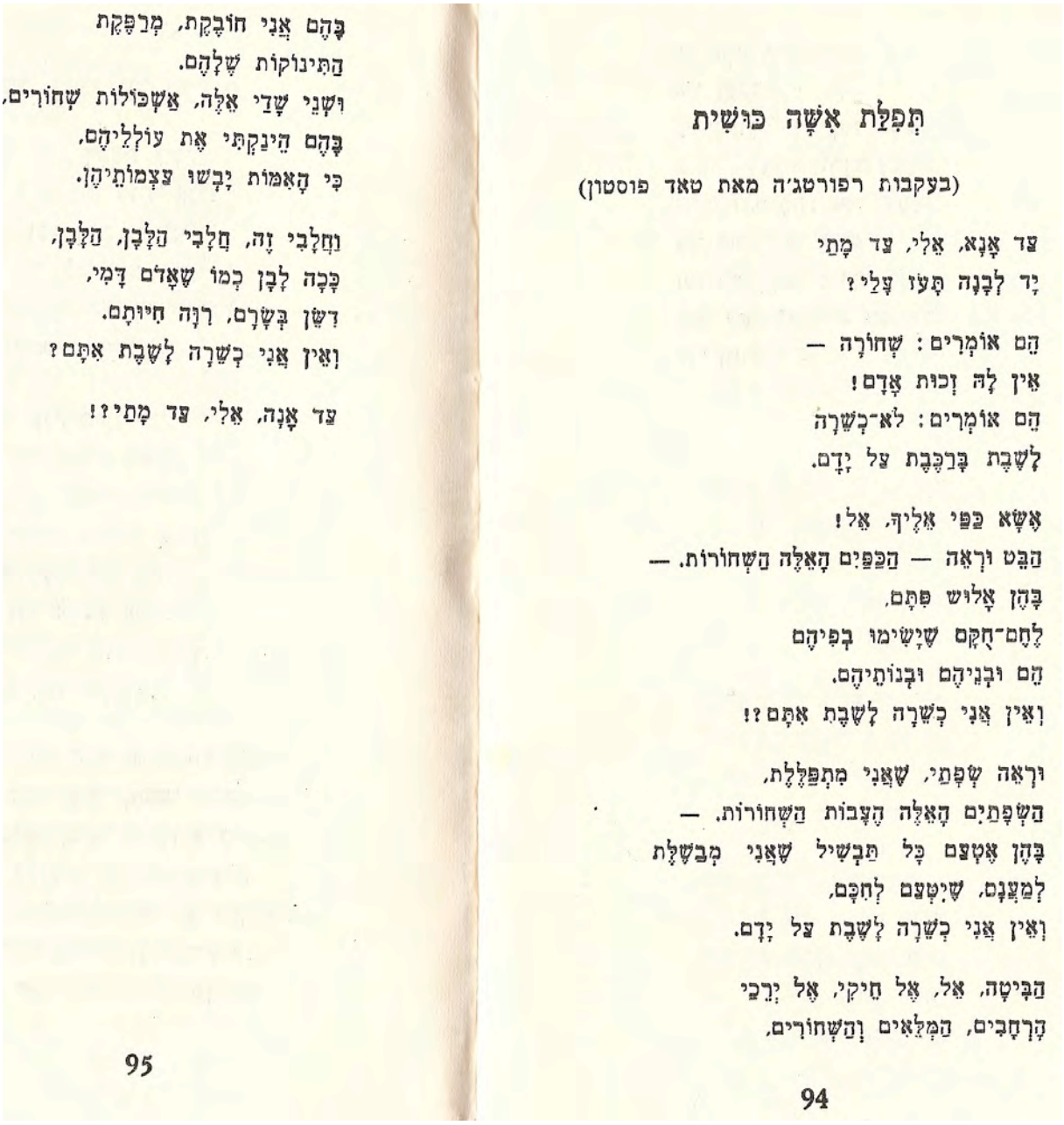
וַיְהִי כִּי הָלְכוּ בְּאַחַת הַמְּסִלּוֹת
וְהָלְכוּ מְלֵי־גִיל כְּצִלְילֵי מְצִלּוֹת
עַל כָּל סְבִיבֵיהֶם,
וַיִּרְאוּ לִפְנֵיהֶם
שְׁתֵּי חֲבִילוֹת.

אָץ הַשָּׁחוֹר,
רָץ הַצָּחוֹר.
אוּלָם הַשָּׁחוֹר
קָדַם לַצָּחוֹר.

עָט הַשָּׁחוֹר עֲטוּף גַּאֲוָה
אֶל הַחֲבִילָה הַגְּדוֹלָה
וּמָצָא בָּהּ מַעְדֵּר, מַחְרֵשָׁה וָאֵת.
אָז יָצָא לַעֲמֹל הַקָּשֶׁה עַל לֹא חָטָא.
הַצָּחוֹר גָּלָה עֵט בַּחֲבִילָה הַקְּטַנָּה
כְּגִבְעוֹל שׁוֹשַׁנָּה.
אָז הֵחֵל לְחַשֵּׁב חִשְׁבּוֹנוֹת עֲרוּמִים.
וְזֶה סְכוּם הַסְּכוּמִים:
שִׂפְיָ וְשָׂפַע לָאִישׁ הַצָּחוֹר,
אֹפֶס וְאֶפַע לָאִישׁ הַשָּׁחוֹר.

[120]

3. Moshe Ben-Meir – "*Tefilat ishah Kushit*"



תְּפִלַּת אִשָּׁה כּוּשִׁית

(בעקבות רפורטג׳ה מאת טאד פוסטון)

עַד אָנָא, אֵלִי, עַד מָתַי
יָד לְבָנָה תְּעֹז עָלַי?

הֵם אוֹמְרִים: שְׁחוֹרָה —
אֵין לָהּ זְכוּת אָדָם!
הֵם אוֹמְרִים: לֹא־כְשֵׁרָה
לְשֶׁבֶת בָּרִכְבֶּת עַל יָדָם.

אִשָּׁא כַפַּי אֵלַיִךְ, אֵל!
הַבֵּט וּרְאֵה — הַכַּפַּיִם הָאֵלֶּה הַשְּׁחוֹרוֹת. —
בָּהֶן אָלוּשׁ פִּתָּם,
לֶחֶם־חֻקָּם שֶׁיְּשִׁימוּ בְּפִיהֶם
הֵם וּבְנֵיהֶם וּבְנוֹתֵיהֶם.
וְאֵין אֲנִי כְשֵׁרָה לְשֶׁבֶת אִתָּם?!

וּרְאֵה שְׂפָתַי, שֶׁאֲנִי מִתְפַּלֶּלֶת,
הַשְּׂפָתַיִם הָאֵלֶּה הֶעָבוֹת הַשְּׁחוֹרוֹת. —
בָּהֶן אֶטְעַם כָּל תַּבְשִׁיל שֶׁאֲנִי מְבַשֶּׁלֶת
לְמַעֲנָם, שֶׁיִּטְעַם לְחִכָּם,
וְאֵין אֲנִי כְשֵׁרָה לָשֶׁבֶת עַל יָדָם.

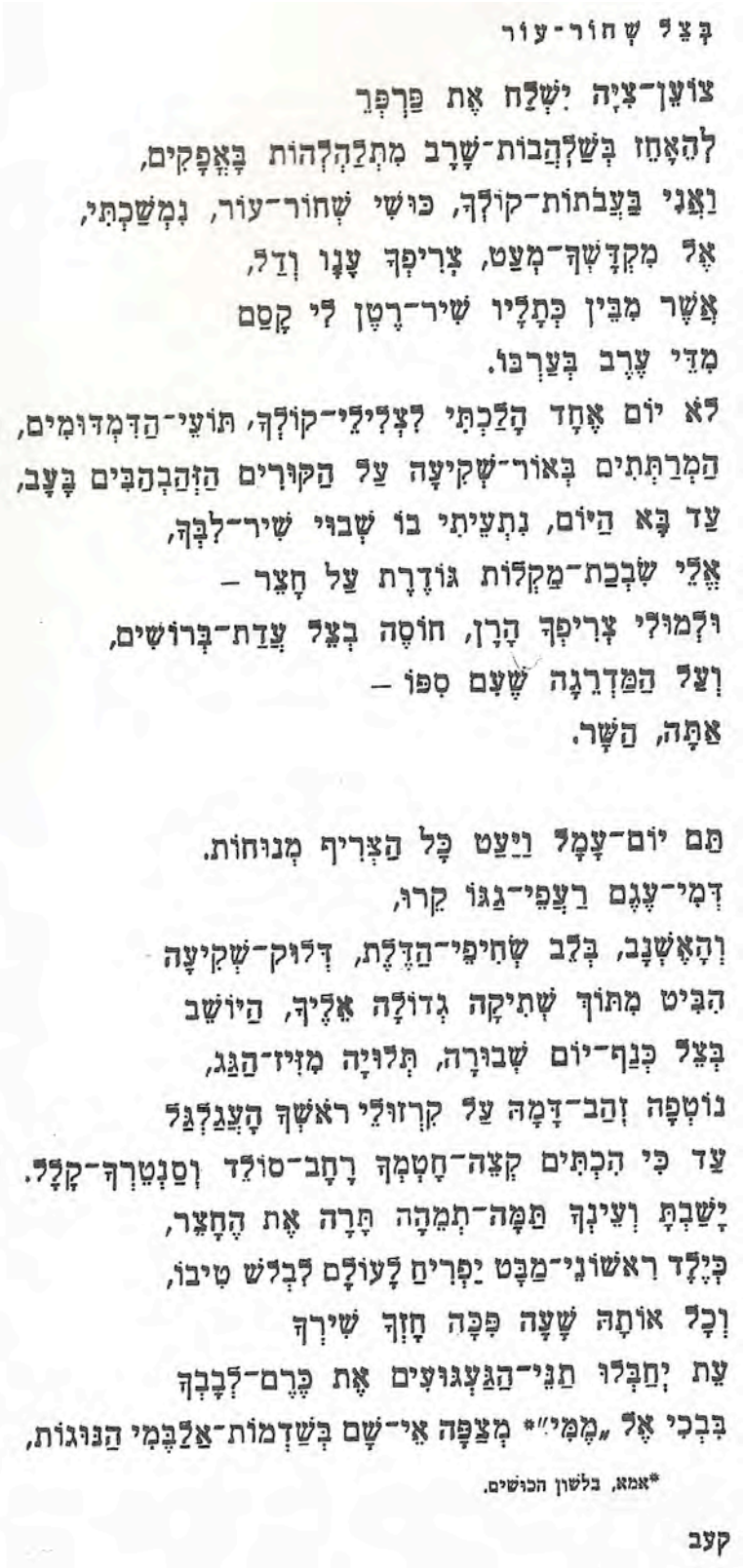
הַבִּיטָה, אֵל, אֶל חֵיקִי, אֶל יְרֵכַי
הָרְחָבִים, הַמְּלֵאִים וְהַשְּׁחוֹרִים,

בָּהֶם אֲנִי חוֹבֶקֶת, מְבַקֶּשֶׁת
הַתִּינוֹקוֹת שֶׁלָּהֶם.
וּשְׁנֵי שָׁדַי אֵלֶּה, אֲשֶׁכּוֹלוֹת שְׁחוֹרִים,
בָּהֶם הֵינַקְתִּי אֶת עוֹלְלֵיהֶם,
כִּי הָאִמּוֹת יָבְשׁוּ צְמוּתֵיהֶן.

וְחֶלְבִי זֶה, חֶלְבִי הַלָּבָן, הַלָּבָן,
כְּכָה לְבָן כְּמוֹ שְׁאָדָם דָּמִי,
דְּשֵׁן בְּשָׂרָם, רְוֵה חִיּוּתָם.
וְאֵין אֲנִי כְשֵׁרָה לָשֶׁבֶת אִתָּם?

עַד אָנָה, אֵלִי, עַד מָתַי?!

4. Reuven Avinoam – *"B'tzel shachor-or"*



בְּצֵל שָׁחוֹר-עוֹר

צוֹעֵן-צִיָּה יִשְׁלַח אֶת פַּרְפָּר
לְהָאָחֵז בְּשַׂלְהֲבוֹת-שָׂרָב מִתְלַהֲהוֹת בָּאֲפָקִים,
וַאֲנִי בַּעֲבָתוֹת-קוֹלְךָ, כּוּשִׁי שְׁחוֹר-עוֹר, נִמְשַׁכְתִּי,
אֶל מִקְדָּשְׁךָ-מְעַט, צְרִיפְךָ עָנָו וְדַל,
אֲשֶׁר מִבֵּין כְּתָלָיו שִׁיר-רֶטֶן לִי קָסַם
מִדֵּי עֶרֶב בְּעַרְבּוֹ.
לֹא יוֹם אֶחָד הָלַכְתִּי לְצִלְצוּלֵי-קוֹלְךָ, תּוֹעֵי-הַדְּמְדּוּמִים,
הַמְרַתְּתִים בְּאוֹר-שְׁקִיעָה עַל הַקּוֹרִים הַזְּהֻבְהָבִים בָּעָב,
עַד בָּא הַיּוֹם, נִתְעֵיתִי בּוֹ שְׁבוּי שִׁיר-לִבְּךָ,
אֵלַי שִׁבְכַת-מַקְלוֹת גּוֹדֶרֶת עַל חָצֵר –
וְלִמּוּלִי צְרִיפְךָ הֶרֶן, חוֹסֶה בְּצֵל עֲדַת-בְּרוֹשִׁים,
וְעַל הַמַּדְרֵגָה שֶׁעִם סִפּוֹ –
אַתָּה, הַשָּׁר.

תֵּם יוֹם-עָמָל וַיַּעַט כָּל הַצְּרִיף מְנוּחוֹת.
דְּמִי-עֻגָם רַעֲפֵי-גַּגּוֹ קֵרוּ,
וְהָאִשְׁנָב, בְּלֵב שְׁחִיפֵי-הַדֶּלֶת, דְּלוּק-שְׁקִיעָה
הֵבִיט מִתּוֹךְ שְׁתִיקָה גְּדוֹלָה אֵלֶיךָ, הַיּוֹשֵׁב
בְּצֵל כְּנַף-יוֹם שְׁבוּרָה, תְּלוּיָה מִזִּיז-הַגַּג,
נוֹטָפָה זְהַב-דָּמָהּ עַל קִרְזוּלֵי רֹאשְׁךָ הָעַגְלְגַּל
עַד כִּי הִכְתִּים קֵצֵה-חָטְמְךָ רָחָב-סוֹלֵד וְסַנְטֵרְךָ-קָלָל.
יָשַׁבְתָּ וְעֵינְךָ תַּמָּה-תְּמֵהָה תָּרָה אֶת הֶחָצֵר,
כְּיֶלֶד רִאשׁוֹנִי-מַבָּט יָפְרִיחַ לָעוֹלָם לְבֵלֵשׁ טִיבוֹ,
וְכָל אוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה פִּכָּה חָזְךָ שִׁירְךָ
עַת יְחַבְּלוּ תַּנֵּי-הַגַּעְגּוּעִים אֶת כֶּרֶם-לִבָּבְךָ
בִּבְכִי אֶל "מַמִּי"* מְצַפָּה אֵי-שָׁם בְּשַׂדְמוֹת-אַלַּבְּמִי הַנּוּגוֹת,

*אמא, בלשון הכושים.

קעב

בְּרֶטֶט־דַּוִי עַל הָאָחוֹת הָאֲנוּסָה
וְעֶנּוּת־דְּמָמָתָהּ־וְעַלְבּוֹנָהּ הַמְצַעֲקָה שְׁחוֹרוֹת,
וְגַם בְּרַעַד־כֹּסֶף כִּי חַזְכִּיר שֵׁם „לוּרֶד" – הָאֱלֹהִים,
בְּשׁוּרֶךָ עַל גְּלִימָתְךָ, כְּנָפֶיךָ, נִבְלְךָ וְנִעָלֶיךָ,
בָּהֶם תֵּצֵא שׁוֹטֵט וָעוֹף עַל פְּנֵי שְׁמֵי־יָהּ,
בָּהֶם תֵּצֵא נַגֵּן וְצָעֹד עַל פְּנֵי שְׁמֵי־יָהּ,
וְעַל כְּרוּבִים שֶׁיְּבִיאוּךָ עַד לְפָנֵי כֵּס־דִּין דָּחִיל,
וְעַל מְחוֹז שְׁאִיפָתְךָ בְּעֵבֶר „גִּ׳וֹרְדָן",
וְעַל „מוֹזֶס" הַגּוֹאֵל הַמִּתְיַצֵּב לִפְנֵי פַּרְעֹה,
וְעַל עוֹד וְעוֹד וְעוֹד – – –

אֶזְכֹּר לָךְ, כּוּשִׁי שְׁחוֹר־עוֹר וּצְחוֹר־לֵבָב,
עַל עוֹד וְעוֹד בְּזֹה שְׁעַת־הַחֲסָדִים,
פָּקַדְתִּי בָהּ אֶת צְרִיפְךָ, אֲשֶׁר הָיָה אָז בְּעֵינַי
כְּמוֹ תֵּבַת־זִמְרָה פְּלָאִית,
וְהִיא תְּלוּיָה אָז בְּקוּרֵי־שְׁקִיעָה וְקֶסֶם־שִׁיר עוֹלָפָה,
וַאֲנִי נֶחְבָּא אָז אֶל בֵּין הַקָּנִים, מֵאַחֲרֵי הַבְּרוֹשׁ הָרָם,
עֵינַי אֶל רֶטֶט נְחִירֶיךָ הָרְחָבִים
וּלְשִׂפְתוֹתֶיךָ הָעָבוֹת לְבִי;
שָׁעָה בָּהּ הִטְעַמְתַּנִי יֵין־עֲצַבְתְּךָ, הוֹ עֶבֶד בֶּן־חוֹרִין,
אֲשֶׁר כִּתַּפְתָּ יְרֻשַּׁת עֲבָדוּת־דּוֹרוֹת
אַךְ גַּם הִשְׂכַּלְתָּ דְּרוֹר לִקְרֹא לְנַפְשְׁךָ הַלָּבָנָה,
אֲשֶׁר לָבְנָה בְּזִקְעֲפוֹת דְּרוֹם־אַפְרִיקָה;
שָׁעָה בָּהּ הֶעֱלַצְתַּנִי בְּשִׁירְךָ טָהוֹר וָכֵן,
בְּהִשְׁתַּלְהֵב בְּךָ הַלֵּב הַמַּאֲמִין;
שָׁעָה בָּהּ אִלַּפְתַּנִי לְשׁוֹרֵר שִׁירַת־נַפְשִׁי
בְּתֹם וּבֶאֱמֶת...

תש"א.

5. Ephraim Lisitzky – “*Haskitu kol ha’pa’amon*”

דברי זמר מפי העם

הַסְכִּיתוּ קוֹל הַפַּעֲמוֹן

הַסְכִּיתוּ קוֹל הַפַּעֲמוֹן
הַמְצַלְצֵל בְּאֵיָל,
הַסְכִּיתוּ קוֹל הַפַּעֲמוֹן
הַמְצַלְצֵל גְּבֹהָה עָל!
בֶּן מֶשֶׁק אֱלֹהִים הוּא זֶה
הַמְצַלְצְלוֹ בֶּעֱזוּז.
בַּפַּעֲמוֹן יְצַלְצְלוֹ
יַשְׁמִיעַ לָנוּ כְּרוּז:

״אֻתָּיוּ, כּוֹשִׁים פּוֹעֲלִים,
תַּם קְצִיר, אָסִיף בָּא,
הוֹבִילוּ, כּוֹשִׁים פּוֹעֲלִים,
פְּרִי פָעֳלְכֶם לְיָהּ!״

מֹאזְנַיִם לְבֶן מֶשֶׁק אֵל,
גַּבְרִיאֵל קֹרָא שֵׁם,
מֹאזְנַיִם לְבֶן מֶשֶׁק אֵל –
וּמֹאזְנֵי צֶדֶק הֵם!
בָּם יִשָּׁקֵל, מִשְׁקָל נֶאֱמָן,
עֲמַל אִישׁ אִישׁ כְּמוֹ,
לְפִיהֶם עָרוֹךְ יַעֲרֹךְ
יְבוּלוֹ עָשָׂה לוֹ,
וְזָרָה, מִדֵּי יִשָּׁקְלוֹ,
מִמֶּנּוּ כָּל בּוֹ מָק,

יְזֻרְנוּ מִדֵּי יִשְׁקָלוֹ,
וְנָתַן לוֹ פְּתָק.

אֶת פְּתָקוֹ הַגֵּשׁ יַגִּישׁ אָז
לַבַּעַל אֲדֹנָי,
אֶת פְּתָקוֹ הַגֵּשׁ יַגִּישׁ לוֹ
וְשִׁלְּמוֹ שְׂכָרוֹ דַּי –
לֹא יְגֻרַע מִשְׂכַּר פּוֹעֲלוֹ
אֱלוֹהַּ עַד מְאוֹם,
פָּתוֹחַ יִפְתַּח מַחְמַד
אוֹצָרוֹ בְּזִבּוּל־רוֹם,
וּבְטוֹב וְיָקָר בּוֹ יְגֻמְלוֹ
לְפִי עֲמָלוֹ גְּמוּל,
בְּטוֹב וְיָקָר בּוֹ יְגֻמְלוֹ
כְּמִכְסַת הַיְבוּל.

וּמִשְׁתֵּה אָסִיף יַעֲשֶׂה
בְּרֹב מַטְעַמֵּי צָלִי,
וּמִשְׁתֵּה אָסִיף יַעֲשֶׂה
עִם מַעֲדַנֵּי שְׁתִי,
עִם מָחוֹל, מָחוֹל צָהֳלָה,
בְּאוּלָם הוֹד, צְבִי דְבִיר,
לְקוֹל נְגִינַת מַקְהֲלוֹת
שְׁנָאנִים בִּכְלֵי־שִׁיר.
לְפוֹעֲלָיו לוֹ נֶעֱבְדוּ
בְּאֹמֶן עֲמַל כַּף,
לְפוֹעֲלָיו לוֹ נֶעֱבְדוּ
זֶה מִשְׁתֵּה חַג יְצוּ.

הַסְכִּיתוּ קוֹל הַפַּעֲמוֹן
הַמְצַלְצֵל בֶּאֱיָל,
הַסְכִּיתוּ קוֹל הַפַּעֲמוֹן
גַּבְרִיאֵל צִלְצֵל עָל.
הַיְבוּל, לֶאֱלוֹהַּ נָאֲוָה,
עָשִׂינוּ לוֹ בְּתֹם,
הַיְבוּל אֱלוֹהַּ רָצָה בּוֹ
נַאֲגְרָה נָא כַּיּוֹם,
נַאֲגְרוֹ נָא מִתּוֹךְ שְׂדוֹת יָהּ
נָנְיָרָה נִירוֹ בָּם,
נַאֲגְרוֹ וְנוֹבִילוֹ לוֹ
כִּי תַם הַקָּצִיר, תָּם!

הנדרסונוויל, אב תש״א

קוֹל מִמִּיסִיסִיפִּי

קוֹל מִמִּיסִיסִיפִּי אֶשְׁמַע
קָרוֹא יִקְרָא לִי בְּסָאוֹן,
קוֹל מִמִּיסִיסִיפִּי אֶשְׁמַע
יִקְרָא לִי: ׳אַיֶּכָּה גִּ׳וֹן?
קוֹלוֹת פּוֹרְקֵי סְפִינוֹתַי
אֶשְׁמַע, שָׁרִים, פֹּה וָשָׁם,
קוֹלוֹת פּוֹרְקֵי סְפִינוֹתַי –
קוֹלְהּ, גִּ׳וֹן, לֹא נִשְׁמַע בָּם!
קוֹלוֹת עוֹמְסֵי סְפִינוֹתַי
אֶשְׁמַע, שָׁרִים, שָׁם וּפֹה,
קוֹלוֹת עוֹמְסֵי סְפִינוֹתַי –

6. Ephraim Lisitzky – "*Amah Kushit*"

אָמָה כּוּשִׁית

אָמָה כּוּשִׁית, לְאָבִיךְ
נֶעֱבָדָה לָעַד,
אָמָה כּוּשִׁית, בֶּן גִּבֹּרְתִּי,
חֶלְצָה לְךְ שַׁד.
תִּגְדַּל, תִּהְיֶה כְּאָבִיךְ:
תַּעֲבִיד כִּבְעִיר
צֶאֱצָאַי לְךְ יַנְחִיל,
תַּשְׁקֵן וְעָתָם נִיר —
מִשַּׁד אָמָה מִתְעָבָה
מִן קְלָלָתָהּ עִם חֲלָבָהּ!

אָמָה כּוּשִׁית, נֶחֱרָפָה,
נִקְלָה, בַּת בְּלִי שֵׁם,
חֶלְצָה שַׁד לְךְ, חֲלָבוֹ

תִּינַק כַּחֲלֵב אֵם.
תִּגְדַּל, תִּהְיֶה כְּאָבִיךְ:
תּוֹרִיד שׁוֹט עַל גֵּו
צֶאֱצָאַי לְךָ יַנְחִיל,
תַּקְשֶׁה לָמוֹ לֵב –
מַשַּׁד אָמָה מְתֹעָבָה
מִן קִלְלָתָהּ עִם חֲלָבָהּ!

אָמָה כוֹשֶׁית, בְּעוֹטַת אָדָם
וּשְׁאוֹטַת יָהּ,
חָלְצָה שַׁד לְךָ, תֵּינִיקְךָ
כַּאֲשֶׁר תֵּינִיק בְּנָהּ.
תִּגְדַּל, תִּהְיֶה כְּאָבִיךְ:
תַּשְׁגִּיל לְךָ בַּת
מִצֶּאֱצָאַי לְךָ יַנְחִיל,
תַּהֲרֹהּ לָלַת –
מַשַּׁד אָמָה מְתֹעָבָה
מִן קִלְלָתָהּ עִם חֲלָבָהּ!

אָמָה כוֹשֶׁית, רַבַּת שָׁבְעָה
נַפְשָׁהּ מְרִי וּבוּז,
חָלְצָה שַׁד לְךָ, תֵּינִיקְךָ
עָצְמָה וָעֶזוּז.
תִּגְדַּל, תִּהְיֶה כְּאָבִיךְ:
תַּפְרִיד, לִבְלִי חֹן,
בֵּין צֶאֱצָאַי לְךָ יַנְחִיל,
תִּמְכְּרֵם בְּעַד הוֹן –
מַשַּׁד אָמָה מְתֹעָבָה
מִן קִלְלָתָהּ עִם חֲלָבָהּ!

אָמָה כוֹשֶׁית, רַבַּת שָׁבְעָה
נַפְשָׁהּ בּוּז וּמְרִי,
חָלְצָה שַׁד לְךָ – מִי יִתֵּן
מוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ תָּהִי!
לוּ כִי תִגְדַּל גּוֹאֵל תָּקוֹם
לִבְנֵי עַם קְדָר עוֹר,
חֶרֶב לַאדָנֶי תָּרִיקָה,
תִּקְרָא לָמוֹ דְרוֹר!
מַשַּׁד אָמָה מְתֹעָבָה
מִן בִּרְכָתָהּ עִם חֲלָבָהּ!

הנדרסונוויל, אלול תש״ה

הָעֶבֶד תָּם

לַעֲבִי הַיַּעַר חָמַק לוֹ הָעֶבֶד תָּם בַּלָּט,
לַעֲבִי הַיַּעַר חָמַק לוֹ וְקַתְרוֹס לוֹ בַיָּד.
זֶה קַתְרוֹס מַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו הוּא,
בֶּן לֵילוֹת רַבִּים עָשָׂה,
מְלִיצוֹ יִהְיֶה, לְאֵל
בּוֹ יִקְרָא בַּצָּרָתָה,
בּוֹ יְשַׁאֵל מֵנוּ רַחֲמִים –
אֵת לֹא יַבִּיעַ פִּיהוּ
צְלִילָיו, יָדוֹ תְעָרֶה
מִנִּימָיו, לוֹ יַבִּיעוּ!
לַעֲבִי הַיַּעַר חָמַק לוֹ הָעֶבֶד תָּם בַּלָּט,
לַעֲבִי הַיַּעַר חָמַק לוֹ וְקַתְרוֹס לוֹ בַיָּד.

7. Gadi Yavrakan – “*Shemot rabbim*”

בגולה קראו לי יהודון
בארצי קוראים לי כושון
בגולה קראו לי זר.
בארץ קוראים לי מוזר
לאן אני אלך?
אם לא לארצי ציון.
למי אני אסביר שיש לי שם.
ושמי הוא לא יהודון ולא כושון
שיקראו לי בשמי הפרטי
שנתנו לי אמי ואבי.

לאן אני אלך?
למי אני אסביר?
מי יבין את הסברי
בהיותי שחור יהודי?
ושוב מבקש שיקראו לי
בשמי הפרטי