

Parashat B'ha'alotcha
Is Judaism Racist?



Dear Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,

There is something that really bothers me alot in the Torah. Why does the Torah relegate Cham's descendants – the African black people- to be slaves? This seems to touch upon racism and intolerance. Personally, my son is Tibetan (Mongol). In my large family, there is a lot of diversity and a real deep openness to different ethnic groups and cultures. Diversity, unity and solidarity are important qualities towards which we should all aspire. So why does the Torah, at times, seem so chauvinistic, favouring only Jews – the Chosen People? What's wrong with coloured people? Wasn't Tzipporah, Moshe's wife, black? Also Yishmael, the father of the Arab nations, is called a "wild person" in the Torah. I believe that redemption will come when we all learn true tolerance, love and forgiveness.

Anna Newman (name changed)

Dear Anna,

Hashem gives every person, no matter from which ethnic culture or tribe a chance to rectify himself and get close to Him- each person according to his own particular way. Every human being, regardless of race or color, is Hashem's dear and beloved child. However, this world is a linear world of hierarchy with different levels. Just as genetic predisposition is an important factor in the intelligence of people, so, too, there are different soul-levels according to their spiritual genetics. Although we are all created by G-d, some souls are purer channels for His Infinite Light, whereas other souls are surrounded by denser קליפות/*kelipot* – husks. Avraham and Sarah purified their souls through their immense kindness to all mankind and via the incredible tests that they went through with flying colors. Their soul rectification was so profound that it penetrated the very fibers of their being. Consequently, they were able to pass down their spiritual genetics to their son, Yitzchak, who in turn passed them down to his son, Ya'acov. All twelve sons of Ya'acov inherited this elevated soul-level from Avraham and Sarah. They became the twelve tribes of Israel from whom the Jewish people stem. Just as Avraham and Sarah were chosen to be teachers and beneficiaries of humankind, so, too, the role of Israel is to be "a light to the nations" (*Yesha'yahu* 49:6), by facilitating the soul rectification of all peoples.

Inheriting Evil

We all have free will, but when someone repeatedly chooses to do evil, then he causes the husk surrounding his soul to become denser and denser, making the rectification of his soul more difficult. This is what happened to the evil Pharaoh, who hardened his own heart during the first five plagues, thereby causing Hashem to harden his heart during the final five plagues (see Rashi, *Shemot* 7:3). Certain evil actions have negative soul consequences not only for the perpetrator but also for his descendants. This was the case with the Amonite and Moabite men who became the antithesis of the Jewish people by their refusal to offer bread and water to the Israelites – the descendants of Avraham whom they owed their very existence, since he saved their forefather, Lot from annihilation. Thus, Amonite and Moabite men forfeited their male descendants' opportunity to convert and become part of the Jewish people (*Devarim* 23:4).

The Curse of Canaan

We can answer your question about the curse of Cham's descendants in a similar vein. Cham committed immorality with his father, Noach, either by raping or castrating him (*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* 70a cited in Rashi on *Bereishit* 9:22). The basis for the assertion that Noach was castrated is the fact that Noach cursed Cham's fourth son, Canaan, (see *Bereishit* 9:25 and 10:6), because Cham prevented Noach from fathering a fourth son. The curse had absolutely nothing to do with skin color, but it is interesting to notice the repetition of the word עֶבֶד/*eved* – slave/servant in Canaan's curse:

“He said, Cursed be Canaan; an עֶבֶד/*eved* – slave/servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. He said, Blessed be Hashem, the G-d of Shem; but Canaan shall be his servant. G-d shall enlarge Yafet, he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; but Canaan shall be his servant” (*Bereishit* 9:25-27).

This curse was fulfilled in the history of the African people who indeed were slaves for centuries.

Righteous Black Jews

The ability to convert excludes Judaism from being racist. There are many great colored converts who are fully accepted into the Jewish fold, regardless of their skin color. One of my best friends, who lives in Bat Ayin, has skin as black as pitch, while being an incredibly beautiful woman inside and out. Every person has an opportunity for rectification; even someone whose soul is enclosed by a dense husk due to his sins whether in this incarnation or in a prior incarnation or due to the sins of his parents. His rectification may be challenging, but nevertheless, he still has the opportunity to choose good and crack his husk, allowing the light of his soul to shine through. Regarding Yishmael, he has the great merit of being Avraham's son. Nevertheless, “He shall be a wild person means that his descendants will engage in wars with all the nations. At first he will win over all the nations, but he will be conquered in the end (Ramban, *Bereishit* 16:12). In addition, the land of Israel was given to Yitzchak and his descendants- not to Yishmael and his children. When the descendants of Yishmael recognize this, then they too receive their rectification.

Who was the Cushite Woman?

במדבר פרק יב: אַ וְתַדְבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל אֲדוֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכֻּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לְקַח כִּי אִשָּׁה כְּשִׁית לְקַח:
 “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moshe because of the Cushite woman...” (*Bamidbar* 12:1).

There are different opinions regarding the identity of the Cushite woman. Besides Rashi's well-known commentary that it refers to Tziporah, both the midrash and Arizal explain that Moshe was actually married to an Ethiopian woman, before he met Tziporah. According to the Midrash, Moshe was eighteen years old when he ran away from Pharaoh's palace and ended up in the land of Cush. After spending ten years in their army, he successfully helped them conquer a very fortified city. They made him king over them and gave him the Cushite noble woman (the wife of the late, previous king) for a wife. But Moshe feared the G-d of his forefathers and did not have intimacy with her, because he remembered how Avraham made his servant Eliezer swear, saying: “Do not take a wife for my son from the daughters of Canaan” (*Bereishit* 24:37). After Moshe had ruled over Ethiopia for forty years, his ‘wife’ complained to the ministers: “Behold, for forty years this one has ruled over Cush, but he has never touched me, and he has never worshiped our idols!” They then agreed to make her son the king, and sent Moshe away with lots of gifts and with great honor. At this time, Moshe was 67 years

old. It was still dangerous for him to return to Egypt, so he traveled to Midian, where he met Yitro. When Moshe told Yitro about what happened to him in Ethiopia, Yitro was concerned that the Ethiopians would become hostile to him if he offered Moshe asylum. He, therefore, threw Moshe into prison for ten years. After being let out of jail, Moshe married Yitro's daughter Tziporah, who had secretly sustained him while in prison. She bore him two sons, Gershom and Eliezer (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 2:168*).

Was Tziporah, Moshe's Wife Black?

The only name of Moshe's wife written in the Torah is Tziporah (*Shemot 2:16-22, 4:25, 18:2*). Thus, Rashi associates the Cushite woman with Tziporah. Scripture calls her black to imply that all agreed as to her beauty, just as all agree to the blackness of an Ethiopian. Moreover, the numerical value of *כְּשִׁית/Cushite* (736) is the same as that of *יפת מראה/yafat mareh* – “a woman of beautiful appearance.” Just as a *כְּשִׁי/Cushi* – a black skinned Ethiopian sticks out among white people, likewise Tziporah was noticeably different from others through her good deeds. Therefore, she was called *כְּשִׁית/Cushit* – black skinned. Israel, too, are called Cushim, as it states, “You are like the children of the Cushites to Me, O children of Israel. Says Hashem” (*Amos 9:7*). Thus being associated with a *כּוּשִׁי/Cushi* – black-skinned person is used as a compliment in the Torah. May we not then conclude that Judaism is far from being racist?