

Reading Rabbinic Literature: It's Not All Black and White (A Response to Jonathan Schorsch)

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The question of anti-Black racism in Jewish history has lately received considerable interest. The Nation of Islam's pseudo-scholarly publication *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews* (1991), purporting to show Jewish responsibility for the Atlantic slave trade, spurred a number of reactions from the academic community. But decades before this notorious book appeared, several writers had concluded that the Talmud and Midrash portrayed Blacks in an unflattering light, and that this portrayal eventually led to the horrors of racism in western civilization.¹

Several articles were written countering these claims but the first lengthy study of the Rabbinic material was Abraham Melamed's *Ha-yahafokh kushi 'oro?: ha-adam ha-shaḥor ke-"aḥer" be-toledot ha-tarbut ha-yehudit* (Haifa University, 2002), which was followed one year later in English translation as *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture: A History of the Other* (London, 2003). The book devoted its first half to the Rabbinic corpus and concluded that this material indeed exhibits strong anti-Black sentiment, which continued on into later times. Shortly after this work appeared, Jonathan Schorsch published *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge, 2004). As the title indicates, Schorsch's primary interest is not the Rabbis, for whose "overwhelmingly negative understandings of blackness and Blackness" he cites Melamed (353n114).

These conclusions about the Rabbinic world are based on an unsophisticated reading of its literature. Because of the nature of the extant Rabbinic texts, initially transmitted orally over centuries; because of the nature of 'open' recensions of some Rabbinic works; because of the practices of learned scribes reworking what they had received; because of the problems of contamination from parallel accounts; because of the history of censorship of these materials, approaching any Rabbinic source for historical inquiry requires, first and foremost, a determination of the correct reading of that source at any given stage in its history. The study of Rabbinic literature since the days of Zunz (d. 1886) have taught us that these texts cannot simply be taken as they appear before us on the printed page, which is unfortunately what both Melamed and Schorsch have done.

In an extensive review of Melamed's book, I have shown that his analysis of Rabbinic literature is flawed for these and other reasons.² I give numerous examples of text critical and other problems but here I will mention only one by way of example. Melamed finds a "link between drunkenness and skin color" because of his reading in *bQid* 49b, "Ten measures of drunkenness were given to the world: nine were taken by the Kushites and one by the rest of the world." However, every extant manuscript of this text (MSS Munich 95, Oxford Opp. 248 [367], Vatican 111), as well as the early printed editions (Spanish 1489?, Venice 1520, Sabionetta 1553) all read 'blackness' (*šhrwt*) instead of 'drunkenness' (*škrwt*).³ Clearly, what we have here is a scribal

¹ For a review of these writings, see David Goldenberg, "The Curse of Ham: A Case of Rabbinic Racism?" in *Struggles in the Promised Land*, ed. Jack Salzman and Cornel West (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 21-51. The capitalization of "Black" in this essay is meant to indicate those whose home or origin is in black Africa.

² *JQR* 93 (2003) 557-579.

³ The earliest non-*šhrwt* reading I could find is that of the Basel edition (1578), in which the second letter

change, error or otherwise, of the two similarly written words.⁴ This is not to say that scribal alterations cannot be influenced by surrounding notions, which may yield historical data. It is to say, however, that if such a change is first found after 1553, we can be fairly certain that it does not represent the original reading.

Schorsch exhibits similar problems when dealing with the Rabbinic material. So, for example, he refers to *bMak* 24a, which demonstrates to his mind denigration of Blacks (*Jews and Blacks*, 36 and 353n114). However, MS Munich 95, *Yalqut Shimʿoni*, and *Haggadat ha-Talmud* read *goyim*, and *ʿEin Yaʿaqov* reads *ʿakum* and *kuthim* rather than the modern printed Talmud’s *kushim*. This is one of several instances in Rabbinic texts where, due to censorship, an original *goy* was changed to *kuthi* (originally ‘Samaritan’, which then came to mean ‘non-Jew’ in general). From *kuthi* to *kushi* is either a scribal error or a deliberate substitution, after *kuthi* was commonly understood to mean ‘Christian’. In either case, *kushi* is not in the original text.⁵

Another type of problem exhibited by these authors is a lack of familiarity with the development of the various works of Rabbinic literature, both the internal development of the individual work and the relationship of one work to another. We can see a paradigmatic example of this when Schorsch quotes what he thinks is a tannaitic midrash, *Sifre* to Numbers. The passage deals with Moses’ Kushite wife (Numbers 12:1), and is important for Schorsch’s purposes because it shows that at this early date “the term Kushite ... seem[s] to have already acquired fairly well-known negative meanings” (*Jews and Blacks*, pp. 104-106, 113, 164). However, there is no such passage in *Sifre*. What Schorsch quotes is found rather in Rashi’s commentary to the Bible (ad loc.), from which Schorsch took it. Schorsch tells us in a footnote that “a nearly identical version of this midrash appears in *Midrash Tanḥuma* 13:96.” This citation, however, only makes matters worse, for not only is *Tanḥuma* the *only* source for this midrash, but there is no section 96 in “*Tanḥuma* 13” (Schorsch means *Tanḥuma*, Leviticus 13). From where did Schorsch derive the number 96 (which he repeats on 353n114)? From the top of the page of the printed *Tanḥuma* edition, where the running head lists the weekly *parasha*, which for this section is *parashat Saw*. Schorsch read *ṣaw* as 96, the numeric equivalent, not realizing that it is the name of the *parasha*! Worse still, the relevant line of the midrash, which contains the “fairly well-known negative meanings” of Kushite, is not even original to *Tanḥuma*. As has been shown, this section of *Tanḥuma* is not original to the work and was inserted from Rashi’s Bible commentary.⁶ So Schorsch’s evidence for an early-century Palestinian view turns out to be from eleventh-century Europe.⁷

of the word appears to be inked over and the bottom open space of the *het* (if that is what it was) filled in, so that the letter now looks like a box or a final *mem*. Although it is a bit difficult to determine from the digitized text that I used (on the JNUL website), it does seem that the original reading in the printing was *ṣhrwt*. Perhaps this is the origin of the reading *ṣkrwt*, which I find in Amsterdam 1644 and Berlin/Frankfurt am Oder 1734, in addition to the Romm/Vilna edition.

⁴ For a fuller discussion, see also David Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 203.

⁵ Similarly a midrash (*Genesis Rabba* 60.3) quoted in a 16th-century homily (Schorsch, 130-131) that refers to a “slave, gentile, or Kushite” does not have “Kushite” in the parallel in *Leviticus Rabba* 37.4, nor is the word found in the better manuscripts of *Genesis Rabba* itself (Vatican 30, Vatican 60, and London). While the homily may attest to the Kushite reading, *Genesis Rabba* itself does not. I discuss this passage in *The Curse of Ham*, p. 204-206 and the *bMak* 24a text on p. 203.

⁶ See the discussion *ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

⁷ This is not the only place where Schorsch confused a midrashic work with a later author. Quoting from the work of Moses Alfalas (16th cent.), Schorsch (130) says that Alfalas wondered, ‘And if a Kushite or *goy* [non-Jew] or slave had come out and slain [Goliath] ...’. It is not, however, Alfalas who wondered but

Lack of familiarity with Rabbinic literature is displayed again in less important, but nevertheless, disconcerting, ways. So, e.g., Schorsch refers to *Midrash ha-Gadol* as another name for *Midrash Rabba* (*Jews and Blacks*, p. 29; see also index, p. 540 s.v. *Midrash ha-Gadol*), presumably unaware of the fact that *Midrash ha-Gadol* is the name of a different work, and is not a Hebrew translation of the title *Midrash Rabba*, as he apparently assumes. Schorsch is also unfamiliar with halakhic/talmudic terminology as can be seen in his attempt to correct the reading *yadayim mokhihot* to *‘eidim mokhihot* (!) in a 17th-century responsum (383n87). Nor is Schorsch familiar with recent scholarship in the field. He cites the *Encyclopedia Judaica* for information on the date and provenance of *Tanḥuma* (350n68), unaware that two dissertations have been written on *Tanḥuma* since the publication of *EJ*, one by Alan Kensky and one by Marc Bregman, the latter of which was published in 2003. The information in *EJ* has been drastically revised based on these dissertations, especially that of Bregman.

My purpose in giving these examples is not to question the overall value of Schorsch’s book. As noted, the work is not primarily devoted to the Rabbinic period but to the early modern world, for which I am not qualified to render judgment.⁸ My purpose in giving the examples above is to

Genesis Rabba, which Alfalas is quoting. Incidentally, the reading “Kushite” is not found in two important manuscripts of *Genesis Rabba*, nor in any manuscript of its parallel in *Leviticus Rabba*, a point not mentioned by Schorsch. As I have shown the reading “Kushite” is a corruption of “Kuthite” (*The Curse of Ham* (Princeton, 2003), pp. 204-206.

⁸ This does not mean, however, that there are no significant errors when Schorsch deals with the medieval or early modern periods, as the previous note indicates. Here are some other examples I noticed in passing: Schorsch writes, “The notion, repeated by early modern Christian authors ..., that the Blackness [*sic*] of Ethiopians serves as a public rebuke for their progenitor’s crime probably came, whether they knew it or not, from R. David Kimḥi, a favorite of Christian Hebraists” (p. 151). Schorsch does not tell us, either here or anywhere in his book, where Kimḥi says this. As far as I could tell, there is no such statement by Kimḥi. In his commentary to Amos 9:7 Kimḥi says that the *kushim* mentioned in the verse are Black slaves, and he explains that “Are you not as the kushim to me O Israel” means that just as the Blacks are enslaved to their masters, so is Israel enslaved to God. Kimḥi does not say here or elsewhere that “the Blackness of Ethiopians serves as a public rebuke for their progenitor’s crime.” A second example occurs when Schorsch cites Rashbam and Samuel Ṣarṣa as saying that Moses abstained from sex with his Kushite wife (Num 12:1) because he found her color ugly (pp. 107, 392n26). Rashbam does not say this and while Ṣarṣa does, he is quoting Ibn Ezra. A third example: Schorsch claims that Ya‘aqov b. Samuel Ḥagiz (16th cent.) “presented a seemingly straightforward appreciation of the attractiveness of Kushite women” (p. 393n41). As far as I could tell, Ḥagiz makes no such presentation. A fourth example: Schorsch quotes what he refers to as Judah Löw of Prague’s “intense ... anti-Ḥamitic discourse” (160). The reference here is to Löw’s commentary *Derekh Ḥayyim* on *Ethics of the Fathers* (2.7), which according to Schorsch speaks of female Black slaves (*shefaḥot bnot ḥam*) “who are steeped in licentiousness.” The passage, however, makes no sense for several reasons, as can be seen from Schorsch’s own equivocations and insertion of question marks in his translation. Given his uncertainties it is surprising that he didn’t look beyond the printed text. In fact, the passage is corrupt and the correct reading from manuscript was included in the Jerusalem 1961 edition, which doesn’t mention Blacks at all and has *ḥomriyim* ‘corporeal’ rather than *bnot ḥam*. A fifth example: Schorsch says (141), “Löw referred in his *Gevurot ha-Shem* to ‘the ruined/rotten seed of Ḥam / זרע חם המקולקל.’” In his note to this line, Schorsch refers to Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, p. 137, who “cited this statement as appearing in ch. 29 of the work mentioned.” Schorsch then says that he checked “several editions” of *Gevurot ha-Shem* and couldn’t find the statement. Why then did he quote it? It is strange that a scholar would quote a line that, as far he could tell, doesn’t exist. Perhaps Katz had in mind another work by Löw, *Hiddushe Aggadot* (ed. Ch. Hoenig et al., London, 1960; repr. Jerusalem, 1972, 3:258, to *bSan* 108b), where Löw says that “[Ḥam’s] progeny was cursed” (*nitqalel zar‘o*), and confusion occurred between *nitqalel* and *nitqalqel* just as in a 12th-century comment to the line in *LevR* 12.1: “Noah caused the separation of Canaan from his sons in that *qilqelo le-‘eved*.” Clearly, we must read

point out that Rabbinic literature cannot be read positively and simplistically, without first investigating manuscript variants, internal textual development, relationships amongst parallel sources, etc. Because of the nature of this literature, as explained above, the printed texts that we have before us today in many cases reflect postrabbinic development. Consequently, scholars who do not, or can not, do the necessary prior spadework on these materials will conclude that what are later, postrabbinic readings represent the earlier Rabbinic world. Presented with this skewed view, historians may then conclude that the early modern and medieval worlds are mere extensions of the world of late antiquity.

An example of this blurring of the chronological boundaries can be found in Schorsch's recent review of my book, *The Curse of Ham* (Princeton, 2003).⁹ The book focuses on the biblical through the Rabbinic periods, yet Schorsch complains that I ignore texts by Maimonides, Yehudah ha-Levy, and Abarbanel (170). A strange complaint indeed, since I state explicitly that my investigation ends in the eighth century (p. 4), but understandable if the Rabbinic world is seen as the medieval/early modern world in late antique dress. The same blurring of boundaries is encountered again when I deal with textual corruptions that resulted in the later introduction of "Kushites" into the Rabbinic text. Schorsch says that "these 'insertions' should not be judged against some 'correct' original because they are authentic elements of postrabbinic and medieval discourse; surprisingly Goldenberg fails to discuss them as such within the main body of the text" (172). Since postrabbinic and medieval discourse are explicitly excluded from the book's purview, it is not unusual that I do not discuss such material. But given Schorsch's chronological confusion it is no surprise that he would expect me to.

A more important example can be found in Schorsch's main critique of the book. Here we shall see that his misreading of the Rabbinic material has led him to assume that postrabbinic, especially early modern European, attitudes toward black Africans were in play in the early centuries of Palestinian-Babylonian Rabbinic society. And this assumption, in turn, has blinded him to the essence of my argument.

In later, postrabbinic periods we do find a negative view of Blacks, which is reflected in the literature of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim writers. The gradually increasing identity of slave with Black was one significant factor in this development. Another important factor was Christian exegesis. Beginning primarily with the church father Origen (d. ca. 253), patristic writings regularly and consistently allegorized the scriptural Black ("Ethiopian") as sinner. Behind this exegesis was the common and age-old color symbolism of blackness as evil, which was transferred to the skin color of the black African. We find this color symbolism as applied to the Black in classical literature (as ill omen and death), in Philo (as evil), and in Rabbinic literature (as sin). Christian interpretation adopted the symbolism, greatly expanding its application for its own hermeneutic purposes. A second Christian development, equally unsettling, was the portrayal of the devil and demons as "Ethiopians," mostly, but not only, found in the desert fathers of the 3rd to 5th centuries. These negative images of the Black are found regularly in Christian literary and iconographic representation and over the centuries surely impacted perceptions of the black African.¹⁰ Black as sinner, devil as Black – "a whole mental structure,

here *qilelo* for *qilqelo*. See M. B. Lerner, *Perush Qadum le-Midrash Wayiqra' Rabba*, (Jerusalem, 1995), p. 98.

⁹ *AJS Review* 31 (2007) 168-172

¹⁰ See the discussion *ibid.*, pp. 48-49, and my essay, "Racism, Color Symbolism, and Color Prejudice," in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, ed. Eliav-Feldon, Miriam, Benjamin Isaac, Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge UK, 2009), pp. 88-108.

unconscious for the most part, was erected to the detriment of the blacks.”¹¹

Recognizing that neither of these factors operated in classical antiquity, two classicists sought to examine the question of anti-Black racism in Greco-Roman times. Neither Frank Snowden (*Blacks in Antiquity*, 1970) nor Lloyd Thompson (*Romans and Blacks*, 1989) found evidence of racist societies, and yet they both found expressions of individual prejudice against Blacks.¹² Thompson, in particular, sought to determine the nature of the various negative expressions of or toward the black African in the ancient world. He especially distinguished between racism and “ethnocentric reactions to a strange and unfamiliar appearance,” and “expressions of conformism to the dominant aesthetic values.”¹³ He also recognized negative expressions of color symbolism, but in a pre-Christian world such expressions did not have the impact or influence of the later patristic allegorizations.

In my book I set Snowden and Thompson as my guides, Snowden for his comprehensiveness and Thompson for his methodologically nuanced reading of the sources. Just as they had found for the classical world, I found no evidence of racism in the Jewish world of late antiquity, and yet there are individual expressions of a negative character. As Thompson, I sought to determine the nature of such expressions. Was a particular statement an ethnocentric reaction to somatic difference, did it involve negative color symbolism of blackness, was it gender specific, representing a widespread preference for lighter-skinned women, did it reflect class-specific color preference, or did it express a racist antipathy to the black African? That is, were these expressions “essentially reactions to an ideologically ascribed, and so almost infallibly predictable, social significance of a given set of somatic characteristics,” or were they otherwise explainable.¹⁴

In the world that Schorsch knows, such distinctions are moot. In a world in which the Black has long become identified with *the* slave, with sin, with the devil, and with ugliness, such distinctions are commonly conflated; to evoke blackness of skin is ipso facto to invoke sinfulness, servitude, and ugliness. In the early modern world ethnocentric reaction to a black African appearance carries with it a host of associated meanings. Because of his peculiar reading of the Rabbinic sources, Schorsch mistakenly assumes that that same world existed in late antique Jewish societies. Thus he misses my point entirely when he criticizes my conclusions and says “many Greco-Romans [*sic*] and thinkers from all three postbiblical monotheisms held antiblack views, whether metaphorical, somatic, ethnic, or some combination thereof” (170). I do not deny that negative images existed, but I attempted to deconstruct these images and differentiate one from the other. Schorsch’s conflation of them all in one grand “antiblack view” may be valid for later periods when these elements were indeed conflated and were part of an “ideologically

¹¹ Jean Devisse in *Image of the Black in Western Art*, ed. Ladislav Bugner, trans. William G. Ryan (Cambridge Mass., 1976), 2/1:80.

¹² Both scholars accepted the definition of racism as a socially defined creation, that is, a society is racist when there are specific, discriminatory practices directed toward a particular ethnic or racial group and these practices or structures of society are commonly based on, and justified by, a belief in the idea of a biogenetic hierarchical ranking of such groups. I should note, incidentally, that in my book I subscribe to precisely the same definition (9, 198-199) although Schorsch finds my definition “curt and inadequate” (171). Schorsch’s contrast of my treatment of the terms ‘racism’ and ‘ethnocentrism’ with Benjamin Isaac’s “methodologically oriented chapters covering more than 200 pages” in his recent book *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, 2004) is misleading – probably deliberately so – since Isaac defines these terms only on pp. 17-25, and even here, as well as in the remaining pages of the book, he does not discuss the black African. Regarding my methodological treatment, cf. Molly Myerowitz Levine in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2004.02.53, second paragraph.

¹³ Thompson, *Romans and Blacks*, pp. 8, 19.

¹⁴ The quote is Thompson’s (*Romans and Blacks*, p. 8), speaking of Black somatic characteristics.

ascribed ... set of somatic characteristics.” It remains to be proved that this is the case in the Rabbinic period.

An illustrative example of Schorsch’s skewed perspective occurs when he criticizes my discussion of a Rabbinic midrash that associates the dark skin of the Kushites in Amos 9:7 with sin (48). In a footnote I mention a suggestion by Samuel Krauss that “Kushites” in this text may refer to the Arabian, and not African, Kushites. Schorsch takes me to task for noting this alternative explanation (as if there is something wrong with doing so), especially since I “immediately acknowledg[e] that the point and significance of the metaphor remains the same” (171n). Here Schorsch has missed the essence of my argument, which is that darkness of skin irrespective of ethnicity is used as a negative metaphor. While in the world that Schorsch knows this distinction may have become irrelevant, that is not the case in the world represented by Rabbinic literature.

The most glaring example of such conflation of the Rabbinic and early modern periods occurs when Schorsch criticizes my analysis of Rabbinic texts in which I distinguish between a curse of servitude, such as the biblical curse on Canaan, and a curse of black skin, such as is found in various etiologies for the existence of darker-skinned people. Schorsch says that many of these texts “seem to prove the opposite. Blackness and servitude are here additive, complementary and conflated, not separated” (170-171). This is true only if one reads the Rabbinic texts from the perspective of later history. An etiology of servitude and an etiology of dark skin are not the same and to assume a “conflation” without any evidence for it in the Rabbinic material is unwarranted.

In addition to preconceived notions that prevent him from engaging with my analyses and in addition to his chronological confusion, Schorsch exhibits surprising misrepresentations of what I say. I do not say that Kushan is *frequently* paralleled to Midian (169) but that it is once (Habakkuk 3:7) paralleled to Midian. I do not say that the Rabbinic characterization of Saul and others as Kushites refers *only* to their outstanding moral features (169) but to their physical and moral features. It is not true that the only Jewish source I cite linking blackness and slavery (the Curse of Ham) is from the 19th century (170; Schorsch contradicts himself on 169). I cite (178) sources from the 14th and 15th centuries (and one from the 12th, although quoting what seems to be non-Jewish sources). It is not ethnocentrism that was “used most extensively by the church fathers” (169) but color symbolism. I decidedly do not say that a curse of blackness affected only Ham, “and thus was not an etiological explanation of a collective phenomenon” (170). I say just the opposite. I do not say that in Rabbinic literature the term ‘Kushite’ “has no ethnic meaning but rather signifies only somatic darkness” (169). I say, rather, that the term “has lost its exclusively ethnic definition and has come to have also a color definition” (126). The Christian portrayal of sinner and devil as an Ethiopian is not “based on classical climatic notions” (170). It is, rather, based “on the common metaphor of darkness or blackness as evil,” as I say explicitly (51).

Such examples of a careless and superficial reading of my book are found even when they form the basis of specific criticisms. [1] Schorsch objects to my identification of black Africa as the location of an Alexander story found in Rabbinic literature because the terms “Ethiopia” or “Ethiopians” are not found in the story. Quoting selectively from the book, he disagrees with my conclusion that the story “would perfectly fit a location in the land of the Ethiopians” (171n). Did Schorsch overlook the fact that the story takes place in “*afriqi*” and that this information, together with other evidence I present, convinces me that the story “in *afriqi* would perfectly fit a location in the land of the Ethiopians” (66). [2] Schorsch objects to my statement that the Kushite

maidservant, which appears a few times in Rabbinic parables, “may well not be an ethnic Kushite but merely a common trope of the dark-skinned Other” (169). This is a remarkable criticism, for I said this as a hypothesis, which I ultimately reject. Didn’t Schorsch read to the end of my discussion, where I conclude: “The Rabbinic *shifhah kushit* [Kushite maidservant] parables, or at least the first two [of the three] of them ... referred to black Africans” (137)? [3] When I say that Targum Jonathan’s translation of “Kush” as “India” in Isaiah 18:1 means East Africa, Schorsch reacts: “How Goldenberg knows this remains a mystery” (171n). Had Schorsch read the entire paragraph he would not have been mystified, for I present evidence for the common confusion or interchange between the names Kush/Ethiopia and India in the sources (Greco-Roman, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic), and I cite a multitude of references showing use of the term “India” for Kush/Ethiopia in East Africa (60 and 210).

Two examples of Schorsch’s careless reading affect crucial arguments of the book. [1] Schorsch misses the nuances of my presentation when he claims that I find the first “real link” between blackness and servitude in 7th-century Arabia (169). Actually I devote a chapter (168-177) showing how the link between blackness and slavery is recorded in different forms beginning in Syriac texts from 4th-6th centuries. I show how this link develops over time and is expressed in various ways becoming ever more explicit, through different traditions and exegeses, culminating in a dual curse of blackness and slavery, which is first found in 7th century Arabia. Schorsch represents this as the only “real” link but that misses and grossly simplifies a crucial aspect of my argument, which explicates the development of the link of blackness and servitude. Ideas gradually unfold over time and the historical development of the notion of a Curse of Ham is precisely what the book sets out to show. [2] I do not claim that there are no “sociopolitical” expressions of negative meanings of blackness (170). On the contrary, I say quite explicitly that the Kushite maidservant (*shifhah kushit*) parables in Rabbinic literature “assume a low status for the *kushit*” (137), that a midrash dealing with Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, is explainable by assuming that the Kushites “represent the uncivilized barbarian” (68), and that a fragment of a Rabbinic (*Yelamedenu*) text preserved by Nathan b. Yehiel of Rome in the 11th century, similarly represents the black Africans as uncivilized peoples (68).

Sometimes, in a concerted attempt to find problems with the book,¹⁵ Schorsch engages in silly claims that he himself rejects elsewhere. Objecting to a point I made, he says, “[E]xegetes saw their job as interpreting their [biblical] prooftexts, not denying them” (171n). What about the midrashic interpretation of Moses’ Kushite wife as the Midianite Zipporah, effectively denying her black African origins? In his book, Schorsch says that this midrash “utterly erased the straightforward sense in the biblical text that Moshe’s wife was a Black woman of Kush” (*Jews and Blacks*, p. 105). I thought exegetes do not deny their prooftexts.

Other criticisms are equally fatuous. Schorsch objects when I attempt to determine the correct view among competing scholarly opinions, as if this were problematic. So, for example, we have: “Goldenberg’s attempt to locate the ‘real’ Tarshish yields a mass of contradictory data from which he simply chooses the solution that suits his thesis” (171n). Firstly, I am not concerned with locating Tarshish but with the Targum’s identification of this place with “*afriqa*” – another misreading of what I say. Secondly, I show that the term *afriqa* in Rabbinic literature can refer to various places, but that here in the Targum it must mean black Africa, and I do this on the basis of

¹⁵ Schorsch’s practice in this regard reminds me of Groucho Marx’s comment in ‘Horse Feathers’: “I don’t know what they have to say / It makes no difference anyway / Whatever it is, I’m against it. / No matter what it is or who commenced it, I’m against it! / Your proposition may be good / But let’s have one thing understood: / Whatever it is, I’m against it.”

several pieces of evidence (42-43). I choose the solution that suits the evidence, not the thesis.

A similarly silly objection is lodged when I note two different explanations for the Egyptian term for Kush as “Land of the Bow.” Schorsch says, “Since there are continuing scholarly disputes ... one should hardly make definitive assertions” (171). Should I not have suggested one possible explanation (hardly a “definitive assertion”) because there is an alternative explanation? Is there no benefit in noting that one of the explanations coincides with the evidence under discussion in the book?

To end on a positive note, let me say that Schorsch did accurately represent what I said when he criticized my belief that I “can define the ‘correct reading’ of a passage” (171). Here Schorsch has finally not misrepresented my view, for I do believe that with the various tools of scholarship in hand, philology and textual criticism in particular, one can at times determine a correct reading (without scare quotes) of an ancient text. Ironically, Schorsch admits as much when he complains that I should discuss mistaken “Kushites” (that is, originally non-Kushite references that have become “Kushite” due to various causes) because they are “authentic elements of postrabbinic and medieval discourse.” Schorsch thus admits that these readings are *not* authentic elements of the earlier Rabbinic discourse, with which I am concerned. Similarly, comparative Semitic philology and comparison of Biblical Hebrew names with their early Greek transcriptions can tell us the original consonantal values of names such as Ham, an exercise I pursue in Chapter Ten of the book.

From Schorsch’s review one would never know that the primary purpose of *The Curse of Ham* was to explore the origin and development of the belief that the Bible condemns black Africans to eternal slavery, the so-called Curse of Ham based on Genesis 9:25. This and much else are all but disregarded by Schorsch. He says next to nothing of my treatment of the pseudepigraphic, Hellenistic-Jewish, early Christian (east and west), and Islamic sources. He has nothing to say of the crucial chapter of philological analysis of the name Ham, except for a snide remark about my characterization of the philological method (in which he missed my irony). Nor is there a word about the chapter on the Curse of Cain, or the chapters on light skin color as a marker of feminine beauty, or the number and significance of Blacks among the slave population in the Near East and in Israel, or the long and crucial chapter on the development of the etiology of dark skin in Christian, Muslim, and Jewish sources.

In sum, Prof. Schorsch has ignored most of the book, including its central argument. He criticizes me for not dealing with what is outside the book’s purview, the medieval and early modern periods. His focus is on one aspect alone – interpretation of Rabbinic texts – which, however, is highly problematic because of his simplistic and superficial reading of this material, which does not inspire confidence in his historical judgments. Schorsch also exhibits an alarmingly large number of misrepresentations based on a careless reading of the book. Several years ago, Schorsch asked me to comment on his MA thesis, which eventually developed into his book, *Jews and Blacks*. In hindsight I see that I should not have complied, but he had asked for my honest opinion and in that spirit I replied: “You don’t seem to have read your sources very well.... Your readings of the primary sources seem to be done rather quickly and so I found a rather large number of misreadings and misunderstandings.” ‘Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose’.