

Black people in Jewish Sources
Rabbinic sources – Mishnah/Tosephta

Leviticus 13:2

ב אָדָם, כִּי-יְהִיָּה בְעוֹר-בְּשָׂרוֹ שִׁמָּת אוֹ-סַפְחַת אוֹ בַהֲרֵת, וְהָיָה בְעוֹר-בְּשָׂרוֹ, לְגַעַע צָרְעַת--וְהוּבָא אֶל-אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן, אוֹ אֶל-אֶחָד מִבְּנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים.

2 When a man shall have in the skin of his flesh a rising, or a scab, or a bright spot, and it becomes in the skin of his flesh the plague of leprosy, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest, or to one of his sons the priests.

<p>משנה נגעים א:א</p> <p>מראות נגעים שנים שהן ארבעה. בהרת עזה כשלג, שניה לה כסיד ההיכל. והשאת כקרום ביצה, שניה לה כצמר לבן, דברי רבי מאיר. וחכמים אומרים, השאת כצמר לבן, שניה לה כקרום ביצה:</p>	<p>Nega'im 1:1</p> <p>The signs of nega'im are two which, in fact, are four. The bright spot (baheret) is bright white like snow; secondary to it is as white as the lime of the Temple. The rising (se'et) is as white of the skin of an egg; secondary to it is like white wool, the words of Rabbi Meir. But the sages say: the rising (se'et) is white wool and secondary to it is like the white of the skin of an egg.</p>
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<p>משנה נגעים ב:א</p> <p>בהרת עזה נראית בגרמני כהה, והכהה בכוש עזה.</p> <p>רבי ישמעאל אומר, בני ישראל, אני כפרתו, הרי הן כאשפרוע, לא שחורים ולא לבנים, אלא בינוניים.</p> <p>רבי עקיבא אומר, יש לצירים סממנין שהן צרין צורות שחורות, לבנות ובינוניות. מביא סם בינוני ומקיפו מבחוץ, ותראה בבינוני.</p> <p>רבי יהודה אומר, מראות נגעים להקל אבל לא להחמיר, יראה הגרמני בבשרו להקל, והכוש ב בינוני להקל.</p> <p>וחכמים אומרים, זה וזה בבינוני</p>	<p>Nega'im 2:1</p> <p>The bright spot in a German appears as dull white, and the dull white spot in an Ethiopian appears as bright white.</p> <p>Rabbi Ishmael says: the children of Israel (may I be atonement for them!) are like boxwood, neither black nor white but of an intermediate shade.</p> <p>Rabbi Akiva says: painters have materials with which they portray figures in black, in white, and in an intermediate shade; bring therefore a paint of an intermediate shade and surround it around the outside and it will then appear as on skin of intermediate shade.</p> <p>Rabbi Judah says: in determining the colors of nega'im the law is to be lenient and not stringent; let therefore, the nega'im of the German appear on the color of his own body so that the law is lenient, and let that of the Ethiopian be inspected as if it were on the intermediate shade so that the law is also lenient.</p> <p>The sages say: both are to be treated as if on the intermediate shade</p>
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English Explanation of Mishnah Nega'im 2:1

Our Mishnah deals with the problem that the colour of nega'im appear differently depending upon the skin colour of the person being examined. This could undermine the objectivity of the examination

The bright spot in a German appears as dull white, and the dull white spot in an Ethiopian appears as bright white. A "bright spot" is impure, but on a pale German (I assume this means anyone from northern Europe) it will look dull. This would mean that he will be declared pure, even though he should not be. On the opposite end of the spectrum, a dull spot, which should not be impure, will look bright on an Ethiopian's skin. This will cause him to be isolated and then, if it remains, to be declared impure. The question is how do we deal with this situation?

Rabbi Ishmael says: the children of Israel (may I be atonement for them!) are like boxwood, neither black nor white but of an intermediate shade. Rabbi Ishmael says that we use the skin of Israelites, which is dark but not black, as the barometer. This is because the laws of nega'im were stated with regard to Israelites. As an aside, Rabbi Ishmael offers to take upon himself vicarious atonement for Israel's sins.

Rabbi Akiva says: painters have materials with which they portray figures in black, in white, and in an intermediate shade; let, therefore a paint of an intermediate shade be brought and applied around the outside of the nega, and it will then appear as on skin of intermediate shade. Rabbi Akiva says that we actually paint the person's skin, at least around the nega. This way we can get an unbiased portrait of what shade the nega really is.

Rabbi Judah says: in determining the colours of nega'im the law is to be lenient and not stringent; let, therefore, the nega'im of the German be inspected on the colour of his own body so that the law is lenient, and let that of the Ethiopian be inspected as if it were on the intermediate shade so that the law is also lenient.

Rabbi Judah says that we always rule leniently. Therefore, if the spot looks dull on the German, he is pure. And if it looks bright on the Ethiopian, we estimate how it would look on a person of average skin colour.

The sages say: both are to be treated as if the nega was on the intermediate shade. The sages disagree and say that all nega'im are judged based on an average background. This opinion seems to agree with Rabbi Akiva.

Numbers Chapter 3

יג כִּי לִי, כָּל-בְּכוֹר--בְּיֹום הַכֹּתִי
 כָּל-בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הַקֹּדֶשׁ שֵׁתִי
 לִי כָּל-בְּכוֹר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, מֵאָדָם עַד-
 בְּהֵמָה: לִי יִהְיוּ, אֲנִי יְהוָה. {פ}

13 for all the first-born are Mine: on the day that I smote
 all the first-born in the land of Egypt I hallowed to Me
 all the first-born in Israel, both man and beast, Mine
 they shall be: I am the LORD.' {P}

משנה בכורות ז:	Mishnah Bechorot 7:6
<p>המקיש בקרסליו, ובארכובותיו, ובעל פיקה, והעקל. איזהו עקל, כל שפמקיף פרוסותיו ואין ארכובותיו נושקות זו לזו.</p>	<p>If one knocks his ankles [against each other, in walking] or rubs his legs [against each other]; a ba'al pikah (protuberance?) and an ikkel. What is an ikkel? One whose knees do not touch each other when he puts his feet together.</p>
<p>פיקה יוצאה מגודלו, עקבו יוצא לאחוריו, פרוסתו רחבה כשל אנו. אצבעותיו מרכבות זו על זו, או קלוטות (למעלה) עד הפרק, כשר. למטה מן הפרק וחתכה, כשר. היתה בו יתרת וחתכה, אם יש בה עצם, פסול. ואם לאו, כשר. יתר בידיו וברגליו שש ושש עשרים וארבע, רבי יהודה מכשיר, וחכמים פוסלים. השולט בשתי ידיו, רבי פוסל, וחכמים מכשירים.</p>	<p>If he has a lump protruding from his thumb, or if his heel projects backward, or if his feet are wide like those of a goose. Or if his fingers lie one above the other. If they are webbed up to the joint, he is fit, if below the root, if he cuts it, he is also fit. If he has an additional finger and he cut it off, if there was a bone in it, he is unfit, but if not, he is fit. If he has additional fingers and additional toes, on each hand and foot six fingers and six toes, [making altogether] twenty-four [fingers and toes]: Rabbi Judah declares him fit, But the sages declare him unfit. One who has equal strength in both hands: Rabbi declares him unfit; But the sages declare him fit.</p>
<p>הכושי, והגיחור, והלבקו, והקפח, והננס, והחרש, והשוטה,</p>	<p>A kushi, a gihur (red skinned) a lavkan, (albino) a kippeah, (very tall and thin) a dwarf, a deaf-mute, an imbecile,</p>
<p>והשכור, ובעלי נגעים טהורין, פסולין באדם, וכשרין בבהמה.</p>	<p>one intoxicated, or afflicted with plague marks which are clean – [these defects] disqualify in human beings but not in animals.</p>
<p>רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר, שוטה בבהמה אינה מן המבחר,</p>	<p>Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel says: a mad animal is not a choice sacrifice.</p>
<p>רבי אליעזר אומר, אף בעלי דלדולין, פסולין באדם, וכשרין בבהמה</p>	<p>Rabbi Eliezer says: also those afflicted with dangling warts they are unfit in human beings but are fit in animals.</p>

הלכה ב

הרואה את ע"ז או ברוך ארץ אפים מקום שנעקרה ממנו ע"ז או ברוך שעקר ע"ז מארצנו יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלינו שתעקר ע"ז מכל מקומות ישראל ותשיב לב עבדיך לעבדך

הרואה את אכלסין אומי ברוך חכם הרזים לפי שאין פרצופותיהן דומין זה לזה ואין דעתן דומות זו לזו
 בן זומא כשראה אוכלסין בהר הבית או ברוך מי שברא את אלו לשמשני כמה יגע אדם הראשון ולא טעם לוגמה אחת עד שזר' וחרש וקצר ועמר ודש וזרה וברר וטחן והרקיד ולש ואפה ואחר כך אכל ואני עומד בשחרית ומוצא אני את כל אילו לפני
 כמה יגע אדם הראשון ולא לבש חלוק עד שגזז ולבן ונפס וצבע וטווה וארג ואחר כך לבש ואני עומד בשחרית ומוצא את כל אילו לפני
 כמה אומניות שוקדות ומשכימות ואני עומד בשחרית ומוצא את כל אילו לפני

וכן היה בן זומא או ארח טוב מהוא או זכור בעל הבית לטוב כמה מיני יינות הביא לפנינו כמה מיני חתיכות הביא לפנינו כמה מיני גלוסקאות הביא לפנינו כל שעשה לא עשה אלא בשבילי
 אבל ארח רע מהוא או וכי מה אכלתי לו פת אחת אכלתי לו כוס אחת שתיתי לו כל מה שעשה עשה לצורך אשתו ובניו
 ואוי זכור כי תשגיא פעלו וגו' ו

Halacha 2

[A person] who sees an idol says Blessed... who is merciful).
 A place from where an idol was uprooted, says Blessed... who uprooted an idol from our land. May it be Your will, Lord our God, that idols will be uprooted from our entire land and from all places where Jews [live], and may You return the heart of your servants to serve you.
 [A person] who sees large crowds says Blessed... who is wise to secrets, because their faces are not similar to each other and their minds are not similar to each other.

When Ben Zoma saw large crowds [of people] on the Temple Mount he said, "Blessed be the One who created all of these [people] to serve me. How much the first man toiled before he tasted [even] one mouthful? He planted [grain], ploughed, reaped, bound sheaves, threshed, winnowed, selected, ground, sifted, kneaded, and baked, and [only] after that [he] ate [bread]. And I stand up in the morning and I find all of these [foods] in front of me [already prepared]."

How much the first man toiled before he wore a shirt? He sheared [wool], washed, combed, dyed, spun, wove, and sewed, and [only] after that he wore [clothes]. And I stand up in the morning and I find all of these [clothes] in front of me [already made].

How many skilled labourers are anxious to wake up [early to sell their goods], and I stand up in the morning and I find all of these [goods] in front of me [already made]."

And also Ben Zoma used to say, "What does a good guest say? 'May the host be remembered for good! How many different types of wine he brought in front of us? How many different pieces [of meat] he brought in front of us? How many different types of fine white bread he brought in front of us? Everything that he did, he did only for me.'

But what does a bad guest say? And what did I eat of his? I ate [only] one bread of his. I ate [only] one piece [of meat] of his. I drank only one cup [of wine] of his. Everything that he did, he did only for his wife and children."

And so also it says, "*Remember this so that you may extol His work that people have witnessed.*" (Job 36: 24)

Halacha 3

[A person] that sees a black [person], a Borek, a redhead [person], an albino [person], a hunchback [person], a midget, a deaf [person], a mentally retarded [person], and a drunk [person] says Blessed... who varies creatures.

הלכה ג

הרואה את הכושי ואת הבוריק ואת הגיחור ואת הלוקין ואת הכפיח ואת הננס (ואת החרש ואת השוטה ואת השכור) או ברוך משנה הבריות

את הקיטע
ואת החיגר
ואת הסומא
ואת מוכי שחין
אוי ברוך דיין האמת

[A person who sees] an amputee,
a lame [person],
a blind [person],
and a [person] afflicted with boils,
says Blessed...the true Judge.

הלכה ד

הרואה
בני אדם נאין
ואילנות נאות
אוי ברוך מי שככה לו
בריות נאות

Halacha 4

[A person] that sees
beautiful people
or beautiful trees
says Blessed... who has thus to him such
beautiful creations

הלכה ה

הרואה
את הקשת בענן
אוי ברוך נאמן בבריתו
זוכר הברית

Halacha 5

[A person] that sees
a rainbow in the cloud
says Blessed... who is trustworthy in His covenant
who remembers the covenant.