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Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim

IN THE HEART OF THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

Ha-Rav Shlomo Aviner on...

24 Adar Sheni 5768

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The White Ethiopian

[From the parashah sheet "Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Parashat Shemini 5768]

Listen and listen well. I've got a big scoop to share about an enormous marvel, a gargantuan scientific achievement: a white Ethiopian Jew (not a white Ethiopian non-Jew, but a Jew)! It sounds like a joke, "a white Ethiopian", an internal contradiction, but it's true. When we stop laughing, we'll have to admit that for that same white Ethiopian Jew a lot of problems will be solved. To our great misfortune, there are fools who view Ethiopian Jews with an arrogant gaze, and sometimes even insult them with Hebrew equivalents of the English word "nigger." For the white Ethiopian Jew, the problem is solved once and for all. After all, apart from skin color, there are no other differences between Ethiopian Jews and other Jews. Both have a heart. Both have a brain. Both have the Land of Israel and Jerusalem. Both have Rachel's Tomb in Bet Lechem and the Cave of Machpelah in Hevron. Both have the same G-d and the same soul, part of G-d above. As we know, the soul has no color, not white or black, brown or yellow. Only the paper-thin black skin distinguishes between them.

Before I reveal to you the secret of the white Ethiopian, I will tell you a story that happened, if not with the precise details than at least approximately. One day in our yeshiva, a student told me that he had gotten engaged. "Mazel Tov! I am happy to hear!" I said. "There is one problem, however," he added. "She is Ethiopian and I am a cohain" (some authorities say that Ethiopians must go through a "giyur le-chumrah – a conversion for stricture" since some are question their Judaism. A cohain may not marry a convert). "Why did you get yourself involved in a complication like that?" I asked. "I didn't think about it," he replied. "I appreciate her and I love her. I didn't notice her color." I was very happy that he hadn't thought about it or noticed it. "Give me three days," I answered him. I pored over the great halachic authorities. I argued with rabbis and finally told him, "It's all right. But we need

the validation of a great rabbi. Go to Rabbis X and Y." He went, and then he came back and he said, "They're afraid." "Fine," I said, "Give me three more days." On the third day I informed him, "I have a note for you that is worth more than a million dollars." It was a responsa from Ha-Gaon Ha-Rav Ovadiah Yosef in his own handwriting, and it said, "A cochain is allowed to marry an Ethiopian girl, and the son remains a cochain in every sense of the word. Respectfully yours, and with great love, Ovadiah Yosef."

Resuming where we left off, where is the white skinned Ethiopian? Very simple. It's me! And millions of other Jews. After all, we said that there is no difference between an Ethiopian Jew and any other Jew but skin color. If so, we are all Ethiopians, with thousands of shared traits, apart from one slim (less than a millimeter thick), negligible external. I didn't invent this idea. Rather, when Dr. Yosef HaLevi first met the Ethiopian Jews 150 years ago, they thought they were the only Jews on earth. He informed them that he was an Ethiopian just like them. That great man was a "White-skinned Ethiopian".

"So," you say. "You were just teasing us." No I wasn't. I was being very serious. Indeed, it really is a gargantuan scientific achievement. Such is the greatness of science, that it focuses on the general and ignores negligible, insignificant details.

And if it is so with secular science [Hebrew "mada"], than all the more so with holy "science", such as Rambam's "Sefer Ha-Mada" (literally, "the Book of Science"). If you take a look there you will see that he said we should love every Jew, and he did not distinguish between "light and dark", but between "darkness and light".