

SKIN AS A DIVIDER AND A CONNECTOR

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“I look forward to a day when the lights within us are again able to shine through our skin.”

I’ve been thinking about skin and the way it can work socially and religiously, positively and negatively. **We Americans understand more than most societies how skin can divide people.** We know the unique history of how Americans have dealt with people who look a certain way and the grim, terrifying legacy of racism. If you have a certain color skin, other people will hate you, and darker skin has this pernicious and pervasive and persistent association with economic discrimination.

In this Covid moment, when we’re frightened for so many of our loved ones, it’s impossible not to note that skin also correlates with how people are experiencing this plague. One in eight Americans are African-American, yet one in four Covid cases are in the African-American community, and 38% of Covid deaths are in the African-American community. It’s impossible for us not to recognize that skin still affects and determines often how we experience things, even this very universal human plague. In his song “American Skin,” written in 1999 after the killing of Amadou Diallo, Bruce Springsteen reminds us that “it ain’t no secret ... you can get killed just for living in your American skin.” The song includes a heartbreaking story of a mom begging her son to “promise Mama” that if stopped by the police, he would “always be polite and ... keep [his] hands in sight.” In this Black Lives Matter era, it’s a vivid and resonant image.

But skin doesn’t only have to be a divider; it’s also permeable — a connector. Think of all the ways that our skin enables us to take something in and let something out.

When Adam and Eve sin in the garden of Eden, God sends them off into the world, and God makes for them *kutnot ’or*, skins of leather, and garbs them. *’Or*, the Hebrew word for “leather,” is spelled differently but sounds incredibly close to the word *ohr*, the Hebrew word for “light.” **A midrash imagines that in an original Torah, it wasn’t written that God gave them clothes of leather, ’or with the letter ayin. It was written that God gave them coats of ohr with an alef — light. God garbed the original human beings in bodies that were luminous, that let all their inner light shine out.** According to the teachings of kabbalah, in this world, our bodies grew denser and more divided. Then the light, the *ohr* with an *alef*, disappeared behind the *’or* with an *ayin*, the coats of leather that we wear nowadays.

But a different era is coming when our skins, *’or* with an *ayin*, will turn back into our skins of *ohr* with an *alef*. R. Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz, who wrote the poem “Lecha Dodi,” evokes this image in the line *hit’oreri ki va orekh*, “arise for your light has arrived,” poetically suggesting that the era of wearing merely leather skin will come to an end, and our *’or* will become *ohr* again — that leather will become light again.

I look forward to a day when the lights within us are again able to shine through our skin.

