

And Shem and Yafes took a garment, laid it upon their shoulders, and they walked backwards, and covered their father's nakedness. (9:23)

Rashi notes the singular term *vayikach*, implying that he – Shem – was the one who took the garment to fulfill the commandment of honoring his father. Because he exerted himself more than Yafes, his reward exceeded that of Yafes. Shem was blessed with the *mitzvah* of *Tzitzis*, and Yafes, who also participated in carrying out the *mitzvah*, was blessed with burial for his descendants. This refers to the war of Gog and Magog, during which the children of Yafes will be accorded burial in *Eretz Yisrael*. The commentators question the attribution of the *mitzvah* of *Tzitzis* to Shem's noble actions, when, in fact, we find that the *mitzvah* of *Tzitzis* is attributed to the merit of Avraham *Avinu's* retort to the king of Sodom, *Im michut v'ad sroch naal*; "If so much as a thread or a shoe strap; or if I shall take anything that belongs to you (king of Sodom...) (*Bereishis* 14:23)

The *Sifsei Chachamim* explain that *Tzitzis* are comprised of two colors of wool: the white wool in merit of Shem; the *techeiles*, blue wool, in the merit of Avraham. The general *mitzvah* of *Tzitzis*, which is a reference to the white wool, preceded the supplemental aspect of *techeiles*.

Horav Eliyahu Baruch Finkel, zl, distinguishes between the *Tallis*, comprised of a four-cornered garment that has *Tzitzis* as its fringes, and the actual wool threads, which comprise the *Tzitzis* themselves. The *Tallis* is a body covering; therefore, it makes sense that this *mitzvah* is derived from Shem's proactive act of honoring his father by taking the garment to cover him. Avraham who referred to a thread, warranted the reward of the wool threads which comprise the actual *Tzitzis*.

Rav Eliyahu Baruch posits that while the *Tallis* garment facilitates the *mitzvah* of *Tzitzis*-- since it is used in conjunction with the *Tzitzis* to provide a garment through which one is *na'eh b'mitzvos*, beautifies himself (for Hashem) with *mitzvos*—it, too, becomes a *cheftza d'mitzvah*, object of the *mitzvah*, no different than the actual *Tzitzis*.

Both Shem and Yafes merited the reward of a "covering": Shem, the covering of *Tallis*; and Yafes, the covering of the ground. The *Tallis* and the earth both cover the body. The *Tallis* covers a person when he is alive, performing a *mitzvah*, and he dons the *Tallis* himself. In contrast, the covering of the earth is for the corpse of the deceased, and this action is performed on his body by others. This underscores the difference between Shem's proactive taking of the garment to cover his father, and the participation of Yafes in acting along with Shem. One is rewarded for the *mitzvah* and also for his attitude in executing the *mitzvah*. Everything that one puts into carrying out a *mitzvah* will be rewarded.

Furthermore, as noted by *Rav* Eliyahu Baruch, *Rashi* writes that, as a result of Shem's actions, "his sons merited the *mitzvah* of and *Tallis* of *Tzitzis*." Regarding Yafes he writes, "He (Yafes)

merited burial for his children.” In other words, Shem’s *zechus*, merit, was transferred to his descendants, because he exerted himself and thus warranted the *mitzvah* for himself-- it actually became his *mitzvah*, possession, so to speak. He could, therefore, transfer the *mitzvah* over to his children, who took possession of it in their own right.

Yafes who participated in this *mitzvah* but didn’t take the initiative was rewarded, but he did not merit that an actual *mitzvah* would become his. Therefore, his children receive spiritual dividends for their ancestor’s reward. However, they do not have their own merit.

Perhaps we might suggest a homiletic rendering of the distinction between the rewards received by Shem and Yafes. The *Tallis* is worn during one’s lifetime as a garment that accompanies him during his prayer service to Hashem. Hence, the *Tallis* symbolizes *mitzvah* performance. When a person dies, his mortal remains are interred in the ground. His body, which is the physical container that had been home to his *neshamah*, soul, decays, and turns into the dust from which it was created. The corpse is placed in the ground, and covered by dirt, so that it eventually blends in with the elements. The corpse of a Jew is first dressed in *tachrichim*, burial shrouds, and then wrapped in a *Tallis*. The body decays, the *Tallis* withers, but it does not disappear/blend in with the earth. What does this signify?

I think this teaches us that, while the body of a Jew breaks down upon burial and putrefies, his lifetime of *mitzvah* performance lives on to eternity. This is where Shem’s reward is distinguished from that of Yafes. Shem’s *Tallis* covers him in the ground, as Yafes’ reward is also a covering of “ground.” Yafes’ covering stays with him; Shem takes his covering before the Heavenly Tribunal as a symbol of a lifetime of service to Hashem. How sad it is that those who reject *Halachah* – and, instead, choose cremation-- either ignore or are unaware of this beautiful and meaningful verity.