The Skin that was Saved

In the repetition of the Mussaf of Yom Kippur we traditionally shed tears as we recount the tragic deaths of the ten great martyrs of Israel so cruelly persecuted by the Romans. One of them, Rabbi Yishmael the Cohen Gadol, features very prominently in this account based on the tradition of the Sages.

It is he who used the Holy Name to ascend to Heaven and confirm that there was no escape from the Divine decree calling for their martyrdom. And it was he who wept so profusely upon the death of the first martyr, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, the head of the Sanhedrin. The daughter of the cruel emperor was attracted by his wailing and was so fascinated by his extraordinary beauty that she asked her father to spare his life. When this request was refused she asked that the skin of his face be removed and preserved. This was indeed done while he was yet alive, and the cry he emitted when his tormentors reached the place where he usually put his tefillin shook the heavens until Hashem restored order by reiterating that this was all part of the Divine decree.

This skin of Rabbi Yishmael, it appears from our section of the Talmud, remained a precious talisman for Roman rulers. The rule is apparently startling revelation (perhaps familiar to us from the practice of many ancient tribes of scalping enemies) the Talmud cites the example of a legion which does not carry along with it a few skins of the heads of corpses (as magic charms for victory in war – Rashi). As a support for this stated that when a traveling legion of heathen soldiers enters a house, it is considered to have contracted a state of impurity, because there is no...