

# The Weekly Daf



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Chullin 117-123

Week of 6-12 Teves 5757 / 16-22 December 1996  
Rav Weinbach's insights, explanations and comments for the 7 pages of Talmud  
studied in the course of the worldwide Daf Yomi cycle

## Saving the Skin

The skin of a human, as well as the skin of certain forms of animal life, has the same status as his flesh regarding the laws of purity. If one comes into physical contact with the skin of a corpse, or is together with it under one roof, he becomes impure, just as if he would have had the same encounter with the corpse itself or any part of it.

The Sage Ulla explains that according to Torah Law the skin of a corpse does not contaminate one with impurity. When the Torah (*Bamidbar* 19:16) states that even a part of a corpse contaminates, it cites a bone as the classic example. Based on this, our Sages (*Mesechta Nidah* 55a) conclude that only something like a bone, which does not restore itself, contaminates with impurity, but skin, which grows back after it is removed, does not contaminate with impurity.

Why then did our Sages decree that the skin of a human should contaminate with impurity?

They were concerned, explains Ulla, lest someone be callous enough to use the skins of his deceased parents as a mattress for his bed. In order to discourage this they decreed a status of impurity.

But, one may ask, "Since it is forbidden to derive any benefit from any corpse, would this alone not have sufficed as a reason for the decree, without recourse to the extreme issue of misusing a parent's skin? This question is raised by Tosefos in a half dozen places, and we here present the three most prominent solutions proposed:

- 1) One has easier access to the skin of a parent than he does to other corpses, and it was this accessibility which triggered the decree.
- 2) The prohibition to benefit from the skin of a corpse is not of Torah origin, and was only decreed by the Sages out of concern that one would benefit from the skin of his parents in the aforementioned manner.
- 3) Even if the prohibition against benefiting from the skin of any corpse is of Torah origin, this alone would not have motivated the Sages to decree impurity in order to discourage anyone from violating this prohibition, since the probability is not so high. But since there was a concern that someone might not only violate this prohibition but also show such gross disrespect for his parents they made this decree even though the probability was low.

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## 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 *Kohen 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 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 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 apparently startling revelation (perhaps familiar to us from the practice of many ancient tribes of scalping enemies) the Talmud cites the example of Roman rulers who wore the headskin of Rabbi Yishmael on their heads as a good luck charm.

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Prepared by Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, Israel

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Production Design: Lev Seltzer

Issue #149 - Chullin 117-123

For the week of 6-12 Teves 5757 / 16-22 December 1996 (Parshas Vayigash)