

Honoring a Father

The Torah tells us that Shem and Yefes took an article of clothing, placed it on their shoulders and covered their father. The Torah uses the singular, *Vayikach*, and he took, referring to Shem who took the initiative to act. Yefes merely followed Shem. Rabbi Yochanan said that because Shem took the initiative in this Mitzvah and [this led] Yefes to join with him, Shem was rewarded with *Talis* [and *Tcheles*] while Yefes was rewarded with the Toga. (Midrash Rabbah 36:9)

Each of Noah's sons displayed a different attitude towards their father. Cham was always looking for the shortcomings of his father, *Ervav Aviv*. Cham disdained his father for drinking wine and becoming intoxicated. He did not allow his father the benefit of relaxing a bit after all he had been through, saving his family and all that was in the ark with them. He never saw eye to eye with his father.

Yefes was not concerned with what was right or wrong. He was more interested in conforming to the current convention. His motivation to act was not borne out of an internal desire to perform acts of kindness. Rather it was because at that moment it appeared to be the proper thing to do. [He might have acted differently if the situation arose at another time.]

Shem on the other hand had an ingrained sense of kindness and love towards his father. Shem realized that everything he is and has, is because of his father. The Gemara uses Dama Ben Nesina as the example of extreme *Kibbud Av*, who was willing to forego a fortune rather than wake his father to retrieve the key hidden under his father's pillow. Why did the Gemara have to harp on the aspect of the key that was under his father's pillow? Why didn't the Gemara simply say that the key was unavailable? Dama Ben Nesina rose to become a member of the Roman Senate. Yet he realized that whatever he became was because of his father. The "key" to his own success was under his father's pillow, by respecting and honoring his father. True *Kibbud Av* is when a son, no matter how great he may become, respects his father and acknowledges that all he has is because of his father.

Shem realized that he owed his existence to his father who brought him into the world. He realized that he now had an even greater debt towards his father, the *Tzaddik Tamim*, who saved him from the flood.

One must realize that he stands on the shoulders of his parents. Ramban says that even though he argues with the Baal Halachos Gedolos (*Behag*), he does not claim to know more than the *Behag*. He compares himself to a midge who stands on the shoulders of a giant and who thus has a slightly better view than that which the giant himself enjoys. This is made possible because of the foundation that the giant has provided him. One must feel the same towards his father. This is also the concept of *Talmid Chaver*. The student knows more because he has also benefited from the foundation his teacher [and all the previous generations of teachers] provided for him.

Shem was rewarded with the *Talis* and *Tzitzis*. The Midrash says that *Tcheles* is similar to the sea, the heavens and to the *Kisei Hakavod*, heavenly throne. *Tcheles* tells the Jew that he is not all-knowing, that he is dependent on Hashem. The sea and the sky remind us that beyond that which we can perceive lies an unfathomable and impenetrable depth. Ultimately no matter how much man may believe he has accomplished and attained it is still insignificant relative to Hashem. Fear of father [*Mora Av*] is equated with fear of heaven [*Mora Shamayim*] because the Jew must understand that just as he is dependent on Hashem, he must also recognize that he also owes everything to his father as well.

Yefes was rewarded with the toga. Yefes was the father of Greece and Greek Culture, which valued greatly expedient action and superficial beauty. Ancient Greece was willing to accept abominable actions in the name of culture. [The Rav compared this to current acceptance of the full gamut of illicit sexual activity and the scorn that modern youth have for the older generation].

Yefes was rewarded with the external trappings, *Klapay Chutz*. Shem was rewarded with the inner beauty as symbolized by the *Talis* and *Tcheles*.

Another dimension to the difference between Shem and Yefes is that while both had *Kavod*, respect, for

their father, only Shem displayed *Yirah*, fear, for his father. *Kavod* entails simple respect that one shows externally towards his father. This respect may come about only because the son would be ashamed of the societal scorn he would receive if he did not care for his father. *Yirah* on the other hand means listening to the advice of his father, looking up to him, overlooking his mistakes and holding him in the highest regard. As the Torah tells us "*Sheal Avicha Vyagedcha, Zkaynecha V'yomru Lach*", seek counsel from your father and your elders.

Shem displayed *Yirah* for his father. He was able to overlook the acts of his father by viewing them in the context of what he went through and the enormous responsibility he had in preserving the world. He could not stand to see his father degraded. Yefes showed only *Kavod* for his father. He was afraid that others might accuse him of being a lesser son than Shem. So when Shem showed the initiative to act, Yefes was quick to participate in this good deed. Cham on the other hand showed scorn and disdain for his father and was always pointing out his father's shortcomings and those of the previous generations.

Copyright 2015 by Rabbi Joshua Rapps. All rights reserved. Permission granted to print for personal use. May not be incorporated in printed or electronic publications without explicit permission from the author.