

Rabbi Avraham Steinberg

Linen Shrouds

Simple, Mystical Beauty

When possible, burial shrouds are to be made of linen[i].

The Talmud records[ii] an enactment by Rabbi Gamliel the Elder. In order to maintain a balance between burial clothes being “respectful” but with their not being too costly and ostentatious he instituted that shrouds should be of white linen. Although, when necessary, other white materials may be used, linen is much preferred. Aside from the simple beauty of white linen, there are deep mystical reasons behind this practice, as well[iii].

It should be noted that the Nemukei Yosef[iv] explains that one who makes beautiful shrouds demonstrates his belief in the Resurrection of the Dead[v].

Emphasis on Linen and Quality

Two points to consider:

1) The Rambam says that even the threads holding together the different pieces (e.g., sleeves) of the shrouds should be made of linen[vi]. Indeed, the mystical sources indicate that there should not be even one thread of non-linen in the shrouds[vii].

2) It is interesting to note that Rabbi Yechiel M. Tukachinsky, the saintly author of the classic work on end-of-life laws *Gesher HaChaim*, did not allow anyone to even touch the shrouds he had prepared for himself[viii].

An Explanation that’s “Out of this World”

The two words used in the Torah for linen – שש and כד – both have a connection to the number six. שש means “six,” and כד has the numerical value of six.

The Yalkut Me’am Loez[ix] says that this is an allusion to the great power of linen. All other plants are affected by all of the seven planets[x], including Mars (מאדים in Hebrew), which is considered a harmful force[xi]. Linen, however, although influenced by the “six” other planets, is unaffected by Mars. When a person is shrouded in linen, therefore, he is protected from harm[xii].

Perhaps this perspective provides an explanation for the elusive Minhag[xiii] of the holy city of Jerusalem, where right before a Niftar is interred the wool Tallis is removed from the deceased, so he is buried only in linen shrouds.

[NOTE: It should be emphasized that – all of the beauty of linen shrouds described above notwithstanding – *shrouds made of other materials (often muslin or cotton) are Halachically acceptable, as indicated by the very same Talmudic source (see note i) that favors linen.*]

[i] See Tur/Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah, 352) and Rambam (Avel 4:1).

[ii] Moed Kattan 27b.

[iii] Gesher HaChaim vol 1, 10:1 cites Kabbalistic sources which refer to the linen vestments of the High Priest. The traditional prayers recited by the Chevra Kadisha during the dressing of the body reflect this connection, as well.

[iv] Cited by Darchei Moshe and Ba'er Haitaiv 352:1.

[v] See Aruch HaShulchan 352:2 citing Masseches Semachos – that the dead are resurrected with the garments in which they were interred.

[vi] Avel 4:1, as noted by Pischei Teshuva 352:2 and Gesher HaChaim (*ibid*). **NASCK Director, Rabbi Zohn** points out that this has practical application, as shrouds sometimes tear on a seam during a Tahara and the Chevra Kadisha is faced with the question as to whether the re-sewing may be done with any type of thread available, or if they should seek to use linen specifically. The above sources would indicate the latter.

[vii] Pischei Teshuva (*ibid*). See also the end of this article.

[viii] See Gesher HaChaim – son's introduction, p. 19, footnote 3. Item: **Rabbi Zohn** recalls the directions of Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l: Although there is a traditional concept of burying someone in the Kittel that he wore during his lifetime, if that Kittel was non-linen, and linen shrouds are available at the time of the Tahara, preference should be given to the linen.

[ix] See also Yalkut Reuveni cited in Pischei Teshuva (Yoreh Deah 352:2)

[x] The “seven planets” in Talmudic tradition are: the sun, the moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Saturn, and Jupiter. These are the planets that are visible to the naked eye. Uranus, Neptune and Pluto are Talmudic non-entities because they cannot be seen without a telescope. (Even in our times, Pluto has been “plutoed” off the list.)

[xi] See Gemora Shabbos 129b and 156a.

[xii] The planetary “influence” spoken of in these sources is presumably entirely

spiritual/mystical. Although the sun and the moon significantly impact our planet by radiation and gravitational pull, it would be hard to imagine that the distant planets have any substantive physical impact. But you never know...

[xiii] To gain a sense of how puzzling this Minhag is, see the wording of the questioner, Gesher HaChaim vol. II, chap. 14.