

The Jewish Obsession with Washing Hands

Jews have always washed their hands, long before the spread of COVID-19. Why are we so obsessed with that specific limb?

Jewish Hand Washers

With the outbreak of COVID last year, there was a common perception that the virus spread through physical contact, which initiated a craze of hand washing and glove-wearing.

For Jews, washing hands was old news. Jews are constantly washing their hands. We're all familiar with the washing of the hands before eating bread. Does anyone know when else Jews wash their hands?

- In the morning, when we wake up, we wash our hands.
- When we leave the restroom, we wash our hands.
- Before each prayer service, we wash our hands.
- After a haircut, we wash our hands.
- After cutting our nails, we wash our hands.
- If we touch our shoes, we wash our hands.
- And if we catch a half-hour snooze, even in the middle of the day, when

we get back up — we wash our hands.

- After we go swimming, we wash our hands.
- And on top of all that, after we take a shower, we wash our hands.

Additionally, when we return from a funeral we wash our hands, and when we leave the grounds of a cemetery we wash our hands. Before they bless the congregation with the Priestly Blessing, the Kohanim, or priests, in a synagogue, have their hands washed by the Leviim (which is any Jewish male descended from the tribe of Levi).

In short, Jews are busy all day washing their hands.

Everyone knows that there are 613 mitzvos in the Torah. But on top of those, there are seven mitzvos enacted by the Sages. Washing the hands is one of those Rabbinic Mitzvot.

The Talmud (Tractate Eruvin 21b) tells us: “When King Solomon established ... the washing of the hands, a Heavenly Voice called out and said, ‘My son, if your heart is wise, my heart too shall rejoice.’” The Talmud is telling us that King Solomon established this mitzvah over 3,000 years ago—and that G-d Himself was happy that King Solomon did it.

Even though washing the hands is not an explicit mitzvah in the text of the Torah itself but rather, a law enacted by the Sages, we find that Jews were very particular about this mitzvah throughout the generations.

The Talmud tells us that when Rabbi Akiva was imprisoned by

the Romans, his student would bring him food every day, and water with which to wash his hands. One day, when the student arrived at the prison door, the guard stopped him and said, "You're carrying more water than your master needs to drink. Are you perhaps trying to dig a tunnel? Is that why you need the water?" The guard spilled out half the water and gave the student the remaining half.

When the student came to Rabbi Akiva's cell, Rabbi Akiva asked him, "Don't you know that my life depends on you now? Why did you bring me so little water?" The student told his master what had happened. But to the student's surprise, Rabbi Akiva said that he would use the remaining water to wash his hands. "Master!" said the student. "This water isn't even enough to drink! And you want to use it to wash your hands?!" Rabbi Akiva replied, "I am prepared to endanger my life so as not to violate the law of the Sages to wash one's hands before eating bread." Indeed, Rabbi Akiva didn't eat anything until water was brought for him to wash his hands.

In this week's double parshah, in the portion of Kedoshim, the Sages found a reference for the concept of washing one's hands. The verse (Kedoshim 20:7) states, "And you shall sanctify yourselves and you shall be holy because I am the Lord your G-d." The Talmud (Tractate Brachos 53b) interprets the verse: "And you shall sanctify yourselves refers to the "first waters"; and you shall be holy refers to the "last waters." "First waters" refers to the washing of the hands for bread before a meal, and "last waters" refers to the rinsing of one's fingertips before the after-meal prayers at the end of the meal.

What is Special About Hands

But what is really behind this obsession with washing the hands? Why indeed was Rabbi Akiva prepared to sacrifice his very life just to wash his hands?

A great chosid once explained that there's something unique about the hands that makes them different than any other body part—all the other body parts pretty much stay in the same place, but the hands can reach anywhere: above the head and below the feet.

This teaches us a valuable moral lesson. A hand can draw close. A hand can greet someone. A hand can hug someone. On the other, well, hand, a hand can push someone away. A hand can put someone in a very bad place. A hand can even hit someone, or worse, G-d forbid. The hand gives charity—but with the same hand, one can take or steal.

When a person does good things with his hands, whether ethical mitzvos or ritual mitzvos, he elevates and raises up his hands, bringing them to a higher place of holiness. On the other hand, when he does undesirable things, he lowers and degrades his hands.

This is also one of the reasons that the village elders would rinse their hands in the local river when they would do the Eglu Arufa ritual. (This ritual was done in ancient Israel if a body would be found in the field between two villages, and none of the elders from either village knew who killed the victim.) They would recite the words, "Our hands did not spill this blood," expressing their desire to wash their hands of the sin. As the

commentators put it: “Just as our hands are clean, so too are we clean of this body.”

In like manner, the blessing of the people by the Kohanim is referred to as “the lifting of the palms”—meaning that when the Kohen blesses the people, his hands need to be “clean.”

And just like the rest of Judaism, this concept is not a detached intellectual concept. Judaism believes that the heart follows the actions—for example, when we put up a mezuzah, it’s not enough to just look at the mezuzah and remember G-d, but one should kiss the mezuzah. Another example is the Cup of Elijah at the Passover Seder table—it’s not enough to pray and hope that Elijah the Prophet arrives to report the Redemption; we actually pour him a real cup of wine.

It’s the same thing with the concept of making our hands holy—the concept is not a detached intellectual concept, but rather, one that is connected to a tangible, physical mitzvah, the mitzvah of physically washing the hands with physical water.

That’s also why Sephardic Jews have the custom of kissing the rabbi’s hand—because if the rabbi’s hand is holy, then he is truly a spiritual person.

The Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe once pointed out that as soon as a person gets up in the morning, the first thing that happens is that all the worries of the day pounce upon him or her: How will my business do? How will I get to work? What will my boss say? Will I be able to pay my bills on time?

The Previous Rebbe taught that this is why we wash our hands precisely at that moment—because when we take a second to stop and remember the G-d Who gave us life, we also remember that the same G-d will give us our livelihood.

The same concept applies to washing the hands before prayer and eating. This physical action forces us to switch from the material world to the spiritual world, and to remind us that we are about to do something spiritual, something holy.

My friends, while COVID reminded us to wash our hands, let us take a spiritual lesson here and be very careful to keep our hands spiritually clean.