



Sorry, I can't shake your hand!

Holidays

The coronavirus epidemic has a silver lining for Chabad rabbi and their wives – members of the opposite gender do not attempt to shake their hands. There are many Jewish customs which have side health benefits, like Mikvah. But what is the real meaning of Mikvah, and how do we fill in for the High Priest in our day?

No More Hand Shaking

One of the biggest hurdles in a Chasidic rabbi's line of work is not shaking hands with women.

Every time the rabbi meets a woman who has never met a Chasidic rabbi, the woman puts out her hand, and when the rabbi just leaves her hand dangling in the air, it can create a very uncomfortable situation.

Obviously, the rabbi will explain that it's a religious matter and that he has nothing against her personally. But in reality, a lot

of rabbis are very embarrassed by it. And so, a whole set of elaborate excuses have formed over the years around the practice of not shaking hands with women.

Some rabbis will crack a smile and say, “My mother taught me to never touch anything that doesn’t belong to me!” Others will joke, “My wife doesn’t let me”—to which many women have been known to reply, “I wish my husband were Chasidic too!”

But in my own experience, when I go to public events and my wife is standing next to me, if a woman will stick her hand out, my wife will immediately cover for me and take her hand instead. The problem is when I’m by myself—so what I’ll do is make sure I’m holding a cup in one hand and a plate in the other.

The problem with that is that people start thinking I’m the waiter—but it’s worth it so as not to get all caught up in the issue, because no matter how many explanations you give, there will always be women who get offended and will not listen to any explanations.

For example, I know of a Chabad rabbi who was interviewed by his local television station. The station sent down an African-American woman reporter who proceeded to extend her hand to the rabbi when she showed up. The rabbi explained that he doesn’t shake hands for religious reasons—but when she got back to her office, she reported to her superiors that “this rabbi won’t shake hands with black people.”

But now, it’s been an amazing relief - Coronavirus!

No one wants to shake my hand!

Chasidic philosophy teaches us that we have to find the good and the positive in everything. And that includes Coronavirus. So, what's good about the Coronavirus? The fact that people stopped shaking hands.

Until coronavirus, we were the odd men out. We were considered strange. But now, everyone has to admit that the rabbi is always right.

Of course, our rules about shaking hands, or not shaking hands, are for totally different reasons, but still, it made people think twice about something so common as shaking hands—which Judaism has been talking about for over 3,000 years.

But it gets even better. What's the other thing that we are told to do besides not shaking hands? Washing hands.

But throughout the year, Judaism is always busy with the washing of the hands. When we get up in the morning, we wash our hands. Before we sit down to a meal with bread, we wash our hands. Every time we use the restroom, when we step back out, we wash our hands.

Long before modern science knew why it was good to regularly wash your hands, Judaism was teaching to constantly wash your hands.

Of course, like shaking hands, we wash our hands for spiritual reasons, not physical reasons—but the point is this: living by the spiritual laws of Judaism, like washing your hands, has side

physical benefits, like preventing infection and disease.

Physical and Spiritual Bathing

And now, we come to tonight, my friends: Yom Kippur. And the same thing applies: physical benefits from spiritual laws.

Before Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, we not only repeatedly wash our hands, but also immerse our entire bodies in the mikvah. Indeed, many Jews, even those who do not go to the mikvah the whole year, make the effort to immerse in a mikvah on Yom Kippur eve.

We'll get to the reason we go to the mikvah in a minute, but for now, it's worth mentioning that the mikvah has the added benefit of making you physically clean, washing away superficial dirt and impurities on the skin.

Today, of course, most people shower or bathe at least once a day—but in the context of ancient history, washing regularly with water was only adopted by most of human civilization about 200 years ago. Until then, people would go days, weeks or months without bathing.

It's hard to imagine such a world. But for thousands of years, we Jews were surrounded by such a world. And we stood out for a number of reasons—one of which was the fact that we regularly went to the mikvah, which kept us physically cleaner than most.

But physical cleanliness was not the primary purpose of the mikvah.

Mikvah as Repentance

One of the central reasons for going to the mikvah is *teshuvah*, or repentance.

What is this concept called *teshuvah*, repentance? The entire idea of *teshuvah* is the decision, the resolution, a person makes to change and become a better person.

What does that have to do with water?

Well, just like with conversion, part of the conversion process is immersing in a mikvah—the convert goes in a gentile and comes out a Jew—so too on Yom Kippur eve, we all change into new people. That's why we immerse in a mikvah on Yom Kippur eve.

However, that's just what we do nowadays. About 2,000 years ago, when the Holy Temple in Jerusalem stood, the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest, would immerse in the mikvah no less than five times.

Now, this is something that had no precedent.

There are those who go to the mikvah on Yom Kippur eve. There are those who go every every Friday afternoon. Chasidim, for their part, generally go every day.

Still, that's only at most once a day. But *five times in one day*?! What's that all about?

The Kabbalah tells us that there are five names for the Jewish soul: *nefesh*, *ruach*, *neshamah*, *chayah* and *yechidah*. This

means that the soul is divided into five levels. The lowest level is nefesh. Above that is ruach, and above ruach is neshamah.

The words nefesh, ruach and neshamah are found in the Torah itself, and are used in various places throughout the Torah to describe life.

But along comes Kabbalah and reveals to us the two highest levels of the soul, called chayah and yechidah.

Now, on Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol is the representative of the entire Jewish Nation, as we previously mentioned. On Yom Kippur, he would confess everyone's sins, which is why he went to the mikvah five times—each time would purify another level of the collective soul of the Jewish Nation. In other words, he wasn't immersing for himself—he was immersing for everyone.

The Alternative Five

Today, when we don't have a Kohen Gadol and we need to pray for ourselves and do all the spiritual heavy lifting on our own on Yom Kippur, we only go to the mikvah on the eve of Yom Kippur.

However, we do have something we do on Yom Kippur itself five times.

Every day, a Jew prays three formal prayers: *Shacharis*, the morning service; *Minchah*, the afternoon service; and *Maariv*, the night service. On Shabbos, another prayer is added called *Musaf*, which means "addition," making it four prayers.

But once a year, on Yom Kippur, we pray five prayers on the same day: In addition to the three regular prayers and the

Musaf prayer of every Shabbos and holiday, we also add the *Neilah* prayer.

Why specifically five prayers? The answer should be obvious.

The Rebbe explains that each prayer corresponds to a level of the soul. On Yom Kippur night, the first prayer purifies the first level of the soul, nefesh. This is the breath of life - lowest level of the soul which is also found in every animal and living thing.

The Shacharis morning prayer the next day cleans the next level of the soul, ruach, -spirit.

Following that, Musaf cleans the neshamah level of the soul. (This may be why the Yizkor prayer said on Yom Kippur is said just before Musaf—because that point, when the neshamah level of the soul is more exposed, is when a child can connect with the Neshama of his or her dear departed loved ones in the World of Truth.)

At the Minchah prayer time, we connect with the chayah level of our souls.

And at Neilah, we reveal the very essence of the soul, the yechidah level. That's why we end the Neilah service by reciting "*Shema Yisroel, Hashem elokeinu, Hashem Echad!*"—"Hear O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is One!" This is the most important prayer in all of Judaism, and at the end of Yom Kippur, we say "the L-rd is One" because at that time, the Oneness of G-d and the oneness (yechidah) of each Jew merge to become one.

Thus we see that when Jews cry out, “Shema Yisrael!” at Neilah, they are standing at the highest and most spiritual level they reach all year.

And just like one must be fully immersed beneath the water for the mikvah to spiritually clean him or her, so too one must be fully immersed in the Yom Kippur prayers for them to purify us and uplift us. Just like the mikvah doesn't spiritually work if your hand, foot or even the tip of your nose is sticking out, so too must one must not leave one foot out the door when it comes to Yom Kippur prayers. We must totally immerse ourselves.

This Yom Kippur, let us remember that just like the laws of Judaism happen to be also be good for our bodies, they are even better for our souls. So as we begin Yom Kippur, let us strive for as immersive an experience as possible this Yom Kippur.