

תנא דבי אליהו, כל השונה הלכות בכל יום מובטח לו שהוא בן העולם הבא

IT WAS TAUGHT IN THE ACADEMY OF ELIYAHU, WHOEVER STUDIES TORAH LAWS
EVERY DAY IS ASSURED THAT HE WILL BE PRESENT IN THE 'WORLD TO COME'

Chapter 2, Question 4

What is the source of the mitzvah of נטילת ידים (washing hands) in the morning? And is this mitzvah dependant on whether one went to sleep before or after midnight?

If one conducted a census of the most commonly practiced mitzvot by the 'traditional Jew', attending Shul on Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur would no doubt achieve the highest results, whereas other important practices may unfortunately land at the bottom end of the spectrum. But how many people are there in the world who do not wash their hands in the morning? It seems that the mitzvah of נטילת ידים of the morning has become part of every Jew's morning routine regardless of their level of religious observance. And even though this may stem from a basic hygiene perspective, nevertheless it is interesting to see that every Jew fulfills this mitzvah. . .

Or do they really?

In fact, the Shulhan Aruch, whilst detailing the halachic obligation to wash our hands upon waking, also gives us the actual **halachic procedure** or manner in which to do so:¹

ירחץ ידיו ויברך 'על נטילת ידים'

He should wash his hands and recite the blessing of 'Al Netilat Yedayim.'

And later on it states:

ידקדק לערות עליהן מים שלש פעמים להעביר רוח רעה ששורה עליהן

One should be vigilant to pour on them (on the hands) water three times in order to remove the 'Ru'ach Ra'ah' that rests upon them.

1. סימן ד, סעי' א-ב.

So it is evident from the words of Maran that simply rinsing one's hands under the tap in the morning is not sufficient for the mitzvah of *netilat yadayim*. There is a specific procedure involved that clearly takes this mitzvah out of the scope of a basic hygiene requirement. So what is the meaning behind this mitzvah? We can see from the latter section of the Shulhan Aruch above, which gives reference to the **רוח רעה** 'evil spirit', that there is a much deeper significance to the *netilat yadayim* of the morning. What is the **רוח רעה** and why does pouring water on the hands three times help remove it?

Let us first take a look at the various Talmudic sources of this halacha for some important background information. The Talmud in tractate Berachot² recalls the following statement made by the great sage Rabbi Hiya bar Abba regarding the necessary motions of a person upon rising in the morning:

כל הנפנה ונוטל ידיו ומניח תפילין וקורא קריאת שמע ומתפלל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו בנה מזבח והקריב עליו קרבן דכתיב: **ארחץ בנקיון כפי ואסובבה את מזבחה ה'**. (תהילים כו,ו)
Whoever relieves himself and washes his hands and puts on tefillin and recites the Shema and prays, scripture regards him as if he built an altar and offered upon it a sacrifice. As it is written: "I wash my hands in cleanliness and circle around Your altar Hashem."

It is thus evident that already from the Talmudic period the mitzvah of washing ones' hands in the morning was considered very much part of the morning service and was likened to the ancient ritual practices conducted in the Beit Hamikdash. The sage Rava³ considers this mitzvah so special that he says it is as if one immersed his whole body in a mikveh! We also find in tractate Berachot⁴ that the Sages instituted a specific beracha for the washing of hands, which is the same beracha we make today:

כי משי ידיה לימא: **ברוך... אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו על נטילת ידים**

When you wash your hands recite: Blessed [are You, etc] who sanctifies us with His commandments and commands us on washing hands.

2. דף יד:

3. שם

4. דף ס:

Now that we have seen where the mitzvah of *netilat yadayim* of the morning originated from, as well as the *nusach* (words) that form its blessing, our next task is to investigate the various reasons given for this special mitzvah. What we come across first in this topic is a major difference of opinion between the Rosh and the Rashba as to why this mitzvah was instituted.

The **Rosh**⁵ (Rabbenu Asher ben Yehiel 1259-1327) who was one of the earliest of the Rishonim (early halachic authorities) and a prominent commentator on the Talmud, gives us an insight into why the mitzvah of *netilat yadayim* was established:

לפי שידיו של אדם עסקניות הם וא"א שלא ליגע בבשר המטונף בלילה,

תיקנו ברכה קודם שיקרא ק"ש ויתפלל

Due to the reason that one's hands are 'fidgety' and it is not possible that one did not touch unclean parts of the body in the night, therefore a blessing was instituted to recite (netilat yadayim) before the recitation of Kriyat Shema and Prayer.

As we know the Rishonim were very meticulous in their writings, with every word being measured precisely. By being careful in our analysis of the words of the Rosh we can therefore deduce that he holds the following; a) that the mitzvah to do נטילת ידים is in order that one's hands should be **clean for prayer**, and b) that the obligation to make a **beracha** on this mitzvah is also connected to the preparation for prayer.

Therefore one could logically assume that, according to the Rosh, if a person went to sleep wearing gloves, he would not need to wash his hands and make a beracha in the morning! However, the halacha today still obligates one to wash and make a beracha even in such a scenario. Furthermore, according to the Rosh, a person would also have to wash his hands (if dirty) and make a beracha in preparation for the afternoon Minha prayer! But it should be noted that today even though the halacha requires us to wash our hands before davening Minha,⁶ the custom is not make the beracha of *netilat yadayim*.

5. שם פ"ט סי' כג.

6. ש"ע סימן רלג, סעי' ב.

The **Rashba**⁷ (HaRav Shelomo ben Aderet, 1235-1310) disagrees with the Rosh and has a completely different reason why the mitzvah of *netilat yadayim* was instituted. He conveys that every night a person's neshama is removed, renewed and then returned to the body, as we see inherent in the pasuk:⁸

חדשים לבקרים, רבה אמונתך

They are new every morning, great is Your trustworthiness!

[See Essay 1.1 on מודה אני for a more detailed discussion on this verse].

The Rashba therefore says that since in the morning a person experiences a renewal in his soul, it is as if he has been created anew and in order to show appreciation to the Creator for replenishing our souls and returning them to us, it is fitting for us to **sanctify ourselves** every morning by washing our hands from a *keli* (vessel). This is likened to the service of a Kohen in the Beit Hamikdash who would ritually wash and sanctify his hands from the *Kior* vessel before performing his service.

Interestingly, according to the Rashba, if a person did not go to sleep **all night** he would not be required to wash his hands in the morning with a beracha!⁹ This in fact is the accepted halacha today as it is well known that on *tikkun* nights when the congregation stay awake in Shul the whole night, e.g. on the night of Shavuot, we do in fact wash our hands at עלות השחר - the crack of dawn, but without a beracha. The reason why we do wash our hands at all is because there is nevertheless a necessity to wash hands before one davens, albeit we do not say a beracha on this washing.¹⁰

But there is a difficulty with the reasons given by the Rosh and the Rashba above. The Gemara in tractate Shabbat¹¹ reveals another reason entirely why the mitzvah of washing our hands three times in the morning is so crucial. It is this fascinating, but somewhat perplexing reason that takes our essay on to a completely different tangent and leads us to the actual practical application of this halacha today:

7. בתשובותיו ח"א ס"קצא

8. איכה ג, כג

9. גם לדעת הרא"ש אם לא טינף ידיו

10. ע' כה"ח שם אות מז בשם האר"י ז"ל והחיד"א

11. דף קט

תניא: רבי נתן אומר בת חורין היא זו ומקפדת עד שירחוץ ידיו ג' פעמים.

It was taught in a Beraita, Rabbi Natan says; She is a 'free agent' this [impure spirit] and she is stubborn [to remain] until you wash your hands three times!

Thankfully we have Rashi to clarify the Gemara above. Rashi explains that the **בת חורין** 'free agent' is a reference to the **רוח רעה** - *the impure spirit*, which rests upon a person's hands at night during one's sleep. The Amora, Rabbi Natan, reveals that the reason why we wash our hands in the morning is in order to remove this 'impure spirit' and this can only be achieved by **pouring water** on the hands three times (from a vessel).¹²

But why does one need to wash their hands exactly **three times** in order to remove the **רוח רעה**? Based on the Gemara above, the Ari z'l reveals in his sefer Sha'ar HaKavanot¹³ that the **רוח רעה** is a spirit that does not leave the hands easily. This is why Rabbi Natan refers to it as a 'free agent', which connotes an entity that is independent of any higher authority and seemingly free to do what it pleases. It is often described as a very proud¹⁴ and stubborn being, and the Ari z'l says that at each pouring the **רוח רעה** jumps and leaps to avoid the water. However, at each jump it gets weaker and weaker until the third pouring of water completely overpowers and removes it.

It is important to note that the Ari z'l also says that in order to remove the **רוח רעה** one must wash their hands three times **alternately**, i.e. the right hand is washed once first, followed by the left hand and so on until each hand has been washed three times.¹⁵

[See Essay 1.3 for more information on the **רוח רעה**]

12. ע"ע פירוש רבנו חננאל שם.

13. שער הכוונות, דף ב.

14. עין עו"ח, תולדות אות ז, שהביא את המשל 'כאגג מעדנות'.

15. **This is unlike the netilat yadayim procedure for eating bread where the right hand is washed three times consecutively and only afterwards is the left hand washed three times.**

With the information we have so far it is clear now that the **main reason** why we have this special mitzvah of *netilat yadayim* is to **remove the רוח רעה**. And since the source of this reason is from the Talmud (quoted above), we can therefore have no doubt that the Rosh and the Rashba were also fully aware of this reason.¹⁶ So why is it that the Rosh and Rashba do not mention the רוח רעה in their reasons given for *netilat yadayim*? We could answer that they were only coming to explain **why we make a beracha** on this mitzvah, and not why we are required to wash our hands three times, which was already clarified in the Talmud above.

There is another very important aspect to this halacha. The חכמי הקבלה (Sages of Kabbalistic wisdom) hold that there is a decisive factor which determines whether we need to wash our hands with a beracha upon waking or not. The decisive factor is whether one went to sleep before or after **חצות - halachic midnight**. According to the Zohar¹⁷ the night is divided into two parts. The first half of the night, which is from nightfall until halachic midnight, is generally a period of time where negative energies are at their strongest and the רוח רעה is able to rest upon those who are sleeping at this time. Then, at the moment the clock strikes halachic midnight - if a person is asleep he automatically receives a greater level of רוח רעה, which is called **טעמא דמותא - a fraction of death** since his soul has been taken from him.

After midnight, however, the phenomenon of **טעמא דמותא** does not (and cannot) occur. So in essence one does not receive the same high level of רוח רעה if he went to sleep after midnight! If someone was therefore awake at the point of midnight and only went to bed after midnight then there really should be no requirement for him to wash his hands with a beracha upon waking. This is because according to the Zohar there would be no רוח רעה to remove! Based on this information from the Zohar, as well as the teachings of the Rashash¹⁸ (HaRav Shalom Sharabi - one of the greatest of the Kabbalistic Masters: 1720-1777), the Ben Ish Hai was able to conclude the following rulings regarding the laws of *netilat yadayim*.

16. ע' תוספות בשבת דף כה, ורא"ש שם פרק ב סימן יח.

17. זוהר פרשת ויגש רז ע"א.

18. נהר שלום דף פו ע"ב.

The Ben Ish Hai writes¹⁹ that if one **went to sleep before midnight** and woke up before midnight he is required to wash his hands three times consecutively **with a beracha** (NB: this is only if he intends not to go back to sleep). This is because, as explained, the first half of the night has inherent within it negative spiritual energies and therefore the רוח רעה will manifest on such a person.

If one was **awake at the point of midnight** and then went to bed after midnight then he is required to wash his hands three times but **without a beracha**.²⁰ However, the Ben Ish Hai adds a very **important caveat** here based on the teachings of the Rashash. . . Since there is still a lower level of רוח רעה present from midnight until dawn, therefore upon waking one would only be able to wash their hands without a beracha on the condition that before he went to bed he first first: a) recited **birchat hashahar** (the morning blessings), b) recited **tikkun hatzot** (if applicable)²¹ and c) **learnt some Torah**. Only then would he not be required to recite the beracha of 'al netilat yadayim' when he washes in the morning. The Rashash²² revealed that these three procedures prevent a person from receiving the רוח רעה after midnight. Therefore if a person was awake at midnight and then went to sleep without reciting birchat hashahar, tikkun hatzot and learning Torah - he would have to wash with a beracha when he gets up.

We are now left with our last question. Why does water have this amazing ability to remove and nullify the רוח רעה ? The Ben Ish Hai,²³ with his deep knowledge of the mystical, explains that **water** possesses an inherent power to deflect and remove negative spiritual forces and impurities. This is why when a person is in a state of **טמאה tumah** (impurity) he needs to immerse himself in a mikveh of water, which then purifies him. The reason why water has this special quality is because water is the manifestation of the characteristic of **חסדים hassadim** (benevolence), and this quality therefore enables it to deflect that which is spiritually negative or destructive.

19. תולדות, אות יג.

20. This is on the condition that he recited tikkun hatzot and learnt some Torah and then went to bed.

21. There are nights where we do not recite tikkun hatzot, e.g. on Shabbat, Yom Tov, etc.

22. שם

23. הקדמת פרשת תולדות.

It is interesting to observe that water also ‘happens’ to be the primary physical matter or medium for the existence of all life on Earth! This is certainly no coincidence. It is very fitting that water - the only substance in the world that represents ultimate spiritual benevolence (*hassadim*), is also chosen to be the very medium for the most important physical benevolence any living creature could wish for - which is **life** itself!

Let us choose life. . .

Rabbi Yosef Haim David

This document contains divrei Torah. Please treat it with the necessary respect.