

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 5

What are the cases where one is required to wash their hands?

In Essay 2.3, after discussing the importance of *netilat yadayim* (washing our hands) after rising from bed in the morning, we discovered that the reason why one has to pour water on each of the hands three times (alternately from a vessel) is to remove the **רוח רעה** - 'evil spirit' that is present. The Shulhan Aruch¹ then lists various other cases where there is also a halachic requirement to wash one's hands, even if one is not about to pray or recite a beracha:

אלו דברים צריכים נטילה במים: הקם מהמטה, והיוצא מבית הכסא, ומבית המרחץ, והנטל צפרניו, והחולץ מנעליו, והנוגע ברגליו, והחופף ראשו, ויש אומרים אף ההולך בין המתים, ומי שנגע במת, ומי שמפליא כליו, והמשמש מטתו, והנוגע בכנה, והנוגע בגופו בידו.

*These are the cases where there is a necessity to wash [one's hands] with water: One who rises from **bed**, one who comes out of the **toilet**, and from the **bathroom**, one who cuts his **nails**, one who takes off his **shoes**, one who touches his **feet**, one who scratches his **head**, and there are some who even say one who goes to a **cemetery**, and one who touches a human **corpse**, one who removes **lice** from his clothes, one who has **relations**, one who touches a **louse**, and one who touches his **body** with his hand.*

Each of the cases listed above are really a whole topic on their own, but we will aim to briefly summarise the issues associated with each one of them and why one would be required to wash their hands in each scenario. For this task we need to go straight to the Ben Ish Hai who beautifully categorises each of the cases according to their varying levels of severity.²

1. סימן ד, סעי' יח

2. בא"ח, תולדות, אות טז - יז

The cases are categorised by the Ben Ish Hai according to what particular washing procedure is required. There are **three types** of washing procedures that apply to these cases: Those that carry the highest level of severity require washing the hands **three times alternately**. The middle level cases require washing the hands **once**. The lowest or least severe cases require a **quick rinse** of the hands for hygienic reasons. In order to aid the reader we have provided a table that illustrates this:

	Level of severity	Washing procedure	Halachic notes
One who rises from their bed	Highest	Three times alternately	Only when one slept in his bed for at least half an hour, and even in the day. ³
One who enters a toilet	Highest	Three times alternately	Even if the toilet is very clean, and even if one did not actually use the toilet. ⁴
One who has relations	Highest	Three times alternately	This applies to both the man and his wife.
One who goes to a cemetery, or is within four amot (approx 2m) of a human corpse.	Highest	Three times alternately	However, Ben Ish Hai says that after one visits a grave or attends a levaya the custom is not to dry one's hands, so that the memory of the deceased remains with us a little longer. And some say that even if you did not come within 4 amot of the deceased you should still wash in order to remember the deceased. ⁵
One who comes out of a bathroom	Medium	One washing	Or one who comes out of a mikveh.
One who cuts nails	Medium	One washing	Or someone else's nails for that matter. Some are also stringent to wash 3 times.
One who touches shoes	Lowest	Quick rinse	Any shoe that has been worn before.
One who touches covered parts of the body	Lowest	Quick rinse	i.e. parts of the body that are normally supposed to be covered.
One who scratches their head, one who touches a hair louse, or one who rids his garments of lice.	Lowest	Quick rinse	Ridding the garments of lice is not so relevant today - b'H!

3. מחזיק ברכה, קונטרס אחרון אות א', וכן הכריע מו"ר הגר"מ אליהו זצ"ל בספר הלכה פ"ב אות יט', וי"א שהוא ג' דקות ושליש וטוב להחמיר.
4. על אף שיש מקום להקל בשירותים של ימינו (ע' אור לציון ח"ב ס"א-ט') לדינא נכון להחמיר.
5. מו"ר הגר"מ אליהו זצ"ל, שם, אות כב'.

So what is the logic behind the table above? Why does the Ben Ish Hai group these cases according to the various washing procedures they require?

The Ben Ish Hai concluded that those scenarios that carry the highest levels of severity are cases which cause the **רוח רעה** *evil spirit* to reside on one's hands. Even though this level of **רוח רעה** is weaker than the **רוח רעה** of the morning, nevertheless it can only be removed by the same procedure of washing, which is three times alternately. The cases in the medium bracket cause a much weaker level of **רוח רעה**, therefore washing the hands once is sufficient. The lowest level cases are simply to do with good hygienic practice and one can use his own judgement to decide how much rinsing is required to remove the sweat, dirt, etc. from his hands.

There is a significant question that must be addressed at this stage. Why is it so crucial to remove the **רוח רעה** from oneself? What could possibly happen if one left it there?

In fact, the actual reality today is that nothing really does seem to happen! Have we ever heard of any harm befalling a person because he did not wash his hands after waking up from a half an hour nap? Or has someone ever caught an illness because he forgot to wash his hands after he cut his nails?

There must be some serious concerns associated with leaving the hands unwashed in all of these scenarios, and we find that our Hachamim actually had a lot to say on this subject. The Shulhan Aruch himself reveals some of the consequences we are dealing with here:⁶

ומי שעשה אחת מכל אלו ולא נטל,
אם תלמיד חכם הוא **תלמודו משתכח**,
ואם אינו תלמיד חכם **יוצא מדעתו**:

*And he who does any of these [actions listed above] and does not wash,
if he is a Talmid Hacham (Torah Scholar) **he will forget his learning**,
and if he is not a Talmid Hacham **he will eventually lose his sanity!***

שם, וסעי' יט. 6.

The Shulhan Aruch then reveals several other consequences of leaving the hands unwashed. Please note that here he also brings two more scenarios (underlined below), which were not mentioned by the Ben Ish Hai and therefore not listed in the table above:⁷

המקוֹז דם מהכתפים ולא נטל ידיו, מפחד שבעת ימים:

המגלח ולא נטל ידיו, מפחד שלשה ימים:

הנוטל צפרניו ולא נטל ידיו, מפחד יום אחד...

One who lets blood from the shoulders & does not wash hands will be in fear for seven days.

One who shaves and does not wash his hands will be in fear for three days.

One who cuts his nails and does not wash his hands will be in fear for one day.

It is well known that the Torah is the blueprint of creation. The Midrash says⁸ that Hashem looked into the Torah and then created the world, like an architect or builder (lehavdil) who looks at the construction plans and then builds the building. It therefore follows that the many halachot we have serve as the 'instruction manual' of how life should be, of how a Jew can successfully live and operate in this world. Rabbi Haim Palachi of Izmir (Turkey, 1788-1869) in his book 'Kaf HaHaim' quotes very powerful words on the subject of one leaving his hands unwashed:⁹

דאף אם יראה לעינים שלא תאונה אילו רע,

ידע נאמנה שדברי רז"ל חיים וקיימים וכן יהיה וכן יקום!

ואם לא בגופו יהיה בנשמתו,

ואם לא בעולם הזה יהיה בעולם הבה,

ואם יש זכות דתולה בו מנכין לו מזכויותיו !

And even if it is perceived by the eyes that no harm will befall him, know in faith

that the words of our Rabbis z'l are very much alive and guaranteed,

and thus will they be [fulfilled]! and thus will they be established!

And if [such harm will] not befall his body - it will no doubt befall his soul !

and if not in this world - it will be in the world to come !

and if this person has any merits - then his merits will be decreased !

7. שם

8. בראשית מדרש רבה, א, א

9. סימן ה, אות כו, בשם החסד לאלפים

Furthermore, we find that Rabbi Yehezkel Ezra Nissim (Baghdad - late 19th Century), who was a Talmid of the Ben Ish Hai, writes in his sefer **עצי היער** *Atzei HaYa'ar*¹⁰ a small insight into the רוח רעה and what exactly happens when it is left on the hands:

וצריך להזהיר הנשים על זה ביותר כי רוב תקון המאכלים הוא על ידי.

וכתב בספר הזכירה: **אשה שאינה זהירה בנטילת ידים שחרית ג"פ,**

התבשיל שמבשלת מטמטם את הלב ועלול לעשות עבירות על ידי הסט"א השולטת.

*And one needs to particularly caution the **women** on this matter, because most of the food preparations are done by their hands. And it is written in the book 'Zechira': **A woman who is not careful to do netilat yadayim in the morning three times, the food that she cooks will cause 'numbing of the heart' and it is also likely to cause [a person to] commit sins through the presence of the 'sitra ahara' (evil spirit).***

The **עצי היער** then writes something very interesting - that if one observes a vessel fall and smash from the hands of a maidservant you can for sure assume that the reason is because she did not wash her hands in the proper halachic manner in the morning.

It seems therefore, according to the **עצי היער**, that the possibility of contracting the **בלב - Timtoom HaLev** 'numbing of the heart' - is the ultimate concern of not washing away the רוח רעה. *Timtoom HaLev* is a very negative spiritual state to be in - it causes one's **spiritual sensitivity** to become blocked or numbed, often without the person realising it. The consequences of being in this state means that one is far more likely to commit sins, or they may develop and adopt attitudes and philosophies that are totally against Kedusha and Torah values. Often we find people in the Ba'al Teshuva movement fighting tough battles to bring their brethren back to a Torah observant lifestyle, and many times they do not succeed. A lot of this failure is without a doubt attributed to people suffering from **בלב** that ultimately prevents them from being able to grow spiritually or succeed in the learning and understanding of the Torah. Being a holy nation requires us to sanctify ourselves - the holy Torah can only be acquired when one is in a state of **קדושה** holiness and **טהרה** purity.

דף כ, סימן כה. 10.

Rabbi Haim Palachi wrote down¹¹ a very moving and **symbolic dream** he had relating to this topic, which has been loosely translated below. Rabbi Palachi was certain, without a doubt, that this dream was inspired by **רוח הקודש Ru'ah HaKodesh** and it is fitting to sum up and conclude our essay with it . . .

Now with regards to that which I have said above regarding the importance of washing one's hands, I will now relay a true incident which occurred to me...

How on the night of the 31st of Shevat I experienced a powerful night vision, and behold I saw in my dream that I was walking in a beautiful garden.

*The garden was filled with many **flowering roses** of various species of rose of differing colours and types. And I was enjoying the immense fragrance and perfume that emanated from these roses and filled the air.*

*And through the garden passed a **large river** that flowed and **watered** the various rows of plants and rose plantations in order to **sustain them** and **make them grow**. And where I was standing, I noticed that I too was placed amongst the roses. And I then made the following request and this is what I said:*

*“Please give me from these waters so that I can **wash my hands** and thus by this action they will **grow**, and they will **increase**, and they will **multiply**, and they will become **plenty** - the **holy plantations** that emanate from the **Torah** and its **Mitzvot**, for only through water can a man acquire holiness from the Torah, for water gives one the strength to enable growth and renewal through the learning of Torah and fulfillment of Mitzvot and Good Deeds.”*

*These were my words and I awoke,
and I did not forget what I had said,
and now I understand clearly why...*

Rabbi Yosef Haim David

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

11. שם, דף נ: 11.