

Hygiene

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In my callow youth I used to think it absurd to have, as Jewish law requires, to wash and make a blessing every time I went to the toilet. It added another ritual ablution to a long list that started from the moment I woke up. My stern grandfather insisted that I make use of a bowl he placed under my bed, together with a jug of water and a cup. The moment I woke up I had to wash my hands, “negelvasser”, as it was called in Yiddish. My father, on the other hand, was more lenient, and he was satisfied if I walked the few paces to the bathroom.

Then after I went to the “loo” there was another wash and a blessing to thank the Almighty for my bodily functions performing normally, cavities to put things in and others to let things out and all of them working as they were intended. Well, of course they did, I thought. I can’t exactly recall when I realized that it was, indeed, something to be very grateful for if all these intricate, complex and malfunction-prone orifices really did function normally. Of course, as you get older you are reminded all the time of what a miracle it is, and the miracle gets bigger as each year passes.

I do not believe that one of the primary intentions of Jewish ritual is hygiene or physical well being. There are too many exceptions and besides you can adhere to the letter of many laws and still be an unhealthy, cigarette smoking overweight slob. Even if the Torah itself commands that we take good care of our bodies—it’s like lots of laws that are often disregarded in practice even by the most Orthodox. But hygiene and physical wellbeing actually turn out to be very important byproducts of leading a religious life. This has even got us into serious trouble more than once, most notably during the Black Death. As Jews were expected to wash after going to the toilet and before meals, it is hardly surprising that they were less likely to be the victims of a disease that spread through unhygienic conditions. Because they were less likely to succumb, Jews were accused of poisoning the wells.

If hygiene, in itself, is not the reason for our laws, it is connected. The consistent theme that underlies all Jewish ritual is, to take a phrase from Georgian literature, “Only Connect” to “Think About the Consequences.” Thinking before acting can add a spiritual dimension to everything one does. It may be that avoiding certain foods has beneficial side-effects or that abstaining from sex during a period lessens the likelihood of catching certain types of diseases, or that circumcision reduces susceptibility to certain types of infections; but the importance of such ritual activities has much more to do with sanctity than hygiene, as the great anthropologist Mary Douglas has often pointed out (most relevantly in [Purity and Danger](#)).

Perhaps adhering to Jewish ritual is, as Professor Yeshaya Leibovitz loved to claim, simply an act of obedience and submission to a higher dictate. Perhaps it is, as the Kabbalists believe, a supernatural matrix that links our

actions to heaven where each action establishes a secret connection. Whatever the reason, in my youth I thought it a bind, and I bridled at the inconvenience to have to bother all the time. Now I thank the Almighty for the understanding that maturity (of sorts) is giving me. Because I know myself how easy it is to say, "What the heck," and just rub your hands against your trouser leg or dab a few drops from the faucet (as the Yanks call taps) in a symbolic gesture. But actually washing hands properly, and being forced into a complex ritual each time one goes to the loo, and having to recite a serious blessing afterwards, is terribly important on hygienic as well as religious grounds because it does indeed force you to stop and think.

I wouldn't want you to think I frequent "conveniences" like American Senators or British MPs who prowl for sexual encounters except I am recording scientific data. Heaven forefend. Neither do I stand around in a dirty raincoat noting those who walk past the sinks after relieving themselves in public conveniences. But I have noticed how often, or in fact how rarely, people actually do wash their hands after excusing themselves. I am just amazed that even in airport lounges or places of intellectual entertainment, such as concert halls and theatres, or at fancy restaurants (even kosher ones), the vast majority, and I repeat, the vast majority of well-brought-up Western men do NOT wash their hands after they handle certain parts of their anatomy that are best left unmentioned, even if the Good Lord created them too!

According to The Lancet, medical tests taken at sophisticated bars (not the grubby boozers of the unwashed masses) have shown that the levels of bacteria from excreta to be found in bowls of peanuts and snacks that are shared, are dangerously high. In our modern, health-conscious world, the majority of us are spreading our dirty stuff around without second thought. I know some people think we have become cleanliness freaks and that's why so many allergies have proliferated in modern families.

How wonderful, therefore, that our ancient and, as some sadly suggest, old-fashioned, restrictive, narrow-minded, primitive religion requires us to wash our hands several times with a goodly measure of water, and praise the Lord, and think, after relieving ourselves. If hygiene were the only reason then of course we would have to add soap and disinfectant and a lot more. And indeed I would heartily recommend that too. But at least if we adhere to the minimum traditional requirement when we come out of the toilet and shake someone's hand, we can do so with confidence, secure in the thought that we have done our bit to avoid passing something unhealthy on to our fellow creatures. Indeed, respect for God should lead to respect for humanity.