

Washing Hands

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

When I was a child and went to visit my grandfather, he always put a bowl and a cup of water next to my bed at night, so that I'd wash my hands first thing when I woke up in the morning. Neigelvasser, it was and is called in Yiddish.

Actually, the first thing I did (and still do) was to say "Modeh Ani", a short prayer to thank God for my being alive. Later on, in rebellious years, I used to wonder about the words it included: "Thank you for returning my soul to me." So the soul, whatever it was, miraculously escaped my body and flew up somewhere into space and wandered around for eight hours or so before being condemned to the jail of my body for another day? It didn't make sense, unless "soul" was another way of talking about "consciousness". But then my consciousness isn't taken away and returned to me—it's a state of being, not an organ. As I got even older, but still rebellious, I realized that prayers are poetry and poetry is not literal or scientific prose.

But back to my hand washing. My father did not put a bowl of water next to the bed. The text says "you shouldn't go four amot before washing", and he followed the view that the "four amot" was not necessarily literal. "Four amot" is a term used in halachic writing that may often mean "your space"; it could be applied to a space you were in, such as your house. So washing one's hands was something to be done, but you didn't need a tape measure to fulfill the mitzvah. (And I should add that this washing ritual has to be done whenever one goes to the toilet, although a good rinse under the tap is good enough. One doesn't have to lug one's cup and bowl around all day like a mendicant fakir.)

The morning wash was a doddle compared to washing before meals. There one had to be particularly careful to check the rim of the cup first, then draw the water oneself, pour carefully three times over each hand, starting with the right, then raise one's hands so that the water dripped downwards. After that, one had to dry them very carefully, while at the same time reciting the blessing. Believe me, there were all kinds of refinements I learnt of over time, and different customs. But the fact is that observant Jews wash their hands every time they wake up, eat a meal (or bread), or go to the loo.

Often as I watch other people so punctiliously walk up to the sink, crouch over, check their hands, give them a good wash if they are dirty, then take the cup, measure in the right minimum amount, pour it over their hands with the care of someone handling precious elixir, I wonder what sort of neurotic, obsessive nutcases Jewish ritual is producing. Is this what religion is all about? Is God looking down kvelling?

I have been giving a course on Jewish history and having started with Hammurabi (yes, I know he wasn't Jewish). I have arrived at the Black Death that ravaged western and central Europe from 1340-1410 and decimated the population. Rumor spread that the hated Jews, in league with the Devil, had

poisoned the wells. The result was that more than half the Jewish population of Europe was massacred. Whole communities perished: Augsburg, Barcelona, Bern, Cervera, Chillon, Cologne, Frankfort, Freiberg, Munich, Spires, Strasburg, Tarrega, Worms, and Wurzburg, to mention only the cases of complete destruction. Thousands perished elsewhere.

It didn't take much for priests and monks to whip up a frenzy against the hated Jews, killers of their god (as if), heretics, unbelievers anyway, condemned to perish in the fires of hell. And a little loot on the side didn't go amiss. But there was another factor in getting the masses to turn on the Jews. Fewer Jews were dying, proportionately, than Christians. The Jews must be guilty. The historical record is that many Jews did indeed die too. They were in the main herded into confined stinking ghettos (even before it became obligatory), where contagion spread rapidly. But the obvious reason they suffered less was that Jews washed their hands far more regularly than the others, and certainly before eating.

Jump to our age. In the season of colds and flu, we are all told to wash hands regularly. If you have been anywhere near a public urinal, even one in a swanky restaurant, you'll know that most people do not wash their hands before eating or after going to the toilet. The amount of contamination that is passed on by handshaking, handling money, eating snacks from a common bowl, let alone strap-hanging, is frightening. But do people care? How many bother, even if they know they should? And how many wash as a matter of routine during the course of a normal day? Very, very few, I can tell you.

That is precisely why a religious ritual can be so practical and utilitarian. I do agree it doesn't need to be obsessive, but better an obsessive hand washer than a passer-on of E. coli or whatever. So scoff if you like, but I'm glad I was conditioned to wash my hands, and make a bracha, and thank God I'm alive and my body is functioning pretty well. Happy Healthy Days!