

Don't Kiss!

Here is a hilarious if sacrilegious clip, in the spirit of Purim, from over five years ago when no one had even heard of something called Covid.

<https://na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fyoutu.be%2FncKtUWnZaA&data=05%7C01%7C%7C0f63c06ebfd547c6669208db1d73b419%7C84df9e7fe9f640afb435aaaaaaaaaaaa%7C1%7C0%7C638136154996370333%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjojMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=b17ZCTxeJqri3oGljjPfvzQA8LpcYUs176%2B2S8K%2FRI%3D&reserved=0>

Recently a prominent Charedi Israeli rabbi has warned his community not to kiss mezuzahs in case they pick up some new infection. Despite the current fashion, this custom was not one our family ever did. But we were of course very conscious of cleanliness. Washing hands was always a huge feature of our lives. It began the moment one woke up. When I visited my stern grandfather, he would place a bowl under my bed, together with a jug of water and a cup. He insisted I had to wash my hands, *Neigel Vasser*, as it was called in Yiddish, (other terms are used in different communities nowadays). My father, on the other hand, was more lenient. He was satisfied if we walked a few paces to the bathroom. We washed before we prayed, and we washed before we sat down to eat a meal. We washed every time we came out of the toilet, and we thanked the Almighty that our body was functioning normally.

I can't recall when I realized that there was a reason for all this. To wake up and be happy to be alive and be very grateful if all the intricate body orifices functioned normally. And as one gets older be reminded of what a miracle life is as each year passes. The importance of cleanliness is as important today as it was thousands of years ago. Sadly, this religious obligation could also get us into trouble. As during the Black Death when Jewish homes were less likely to be infected. Since we suffered less, thanks to our religion, the rest of Europe thought that we poisoned the wells and were in league with the devil.

Today I have noticed how rarely, people wash their hands after excusing themselves. I am amazed that in public spaces the majority of well-brought-up people 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 just grubby boozers) 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 infections around without a second thought. And how many working parents pack their sick children off to school?

Another issue that seemed excessive at the time, but Covid has given new significance to, was the idea of not touching a person of another sex, *Negiah*. This surely was taking "building a fence around religious law" to extremes. In much of the world, adult kissing on the cheek is regarded as polite behavior. But in Charedi circles it is taboo. What was once thought of

as pietistic excess is being taken very seriously elsewhere. Except of course for the millions of mainly young swingers who don't seem to give a toss whether they catch anything infectious or not. So long as they can rave the night away.

I do not believe that the primary motivation for Jewish rituals 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, drunken slob. Even if the Torah itself commands that we take good care of our bodies, it like lots of laws, is often disregarded in practice even by the most orthodox. But hygiene and physical well-being, actually turn out to be very important byproducts of leading a religious life.

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 one establishes a secret connection. What once I thought excessive now makes sense. Washing hands and having to recite blessings may be a nuisance but it does indeed force you to stop and think. And so does who you kiss!

If hygiene, in itself, is not the reason for our laws, it is connected. To add an extra spiritual dimension to everything one does even the most mundane. 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 real importance of such ritual activities have as much to do with sanctity as hygiene, as the great anthropologist Mary Douglas often pointed out.

How wonderful, therefore, that our ancient and, as some suggest, old-fashioned, primitive religion requires us to wash our hands several times a day and give thanks after relieving ourselves. So that if we adhere to the minimum traditional requirement of washing our hands before putting food into our mouths or coming out of the toilet and shaking someone's hand, we may have done our bit to avoid passing something unhealthy on to ourselves and our fellow creatures.