



חבורת מהות היהדות

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From the Chaburah
By: Adam Friedmann

Varieties of *Netilat Yadayim*

The first halacha in the third chapter of Rambam's *Hilchot Keriat Shema* is about the obligation to wash one's hands (*netilat yadayim*) before reading the Shema. Many people are familiar with the requirement to wash hands upon waking up in the morning and before eating bread. Where does the obligation to wash hands before reading the Shema come from and what does it mean? To understand this obligation better, we need to analyze the primary sources in the Gemara and consider the different views of the Rishonim.

Primary sources

There are two important passages in the Gemara about hand washing that are relevant here. The first one appears on *Berachot* 14b-15a (Koren translation):

And Rabbi Yoḥanan said: One who seeks to accept upon himself the complete yoke of the kingdom of Heaven should relieve himself, wash his hands, don phylacteries, recite Shema, and pray, and that is acceptance of the complete Kingdom of Heaven. On a similar note, Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba said that Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Anyone who relieves himself, washes his hands, dons phylacteries, recites Shema, and prays, the verse ascribes credit to him as if he built an altar and offered a sacrifice upon it, as it is written: "I will wash in purity my hands, and I will encircle the altar of the Lord" (Psalms 26:6).

Here's the second passage (*Berachot* 60b, Koren translation):

When one awakens, he recites: My God, the soul You have placed within me is pure... Upon hearing the sound of the rooster, one should recite: Blessed...Who gave the heart [sekhvi] understanding to distinguish between day and night....Upon donning phylacteries on his head one should recite: Blessed...Who has made us holy through His commandments and has commanded us with regard to the mitzva of phylacteries. Upon ritually washing his hands: Blessed...Who has made us holy through His commandments and has commanded us with regard to the washing of the hands.

The first passage positions washing hands as part of the preparation for reading the Shema and praying. The second source is more ambiguous. It seems to position hand washing and the blessing made over it in the context of the series of blessings that we make at the start of the day (*birkot hashachar*). Are the two sources talking about the same hand washing? Is the blessing prescribed in the second source also relevant to the hand washing in the first source? These ambiguities form the basis of the various positions of the Rishonim.

Rishonim

One way to line up the positions of the Rishonim is based on the question of whether the hand washings described in our passages are a means to achieving something else, like cleanliness, or a necessity on their own. For example, hand washing before meals is an independent necessity. Chazal required this hand washing regardless of whether a person's hands are clean and pure or not. On the other end, the hand washing that kohanim must do before *birkat kohanim*, is, at least according to the Rambam, a means of ensuring clean hands (see *Hilchot Tefillah* 15:5).

Based on this distinction, a range of views emerge in the Rishonim:

- According to the **Rashba** (Responsa 1:191), the second passage is talking about a necessary kind of hand washing. This is the washing we do when we wake up in the morning. We do it to mirror the Kohanim in the *Beit Hamikdash* who would wash their hands before starting the daily service. Only this washing requires a blessing. The washing described in the first passage is only a means to having clean hands while praying and never requires a blessing.
- According to the **Rosh** (*Berachot* 9:23), both passages are talking about the same kind of hand washing. Fundamentally, this kind of washing is a means to having clean hands for prayer. We see that quite clearly in the first passage. According to the Rosh, even though one does not usually have to make a blessing when washing their hands to clean them, when this is done in preparation for prayer one must make a blessing. He also assumes that one's hands are moving about at night and definitely become dirty. Therefore one must always wash their hands and make a blessing in the morning. For the other daily prayers, it depends if they cleaned their dirty hands just before praying.
- The **Rambam** (*Keriat Shema* 3:1, *Tefilla* 4:1-2) also seems to hold that both passages are talking about the same hand washing. However, in his view they are both referring to washing that is necessary in and of itself. We know this because he doesn't make the washing conditional on dirty hands. Furthermore, the Rambam (*Berachot* 6:2) lists all the cases where one makes a blessing over hand washing. He includes washing for eating, the Shema, and prayer. He doesn't include washing for *Birkat Kohanim*, because in that case the washing is only a means of cleanliness. This further indicates that the Rambam views the washing for the Shema and prayer as inherently necessary.

Next week we'll consider what bearing these views have in understanding the philosophy behind washing hands for the Shema.

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

Berachot 7:2 — Corrupting Influences

In last week's mishnah, we discussed how the halachot surrounding mealtime elevate the social aspect of the meal by constructing a concept of “togetherness.” This is apparent in the laws of the *zimun*, which strictly exclude certain individuals from this final stage of the meal. Indeed, many people that one could theoretically eat with are nevertheless excluded from the *zimun* for that same meal. Particularly in *Berachot* 7:1, we saw a focus on forming a group with an acceptable level of commitment to Jewish law and practice.

This week's mishnah seems to articulate a different but complementary aspect of this elevated togetherness. The mishnah begins by teaching that women, Canaanite slaves, and children are not included in the *zimun*. This is surprising, given that an earlier mishnah has already taught us that all three of these groups are obligated in *birkat hamazon*. This is our first indication that the laws of *zimun* are aiming at something more exacting.

The commentators attempt to explain this surprising exclusion, and there are numerous approaches. At one extreme, Rabbeinu Yonah cites Rashi who holds that even a single woman may not be included, whether for a *zimun* of three or ten people. The rationale is simply that the company of women is not considered pleasant or proper. At the other extreme, Rabbeinu Tam and Rabbeinu Simcha hold that a woman may always be included, whether to complete a *zimun* of three or ten. According to this approach, the mishnah only means to prohibit a *zimun* composed exclusively of women and slaves, without any Jewish men present, due to a concern for immorality.

The situation is similar with respect to children. The commentators debate whether the mishnah means to exclude children absolutely (Rosh) or only those who are not old enough to understand that their blessing is to Hashem (Rambam). This debate continues on to the Shulchan Aruch and Rema.

The *zimun* represents our coming together as a cohesive unit in the praise of Hashem, and we saw in last week's mishnah how that cohesiveness must be grounded in a shared commitment to Jewish practice. In this mishnah, we see how the halachah further refines this social aspect of the meal, excluding situations which are likely to result in immorality or which include participants that cannot fully appreciate their role in the *zimun*, i.e. children. In constraining the *zimun* in this way, our mishnah reminds us how vulnerable our spiritual gatherings are to corrupting influences. Even in our desire to include others in our praise of Hashem, we must remain attuned to the dynamics and risks involved.

Sforno on the Parshah
By: Nochum Spiegel

The *Brit* of the *Brit*

Interactions between two sides can exist in a variety of ways. In Hashem's development of a relationship with mankind He utilizes the term *brit*. In our *parsha* (*perek* 17) when Avraham is instructed regarding the *mitzvah* of *milah*, the term appears thirteen times. What is the nature of this *brit* and how does it enhance the spiritual life of Avraham and his descendants?

Due to common usage one may have the tendency to simply substitute the term *brit* for the *mitzvah* of *milah* in the context of our *perek*. However the term is used multiple times before *milah* is even introduced. The function of this *brit* goes beyond the one time act of performing a circumcision.

The Sforno explains that Avraham is first told ***Hithalech L'fani V'bye Tamim*** — whichever path or actions you may choose in life, one should always be looking towards Hashem. Through analyzing the ways He conducts Himself and interacts with the creation we learn the proper ideas and actions which we are meant to incorporate into our behavior and conceptions. We are then equipped to make the decisions in life which advance us to the highest spiritual levels. Hashem then introduces His response to a life lived with such a focus. I will establish My *brit* between Me and you and your children after you for generations, an everlasting *brit*, ***Liyot L'cha L'Elokim*** and for your children after you (*Bereishit* 18:7). To be a G-d for you, meaning a direct connection without any intermediary force dampening the relationship. The name Elokim indicates eternity (see Sforno *Bereishit* 1:1), indicating that your existence will transcend into the eternal as only befitting a connection with Elokim. Hashem then promises possession of Eretz Yisrael and the ability to utilize its unique spiritual and physical properties to further enhance our opportunities for ***Liyot Labem L'Elokim***.

This *brit* is not exclusive to Avraham. It extends to his children and future descendants as well. It is therefore integral that he raise them with this life perspective of ***Hithalech L'fani*** so that they too can merit eternal existence.

Mitzvat milah is now introduced and described as an *obt brit*. A sign/symbol of remembrance. The *milah* is a marker forged in flesh carried with us at all times and locations, reminding us in all circumstances to place Hashem's ways as our guiding beacon. Its position on our bodies is not happenstance. It is placed on the body part responsible for the continuity of the human species, representing the continual/eternal existence achieved by our *brit* with Hashem. It is also the organ of reproduction, indicating that the *brit* is passed on to children and the parents' role in ensuring that.

In each generation, as the eighth day arrives, a new ***Hithalech L'fani*** rings out and another of Avraham's descendants answers the call, forming a *brit* for himself and for his child with Hashem.