

Tetzaveh 5780

Now Wash Your Hands

Today's parashah mostly comprises the instructions for making the sacred clothes to be worn by Aaron and his sons in their service as priests in the Mishkan, the desert sanctuary. But we should also note that Moses is commanded to *lead Aaron and his sons up to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and wash them with water* [Shemot 28:42]. In the words of the old proverb, it would appear that cleanliness is really next to Godliness.

How does that washing translate into our own tradition?

One obvious answer is that as a people we continue to wash our hands at important ritual moments. One of the first things we do if we follow the traditional liturgy of waking up is a ritual handwashing with what is known in Yiddish as *negel vasser*. We wash before and after we eat bread (the 'after' ritual is fell out of use but is being revived and involves a cup being passed around the table for people to rinse their fingers at bentsching stage). We wash before we eat dipped fruit and vegetables. Traditionally we wash after we have touched a part of our body that is usually covered, we wash after going to the bathroom and we wash as we leave a cemetery.

In fact we wash our hands so often that the Rabbis of the Talmud created blessings for this act that we still use. Before we wash our hands for ritual purposes, we say *al netilat yadayim*. (If you get the opportunity without crowding her, you should really listen to Reeva Adelman recite this one.) *Netilat yadayim* really means 'on lifting up our hands' and it echoes the priestly rituals that were developed based on our parashah. And there is a special brachah for when we come out of the bathroom that acknowledges the fragility and mystery of our bodies and the way they work.

But handwashing doesn't only have ritual significance. Some believe that the frequency with which we washed our hands over the course of our history was a major factor in our survival. The historical jury is out on the question of whether the Jewish death rate during the Black Death - the medieval plague that swept through Europe in the mid-1300s - was actually lower than in other populations, but it's certain that Jews were blamed for it,. One of the reasons offered for this is precisely the handwashing and frequent house cleaning that is part of the pattern of Jewish religious life. But it's not altogether clear this was the case.

We do know for certain that in 1850 in Vienna, a cantankerous Jewish, Hungarian doctor by the name of Ignaz Semmelweis, urged his colleague obstetricians to introduce a change in their practice of going from childbed to childbed to help women deliver. "Wash your hands," he urged them. The rate of women dying from childbed fever in hospitals at the time was at least 10 times higher than at home, and Semmelweis believed this was due to doctors transferring sepsis from bed to bed. A decade before Pasteur's and Lister's work on bacteria and antiseptics, Semmelweis's students were washing their hands and saving lives.

The Jewish practice of handwashing is even mentioned - favorably - in the World Health Organizations' guidelines on hand hygiene, issued in 2006, and I found the practice mentioned in a number of scientific articles that continue to advocate thorough hand washing for health care workers - though I confess I didn't fully understand them.

And of course, hand washing is in the news once again now.

A few days ago the Rabbinical Assembly published a set of unofficial halakhic guidelines about the coronavirus. As well as discussing what might need to happen if we become confined to home, and what forms of technology could be used in that case, the guidelines open with the straightforward announcement that 'all should follow advice regarding hygiene and handwashing.' (By the way, the guidelines also suggest that we should refrain from kissing ritual objects at this time, and also from handshaking. I'm also going to need to stop hugging for a while.)

And as far as the advice regarding hygiene and handwashing goes, one theme is becoming very clear - while masks are not effective unless you already have the virus and most hand cleansers are antibacterial rather than antiviral, washing our hands, for a period of time, with soap, is one thing that could make a difference.

So it's time to claim back our practice of handwashing and perform it as often as we can.

And I have a few suggestions from our tradition - ancient and modern - that I hope will help us take the recommended act of handwashing and re-elevate it back into a mitzvah.

First of all, just a reminder of the CDC guidelines on handwashing:

Follow these five steps every time.

Wet your hands with clean, running water (warm or cold), turn off the tap, and apply soap.

Lather your hands by rubbing them together with the soap. Lather the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and under your nails.

Scrub your hands for at least 20 seconds.

Rinse your hands well under clean, running water.

Dry your hands using a clean towel or air dry them.

That's the physical stuff. But remembering that handwashing started out as a spiritual practice, what can we do with our minds and our focus during those 20 seconds? I have three suggestions:

1 - We can sing. There are memes all over the internet about what we can sing - they include the choruses of Jolene, Take On Me, Any Dream Will Do and two rounds of Happy Birthday. But in this particular community, perhaps we want to use the handwashing song that has spread all over the USA in summer camps but clearly originated here:

*Oh when the Jews go wash their hands,
Oh when the Jews go wash their hands,
Oh, how I want to be in that minyan,
When the Jews go wash their hands!*

Sing that twice and we've made our 20 seconds.

2 - We can pray. The specific prayer that is prescribed for after the bathroom is on page 99 and we'll be studying it in this morning's class after Kiddush. I've also made copies of a new prayer by Trisha Arlin that incorporates the *Netilat Yadayim* brachah - please take one home with you if you wish.

3 We can create - our own kavvanah. In Hebrew or in English, with words or without - let's just pause for 20 seconds and focus on the act we are performing and why we are doing it.

Let's remember how handwashing began - with priests, with sacred service. These are intimidating times; it is even more important to come together as community - whether physically or not - and support each other and our city. As we do so, let us not forget that guarding each other's health is sacred service as well.

Shabbat shalom.