

Ritual Hand Washing: Can an Ancient Ritual Be Given New Meaning?

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Advisor: Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman**

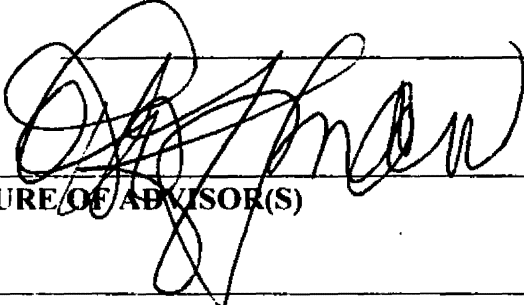
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Rabbinic Thesis: *Ritual Hand Washing: Can an Ancient Ritual Be Given New Meaning?*

Advisor: Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman

Date: February 28, 2005

This thesis explores the ancient Jewish ritual of hand washing and suggests ways in which Reform Jews, today, can use hand washing and the accompanying blessing, as a part of new rituals.

Chapter 1 explores the origins of ritual hand washing before eating. Chapter 2 explores the origins of ritual hand washing upon awakening in the morning. Chapter 3 proposes four new rituals that include hand washing before eating in group settings, but focus on the silence between the washing and the *Motzi*. Chapter 4 proposes a new ritual that includes a modification of the hand washing blessing, and uses the verb "*nataf*" in its original sense meaning to lift, rather than to wash. This ritual is one of self-healing, in which the ill person prays to God to help him or her "lift the hands." The thesis also contains an Introduction, Conclusion, Bibliography, and Acknowledgements page.

The last time a thesis on ritual hand washing, or *n'tilat yadayim*, was written by a New York HUC-JIR rabbinical student was 1955, by Rabbi Bernard Zlotowitz. This thesis, in some ways, continues the work of Rabbi Zlotowitz, but offers a different slant: My ultimate goal was to see if I could take an ancient ritual, unknown to most Reform Jews and rejected by those familiar with it, and give it new meaning and use for Reform Jews. I have partly tried to answer the question: What in our tradition that we have thrown out can we bring back and still make meaningful?

For the first two chapters, I used mostly *tannaitic* and *amoraic* texts -- *Mishnah*, *Tosefta*, and the *Talmuds*. For final two chapters, I used contemporary materials (books, articles, and writings on the Internet) that focused on silence and healing.

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Introduction

On one of my first *Shabbatot* in Jerusalem, during my first year at HUC-JIR, the class held Friday night services in the campus synagogue and then headed to the *mo-adon* for a potluck dinner. We made *Kiddush*, and then, one by one, students formed a line into the kitchen. I knew they weren't getting the food; it was already on the tables. Instead, they were taking the time to ritually wash their hands in the kitchen sink. Each student washed, recited the blessing, and left the kitchen in silence. As more and more students emerged from the kitchen, those who were done washing began to chant a *niggun*. This scene continued until every last student who wished to ritually wash returned from the kitchen. Then, the chanting ended, we said the *Motzi*, and we ate.

I watched in stunned silence. The ritual wasn't foreign to me; my years of studying and breaking bread in multi-denominational settings had readily acquainted me with the Jewish ritual of handwashing before eating. But I had never seen Reform Jews engage in the practice, and I didn't know what to make of future Reform rabbis, cantors, and educators participating in something that seemed entirely alien within our movement. (I quickly came to realize that the year in Israel is all about experimenting with rituals and practices, including the wearing of *kippot* and *tallitot*, laying *t'fillin*, keeping *kosher*, and many more. Ritual handwashing was just a part of that.)

As the weeks and months progressed, I, too, began to ritually wash before eating – but only when I was with a group on Friday night. I especially enjoyed the silence, or the chanting of a *niggun*, between the *Kiddush* and the *Motzi*. I recall that I was challenged to remember the words, and I was grateful for the many places in Jerusalem that had signs over their sinks with the words of the blessing.

When I returned to the States, I all but stopped ritually washing on Friday nights. Most *Shabbatot* were spent at the homes of congregants or clergy who went from *Kiddush* to *Motzi*, pausing only to bless their children; or, at my own home, rushing to eat dinner before running out the door to services. In the latter situation, something had to give, given the scheduling constraints, and hand washing was an easy choice.

During the past year or so, my partner Shira and I have had the opportunity to have *Shabbat* dinner at home most Friday nights before we head off to our respective student pulpits. And ritual handwashing has once again become a sometime part of our routine. Not only do we have a *n'tilat yadayim* cup that sits by our kitchen sink, but we also have a towel with the words "*al n'tilat yadayim*" embroidered on it, and a ring holder to house our finger jewelry while we wash.¹ Do we engage in the ritual every week? No. But we do so frequently. I'm not sure why we do it, which is probably one reason we are comfortable skipping it when "we just don't feel like it." We'd never consider skipping the candle lighting, the *Kiddush*, or the *Motzi*. I am intrigued by my own ambivalence, which has only grown since I began doing research for this thesis.

I have often asked myself why Reform Jews, now apparently so comfortable with the ritual traditions of candle lighting, *Kiddush*, and *Motzi* (at least on *Shabbat*) either have no awareness or understanding of ritual handwashing, or have out and out rejected it. Before I began my thesis research, I would have offered the following hypothesis: Ritual handwashing is connected to some practice during Temple times (one reason Reform Jews would reject it), or contains within it some notion of impurity or warding off evil

1. The subject of *chatzitzah* – that no foreign object, particularly jewelry, may come between the hands and the water – is beyond the scope of this thesis.

spirits or both (a second reason Reform Jews would reject it). Now I know: both are true. It becomes obvious then, why the practice was omitted by the early reformers. And as Reform Jews of the current generation have sought to include certain rituals long lost to Reform Judaism, I'm not surprised that knowledgeable Reform leaders have not steered Reform Jews toward a practice that harkens back to the Temple and is meant to address our inherent impurity.

So I'm left with two questions. First, is there any place in Reform Judaism for a traditional Jewish ritual whose origin conflicts with one or more basic theological tenets of Reform Judaism? Second, is it possible to re-introduce into Reform Judaism a problematic traditional Jewish ritual, but give it a new interpretation and use?

I believe that the answer to the first question could be "yes," but that the educational undertaking necessary to teach Reform Jews about traditional rituals, *halakhah*, theology, and metaphor hardly makes the exercise worth the effort. Consider the reaction to the inclusion of *m'chayei meitim* in two places in the *G'vurot* of the *Amidah* -- without any explanation -- in the first draft of the movement's new prayerbook, *Mishkan T'filah*. The oppositional outcry was enormous, and the final draft will include four instances of *m'chayei hakol*, with *m'chayei meitim* following in parenthesis.

To the second question, I would suggest that the answer is a resounding "yes." Reform Jews, like most practicing Jews, enjoy ritual. Ritual helps us put our lives, or even just a moment of our lives, into some kind of order, and help us make meaning out of a world or condition that can seem chaotic. Rituals also help us forge our identities as Jews, or as a specific "kind" of Jew -- in this case, "Reform."

The subject of ritual handwashing -- *n'tilat yadayim* -- is huge. While I have limited

my discussion in this thesis to hand washing before eating and upon rising, this *mitzvah* applies to several other situations:²

- after excreting bodily waste
- after filing nails
- after removing shoes
- after combing the hair
- after touching parts of the body that are normally covered
- after leaving a cemetery or participating in a funeral
- after engaging in sexual intercourse
- before reciting the *Shema* (this will briefly be discussed in this thesis when it relates to hand washing upon rising)
- before reciting *Birkat Hamazon* (this will briefly be discussed in this thesis when it relates to hand washing before eating)
- before eating parsley during the Passover *seder*, and
- before reciting *Birkat Hakohanim* (by the priests, whose hands are washed by the Levites).

Regarding handwashing before eating and upon rising, some of the earliest *halakhah* on the subject is found in the *Mishnah* (especially *Yadayim* and *B'rakhot*). Other early *halakhot* are in the *Tosefta*, and we find both *halakhic* and *aggadic* passages on ritual handwashing in the *Babylonian Talmud* and the *Jerusalem Talmud*. The *midrashim* also contain lessons about *n'tilat yadayim*. And of course, the *tannaim* and *amoraim* were not the only ones to teach about it. Maimonides, Caro, and others have all addressed the topic

2. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 12 (Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971): 998-999.

in great detail.

In order to narrow my topic to a manageable length for a rabbinic thesis, I have chosen to focus as follows: I limit my *halakhic* and *aggadic* passages to certain *tannaitic* and *amoraic* sources – *Mishnah*, *Tosefta*, *Yerushalmi*, *Bavli*, and early *midrashim*. In Chapters 1 and 2, I review these sources as they relate to two aspects of *n'tilat yadayim* – before eating and upon waking in the morning. I have chosen this order, rather than what might appear to be the more logical reverse order, because the ritual apparently began in relation to food and then was expanded to include awakening.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I propose several rituals in response to the second question I raised, namely, whether is it possible to re-introduce into Reform Judaism a problematic traditional Jewish ritual, but give it a new interpretation and use. In Chapter 3, I suggest four uses of *n'tilat yadayim* before eating, but in ways that explore the role of communal silence, something with which we Reform Jews are not particularly comfortable. In Chapter 4, I suggest a use of *n'tilat yadayim* upon waking in the morning, as part of a ritual of self-healing.

Chapter 1 – *N'tilat Yadayim* Before Eating

The *halakhic* obligation for Jews to wash their hands and recite a blessing before eating originally applied to a situation far more narrow than “any Jew eating any meal containing bread.”³ Initially, the law applied only to the Temple priest as he prepared to eat the *k'doshim*, as we find in *Shabbat* 14b-15a (and in a very similar text in *Eruvin* 21b):

ואכתי שלמה גזר דא"ר יהודה אמר שמואל בשעה שתיקן שלמה עירובין
ונטילת ידים יצתה בת קול ואמרה בני אם חכם לבך ישמח לבי גם אני חכם
בני ושמח לבי ואשיבה חורפי דבר אתא שלמה גזר לקדשים ואתו אינהו
וגזור אף לתרומה.

And thus, Solomon decreed, as Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel:
At the time King Solomon established the laws of *eruvim* and washing
hands, a *Bat Kol* went forth and said: “My son, if your heart is wise, My
heart will rejoice, too” (*Proverbs* 23:15). [And it said:] “Be wise, My son,
and My heart will rejoice, and I will answer to those who disparage My
word” (*Proverbs* 27:11). Solomon decreed about the *k'doshim* and they thus
decreed about the *t'rumah*.

A. *N'tilat Yadayim* to Insure the Purity of an Offering

According to the traditional understanding of the above passage, Solomon decreed
that the priest was required to observe the ritual of *n'tilat yadayim* before preparing to eat
those animals that were to be consecrated to God for holy purposes – the *k'doshim*.
Although the *Bavli* does not state so explicitly, one can guess that the thinking imputed to
Solomon was that whatever was to be offered to God should be handled by purified
hands. We read in the *Tanakh* about Hiram, who, at Solomon's direction, built the *mikveh*

3. For a discussion on the current *halakhic* obligation, see *S.A., O.H.* 4:18.

for the Temple.⁴ Immersing the body in water, and in some cases washing just the hands, as a means of purification was a well-established practice by the time of the Temple.⁵

As the passage indicates, "Solomon's" decree was extended from the *k'doshim* to the *t'rumah*,⁶ although by whom is not clear.⁷ This is a logical development, in that only the Rabbis wanted to make sure that every offering the priest presented was handled only by purified hands. But whereas only the priest handled the *k'doshim*, both the Israelite and the Levite handled the *t'rumah* or the *t'rumat hama'aser*.

So now, everyone had to wash. It wasn't enough that the priest washed before preparing and eating the *k'doshim* and the *t'rumah*. The Levite and Israelite were also required to handle food that would eventually be given to the priest as an offering. At any point in the chain – from harvest time to carrying the produce to Jerusalem to handing it over to the priest – the *t'rumah* could be made impure by coming in contact with impure hands. Thus, a requirement that the Levite and Israelite wash their hands before handling the *t'rumah* seems to follow.

In a lengthy discussion that ends in *Shabbat* 17b, we learn of the eighteen *g'zerot* that were enacted after a great debate between Hillel and Shammai. Included within those

4. *I Kings* 7:23-25.

5. See, for example *T. Chag.* 3:2.

6. *T'rumah* means "that which is lifted or separated" and was an offering to be given to the priest. There were two types of *t'rumot*: the regular offering, which the Israelites had to separate from their own crops and give to the priest, and the *t'rumat hama'aser*, the tithe offering, which the Levites had to separate for the priests from the tithes they received.

7. Rabbi Bernard Zlotowitz identifies them as Hillel and Shammai in "The Role of *Netilat Yadayim* in the Talmudic Period With an Excursus on the New Testament's Attitudes" (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, 1955): 37. Rabbi Zlotowitz bases his assertion on a passage from *Shabbat* 14b, which reads הלל ושמאי גזרו טומאה על ידים, "Hillel and Shammai decreed [concerning the] uncleanness for the hands." We have no way of knowing for certain if the attribution is accurate, but if so, Rabbi Zlotowitz's conclusion seems sound. The passage from *Shabbat* 14b-15a indicates that "they" decreed about the *t'rumah*; this follows the line about Hillel and Shammai. In this part of the *Bavli*, no other "theys" are mentioned as decreeing anything about hands.

eighteen prohibitions is a discussion relating to what makes the *t'rumah* unfit. References to the *t'rumah*-related *g'zerot* are found in *Shabbat* 13b-14b, one of which identifies contact with the hands before they are washed, as something that would make the *t'rumah* unfit:

ושמנה עשר דבר גזרו מאי נינהו שמנה עשר דבר דתנן אלו פוסלין את
התרומה האוכל אוכל ראשון והאכל אוכל שני והשותה משקין טמאין והבא
ראשו ורובו במים שאובין וטהור שנפלו על ראשו ורובו שלשה לוגין מים
שאובין והספר והידים והטבול יום והאוכלים והכלים שנטמאו במשקין

Eighteen matters they enacted: What are the eighteen matters? We learn that these make the *t'rumah* unfit: The one who eats food of the first degree and the one who eats food of the second degree.⁸ The one who drinks an unclean liquid. The one who brings his head and greater part [of his body] into water that is drawn.⁹ A clean person who drops his head and greater part [of his body] into three *logs*¹⁰ of water that is drawn. A book [of the Bible].¹¹ The hands [before washing].¹² The *t'vul yom*.¹³ Foods or

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8. According to the *halakhah*, four degrees of ritual uncleanness are possible. The first degree is called the "father of fathers" of ritual uncleanness. One becomes first degree unclean through contact with a human corpse or from being under the same roof as a human corpse. When the item or person who touches the corpse or is under the same roof as the corpse (the first degree of uncleanness) comes in contact with something else, that something else is considered unclean to the second degree. When the second degree of uncleanness comes into contact with another person or item, the latter is unclean to the third degree. And when the third degree of uncleanness comes into contact with another person or item, that latter is unclean to the fourth degree. Limits are built into this system. A first degree of uncleanness (one who touches a corpse or is under the same roof as a corpse) can convey uncleanness to *all* food or liquids with which he comes in contact. A second degree of uncleanness can convey uncleanness only to *t'rumah* or *k'doshim*. A third degree of uncleanness can convey uncleanness only to *t'rumah*. And a fourth degree of uncleanness cannot convey uncleanness to anything else.
 9. Water that that is drawn is water that has passed through a vessel, as opposed to "living water," such as well water, river water, or rain water collected in a pit.
 10. The amount of liquid that constitutes a *log* is discussed in Section D of this chapter.
 11. According to *Shabbat* 14a, the *t'rumah* used to be stored near the *sifrei Torah*. The books were damaged and had to be declared unclean. (The damage, according to the *Shottenstein Edition of the Talmud*, was caused by the mice who ate the food and then ate the books, too.)
 12. According to *Shabbat* 14a, the hands are active and thus apt to touch things that could render them impure.
 13. *T'vul yom* is the "immersion day." On the day a person immersed himself, he is still considered unclean, and would render the *t'rumah* unclean if he touched it. Only once night fall comes is he

vessels that were made unclean by a liquid.

The Rabbis came to realize that, if they wanted to protect the *t'rumah* from becoming impure through contact with impure hands, the Levites and the Israelites had to get into the habit of regularly washing their hands. Thus, they extended the requirement of *n'tilat yadayim* to every situation in which a person was about to come into contact with his own produce – the *chullin*.

M. Chag. 2:5 states:

נטלין ידיים לחולין ולמעשר ולתרומה.

They must wash the hands for the unconsecrated produce, for the tithe produce, and for the *t'rumah*.

Once the Rabbis declared that a person must wash his hands, not only before he came in contact with produce that would be given to the priest for an offering, but also before he handled the produce that he would retain for his own personal consumption, it was only a matter of time before the Rabbis extended *n'tilat yadayim* to all food, not just produce. The Hebrew word, *chullin*, which initially refers to the “unconsecrated produce,” thus eventually came to mean “all food,” so that the decree meant that a person must wash his hands before eating *anything*. Why? To get into the habit of washing for the *t'rumah*, as we see from *Chullin* 106a:

אמר רב אידי בר אבין אמר רב יצחק בר אשיאן נטילת ידיים לחולין מפני
סרך תרומה.

Rabbi Idi bar Abin said in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak bar Ashian:

Washing the hands for ordinary food is done to develop the habit for *t'rumah*.

considered clean and able to touch the *t'rumah*. *Shabbat* 14b finds support for this in *Leviticus* 22:7, which states that once one immerses, “when the sun sets, he shall be clean, and [afterwards] he may eat of the holy things.”

B. *N'tilat Yadayim* to Insure the Purity of the Self

To reiterate: The *mitzvah* of *n'tilat yadayim* began with the priest, who was required to wash before handling *k'doshim*. It was then extended from *k'doshim* to *t'rumah*, and then to *chullin*; and, in parallel fashion, it was extended from the priest to the Levite and Israelite, so as to ensure the purity of *k'doshim* and *t'rumah*. After the Temple's destruction and the demise of Temple sacrifices, the sanctity of the original priestly offering, *k'doshim*, was transferred to the individual – that is, washing the hands before eating became the way to sanctify the self for the self (indication of which follows), not a way to purify the self in order to protect the sanctity of the offering.

We find support for this assertion – that washing before eating is a way to sanctify oneself – in *B'rakhot* 53b. Although this passage is more about washing for *Birkat Hamazon* than about washing before eating, it clearly lets us know the purpose of washing before eating in the post-Temple era.

ת"ר שמן מעכב את הברכה דברי רבי זילאי רבי זיואי אומר אינו מעכב רבי
אחא אומר שמן טוב מעכב ר' זוהמאי אומר כשם שמזוהם פסול לעבודה
כך ידים מזוהמות פסולות לברכה אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק אנא לא זילאי ולא
זיואי ולא זוהמאי ידענא אלא מתניתא ידענא דאמר רב יהודה אמר רב
ואמרי לה במתניתא תנא והתקדשתם אלו מים ראשונים והייתם קדושים
אלו מים אחרונים כי קדוש זה שמן אני יי' אלוהיכם זו ברכה.

Our Rabbis taught in a *baraita*: If there is no oil, one may not say the blessing.¹⁴ These are the words of Rabbi Zi'lai. Rabbi Zi'vai says: One may say it. Rav Aha says: The lack of good oil prevents it from being said.¹⁵ Rav Zuha'mai says: When one has an evil smell, he is ineligible for

14. According to Rashi, this means that those who regularly wash their hands with oil following the meal may not participate in *Birkat Hamazon* until they have washed with oil.

15. According to Rashi, "good oil" is oil perfumed with fragrant spices.

Temple service; thus one whose hands have an evil smell is ineligible to recite the blessing [*Birkat Hamazon*]. Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak said: Zi'lai and Zi'vai and Zuha'mai I do not know, but I do know a *baraita* of Rav Yehuda speaking in the name of Rav, and others taught in the *baraita*: "Sanctify yourselves" (*Leviticus* 11:44). These are the first waters [washing prior to eating]. "And you shall be holy" (*Leviticus* 11:44). These are the second waters [washing before *Birkat Hamazon*]. "For I am holy" (*Leviticus* 11:44). This is the oil. "I am the Eternal your God" (*Leviticus* 11:44). This is the blessing [*Birkat Hamazon*].

Another indication that ritual hand washing became an act of personal purity comes from *Bekorot* 30b:

ת"ר מקבלין לכנפים וא"ח נקבלין לטהרות ואם איני נקבל אלא
לכנפים מקבלין אותו קיבל לטהרות ולא קיבל לכנפים אף לטהרות לא
קיבל.

Our Rabbis taught in a *baraita*: We accept a *chaver* if he promises to observe cleanliness of the hands. Afterwards, we accept him as one who will observe the other rules of purity. If he said: I only promise to observe cleanliness of the hands, we receive him. If, however, he promised to observe the rules of purity but not the cleanliness of the hands, then even his promise to observe the rules of purity is not regarded as a genuine promise.

In this passage, the Rabbis are discussing what it takes for someone to be considered a member of their elite group. His observance of the laws of ritual purity appear to be the standard used. And even if he observes all the rules for ritual purity, that is insufficient unless he also observes the law of cleaning his hands.

C. *N'tilat Yadayim*: Strictly Observed or Not?

How strict is the obligation to wash before eating? The Rabbis of the *Bavli* seem to universally uphold the obligation to wash one's hands before eating, but, as we will see later in a text in the *Yerushalmi*, washing before eating is there said to be a matter of free choice. But even if the Rabbis of the *Bavli* uphold the obligation, they are not of one mind concerning the consequences for failing to observe this *mitzvah*, as the following passages reflect.

The first one comes from *Sotah* 4b:

אמר רב זריקא אמר רב אלעזר כל המזלזל בנטילת ידים נעקר מן העולם.

Rabbi Zerika said in the name of Rabbi Elazar: All who neglect washing their hands [before eating] shall be stricken from the world.

Elazar teaches, and his disciple Zerika reiterates, that there is quite a serious consequence for failing to wash one's hands before eating. If we take the words literally, the one who fails to wash his hands before eating will be stricken from the world. If "the world" actually alludes to "this world" (even though the text does not say *olam hazeh*), might it also mean that the person would also be stricken from *olam haba*, the world to come, and therefore suffer the ultimate rejection by God?

Perhaps this is reading too much into the statement. A simpler read, accounting for the rhetorical nature of rabbinic hyperbole, would understand it to mean, "it is fairly important that you wash your hands before eating."

Another passage, also from *Sotah* 4b, supports this latter interpretation. It reads:

דרש רב עזריא זמנין אמר לה משמיה דרבי אמי זמנין אמר לה משמיה דרבי

אסי כל האוכל לחם בלא נטילת ידים כאילו בא על אשה זונה שנאמר כי

בעד אשה זונה עד ככר לחם.

Rav Avira expounded, and sometimes he said it in the name of Ravi Ami, and sometimes he said it in the name of Ravi Asi: Anyone who eats bread without washing the hands – it is as if he came to a harlot, as it is said: “for on account of the harlot, to the extent of a loaf of bread” (*Proverbs* 6:26).

Rashi explains that this verse from *Proverbs* means that if a man neglects to wash his hands before eating a loaf of bread, he is punished to the same extent as if he had sex with a harlot. What is that punishment? In at least one *talmudic* passage, it is quite severe. In *Bava Kama* 16b, the sages discuss the biblical prophet Jeremiah, specifically verse 18:22 of the book that bears his name, which reads: “For they have dug a ditch to take me and hid snares for my feet.” R. Eleazar says, “They maliciously accused him of [having intercourse with] a harlot.” R. Samuel b. Nahmani says: “They maliciously accused him of having [intercourse with] another man’s wife.”

The sages have an easy time accepting the view that the accusation was concerning a harlot, and cite as support *Proverbs* 23:27, “for a harlot is a deep ditch.” But they ask how the word “ditch” in that verse could concern another man’s wife. They answer by pointing to verse 18:23 of *Jeremiah*, which reads, “God, You know all their counsel against me to slay me,” meaning that if he had slept with another man’s wife, surely he’d be punished with death. So, the sages ask, is death not the punishment for sleeping with a harlot? They know that the death penalty does not attach to that sin, yet, they answer yes, by quoting *Jeremiah* 38:6 as proof that God intended to kill him with the words, “by throwing him into a pit of mire.”

And so, as with the first *Sotah* passage, in the second *Sotah* passage the Rabbis assert a severe penalty for failing to wash one’s hands. Once again, we can only assume that

this is rabbinic excess, and another way in which the Rabbis are saying, "it's fairly important that you wash your hands."

Even if, for a moment, we were to accept the literal punishments from the two *Sotah* passages, that one who fails to wash before eating would be stricken from the world or punished by death as if he had had sex with a harlot, we would find little other support for these extreme interpretations in the rabbinic texts. In fact, in three other *sugyot* that appear to assert grave consequences for failing to wash before eating, the discussions actually have very little to do with washing. Instead, the obligation to wash is merely an example of one way in which a person is obligated to give honor and show respect to his teachers.

The first passage is in *B'rakhot* 19a:

ואמר ר' יהושע בן לוי בכ"ד מקומות בית דין מגדי' על כבוד הרב וכולן שנינו
במשנתנו אמר ליה ר' אלעזר היכא אמר ליה לבי תשכח נפק דק ואשכח תלת
המזלזל בנטילת ידים והמספר אחר מטותן של תלמידי חכמי והמגים דעתו
כלפי מעלה ... והמזלזל בנטילת ידים מאי היא דתנן א"ר יהודה חס ושלום
שעקביא בן מהללאל נתנדה שאין עזרה ננעלת על כל אדם בישראל בחכמה
ובטרהרה וביראת חטא כעקביא בן מהללאל אלא את מי נדו אלעזר בן חנוך
שפקפק בנטילת ידים וכשמת שלחו בית דין והינהו אבן גדולה על ארונו
ללמדך שכל המתנדה ומת בנדויו בית דין סוקלין את ארונו.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: In 24 places, the *beit din* excommunicated people for dishonoring Rabbis. All are found in the *Mishnah*. Rabbi Elazar said to him: Where? He said to him: See if you can find them. [He said:] I found three: the one who makes light of washing hands, the one who insults scholars after their death, and the one who acts as if he knows heaven.¹⁶ ... [About] the one who makes light of hand washing, what have

16. "Acting as if he knows heaven" means being on intimate terms with God. In *Eruvin*, we find the

we learned? Rabbi Yehuda said: Far be it for us to think that Akaviah ben Mahalalel was excommunicated, for the Temple hall did not close on¹⁷ anyone in Israel greater in wisdom, in purity, and in fear of sin than Akaviah ben Mahalalel. Rather, the one excommunicated is Elazar ben Hanoch, who made light of hand washing, and when he died, the *beit din* put a large stone on his coffin to teach you that when one is excommunicated and dies excommunicated, the *beit din* stones his coffin.

Note that the point of the excommunication is not that it happened to someone who made light of hand washing, but rather, it happened to someone who dishonored a Rabbi. We really learn very little about how the Rabbis feel about handwashing itself from this *sugya*. Perhaps it is included as one of the examples because it *is* a significant obligation. On the other hand, perhaps it is included as one of the examples because it is a lesser obligation that few people followed, and the Rabbis are reminding one another that they shouldn't ignore it because, after all, one of their own said "do it."

Another example of where the obligation to wash before eating is used as a way to honor one's teachers is found in *Eruvin* 21b:

תנו רבנן מעשה ברב"ע שהיה חבוש בבית האסורין והיה ר' יהושע הגרסי משרתו בכל יום ויום היו מכניסין לו מים במדה יום אחד מצאו שומר בית האסורין אמר לו היום מימך מרובין שמא לחתור בית האסורין אתה צריך שפך חציין ונתן לו חציין כשבא אצל ר"ע אמר לו יהושע אין אתה יודע שזקן אני וחיי תלויין בחיך סח לו כל אותו המאורע אמר לו תן לי מים שאטול ידי אמר לו לשתות אין מגיעין ליטול ידיך מגיעין אמר לו מה אעשה שחייבים עליהן מיתה מוטב אמות מיתת עצמי ולא אעבור על דעת חברי אמרו לא טאם כלום עד שהביא לו מים ונטל ידיו כששמעו חכמים בדבר אמרו מה

example of Honi the Circlemaker as one who acts as if he knows heaven, asking God repeatedly to bring the rain, and God relents to him. This is unacceptable behavior, according to the Rabbis, because it does not show proper distance - it is a lack of knowing one's place.

17. Meaning that there was no one greater than him.

בזקנותו כך בילדותו על אחת כמה וכמה ומה בבית האסורין כך שלא בבית
האסורין על אחת כמה וכמה.

Our Rabbis taught: There was the case of Rabbi Akiva who sat in prison. Rabbi Yehoshua Hagarsi attended him. Every day, he would bring him a measured amount of water. One day, the [prison] guard went out and said to him: Today you have much water. Perhaps you need to dig out of prison?¹⁸ He poured out half and gave him half. When he [Yehoshua] came to the place of Rabbi Akiva, he said to him: Yehoshua, don't you know that I am old? My life depends on you. He told him all that occurred. He said to him: Give me water and I will wash my hands. [Yehoshua] said to him: There isn't enough to drink. [You think] there is enough to wash your hands? [Akiva] said to him: What can I do? The obligation on them¹⁹ is death. It is better that I die a death I caused to myself than contravene the opinion of my colleagues (that is, I won't drink and I will wash), [for] they said: Do not taste anything until you bring your hands to water for washing. When the sages heard his words, they said: In his old age, how much more so in his youth; in prison, how much more so not in prison.

Akiva reiterates the obligation to show respect to the sages, using the example of washing before eating. But again, we cannot tell from this passage if the obligation to wash was considered major or minor. A third *sugya* similarly uses the obligation to wash before eating as an example of showing honor to one's colleagues. We find in *Chullin* 106a the following:

ועוד משום מצוה מאי מצוה אמר אביי מצוה לשמוע דברי חכמים רבא אמר
מצוה לשמוע דברי ר"א בן ערך דכתיב וכל אשר יגע בו הזב וידיו לא שטף
במים אמר ר"א בן ערך מכאן סמכו חכמים לנטילת ידים מן התורה אמר

18. The guard is accusing Akiva of planning to use the water to soften the ground so he could dig his way out.

19. Meaning to follow the teachings of the Rabbis.

ליה רבא לרב נחמן מאי משמע דכתיב ידיו לא שטף במים הא שטף טהור
הא טבילה בעי אלא הכי קאמר ואחר שלא שטף טמא.

Also, because it is a *mitzvah*. Which *mitzvah*? Abbaye said: The *mitzvah* to heed the words of the sages. Raba said: The *mitzvah* to heed the words of Rabbi Eliezar ben Arach. As it is written: "If one with a discharge, without having rinsed his hands in water, touches another person..." (*Leviticus* 15:11). Rabbi Eliezar ben Arach said: From this, the sages found support for hand washing from the Torah. Raba said to Rav Nachman: Where is this indicated? For it is written: "He did *not* rinse his hands in water." [Does this mean that] if he had rinsed [his hands, whoever he touched] would be clean? Or is immersion required? The meaning must be, that anyone else who does not rinse is unclean.

Although this *sugya* does not speak of the consequence for failing to wash before eating, it supports Akiva's assertion that one must follow the teaching of his colleagues, and it uses hand washing as the example.

Thus far we have seen three separate passages using the example of hand washing to support the assertion that one must give honor to the Rabbis by following their teachings. Nowhere within those passages do we learn anything about the seriousness of the obligation to wash one's hands before eating, which might indicate that this *mitzvah* was often overlooked. At the same time, however, the two passages from *Sotah* 4b (all who neglect washing their hands before eating will be stricken from the world or punished by death as if they had had sex with a harlot) could lead one to conclude that the Rabbis took the obligation quite seriously.

Two additional passages from the *Bavli* and two from the *Yerushalmi* possibly give us insight into how seriously the Rabbis considered the obligation to wash one's hands before eating. The first is in *Shabbat* 62b:

א"ר אבהו ואמרי לה במתניתא תנא ג' דברים מביאין את האדם לידי עניות
ואלו הן המשתין מים בפני מטתו עורס ומזלזל בנטילת ידים ושאשתו
מקללתו בפניו ... ומזלזל בנטילת ידים אמר רבא לא אמרן אלא דלא משא
ידיה כלל אבל משא ולא משא לית לן בה ולא מלתא היא דאמר רב חסדא
אנא משאי מלא חפני מיא ויהבו לי מלא חפני טיבותא.

Rabbi Abahu said and others say: In a *baraita*, we learn that three things
bring a person's hands²⁰ to poverty and they are: Urinating in front of
one's bed while naked; making light of washing the hands [before eating];
and being dishonored by one's wife in one's presence. ... [Regarding]
making light of washing the hands, Rava said: We say this only when he
does not wash his hands at all, but if he washes but doesn't wash (he uses
the barest minimum of water²¹), it (the *baraita*'s assertion that he will
become poor) doesn't apply. But this is not so, for Rabbi Hisda said: I
washed with a full handful of water and He gave to me a full handful of
goodness (meaning that because he used a lot of water, he was greatly
blessed).

When trying to understand how seriously the Rabbis took the obligation to wash, we
have only the two *Sotah* passages to compare this to. In the first *Sotah* passage, the
Rabbis are saying "it's important that you wash, so important, in fact, if you don't you'll
be stricken from the world." Accepting that the first consequence is more rhetorical than
real, perhaps it's no surprise that, in this *Shabbat* passage, the consequence has lessened,
reflecting the rabbinic thinking of the second *Sotah* passage (neglecting to wash before
eating is like sleeping with a harlot). Here, Abahu and others, including Rava, claim that
the person who does not wash before eating is headed toward poverty. I can't imagine
that the Rabbis wished poverty on themselves or anyone else, but, nevertheless, it seems

20. Meaning the person himself.

21. According to the commentary in the *Shottenstein Edition of the Talmud*.

to fall far short of being stricken from the world.

We find another “less severe” consequence in *Chullin* 106a:

כי אתא רב דימי אמר מים הראשונים האכילו בשר חזיר אחרונים הוציאו
את האשה מבעלה כי אתא רבין אמר ראשונים האכילו בשר נבלה אחרונים
הרגו את הנפש.

When Rav Dimi came he said: [Someone who neglected] the first waters (washing before eating) was fed forbidden meat.²² [Someone who neglected] the second waters (washing after eating) divorced his wife.²³ When Rabin came he said: [Someone who neglected] the first water was fed the meat of *n'velah*. [Someone who neglected] the second water committed murder.

In this passage, we find what might appear to be the “lightest” consequence yet for failing to wash before eating. Here, *n'tilat yadayim* before eating is compared to *n'tilat yadayim* after eating (as part of *Birkat Hamazon*). According to Dimi and Rabin, someone who forgets to wash his hands before eating could wind up eating *treif*. But the one who forgets to wash his hands after eating might divorce his wife or commit murder.

While eating *treif* is certainly a serious transgression for the Rabbis, I cannot imagine it rising to significance of divorce or murder. First, no other person is involved – *kashrut* is between a person and God. Second, rarely (if ever), would it have any kind of lasting

22. According to the *Shottenstein Edition of the Talmud*, he entered an inn and did not ritually wash before eating. The innkeeper assumed he was a non-Jew and served him pork (some say, he was served *n'velah*, meat of an animal that died a natural death and had not been ritually slaughtered).

23. According to *Yoma* 83b, the Rabbis entrusted their purses to a man who later denied having them. They noticed that the man had traces of lentils on his upper lip, so they went to his home and asked his wife, in the name of her husband, to hand over the purses. She asked them to prove that they had the right man. They told her that the man they entrusted their purses to had eaten lentils that day. She turned over the purses. When her husband came home, he divorced her (some say, he killed her). Concluded the sages, had he washed his hands (and upper lip) after eating, the Rabbis would not have been able to prove his identity and the divorce (or murder) would not have happened. It's fascinating that the Rabbis ignore the dishonesty of the man and instead lay blame with his failure to wash.

consequence. I admit, however, that this is my own conclusion. Perhaps the Rabbis did consider eating *treif* to be as great a transgression as murder. It is impossible to tell on the face of it which is more serious, and the commentaries within the *Bavli* do not shed light. But one *Midrash* may help us understand.

The *Midrash* states that the innkeeper who served a Jew non-*kosher* meat did so during a time of persecution, when the Jews were being killed for practicing their faith. Thus, in order to disguise his religion, the Jewish innkeeper served non-*kosher* meat to the patrons who were not Jewish, and served only *kosher* meat to the patrons he recognized as Jewish (because they washed before eating).²⁴ Is it possible, according to this *Midrash*, that the Jewish patron's failure to wash before eating is somehow excusable because of the time in which he lived? It appears not. The *Midrash* seems to offer an out for the innkeeper, but not for the diner. And why would the Rabbis be looking to excuse the behavior of the innkeeper? Because according to the *halakhah*, a Jew is not supposed to make a living selling non-*kosher* food.²⁵

So we now have four possible consequences for failing to wash before eating: being stricken from the world (a way of saying "do it because it is important"), being given the death penalty as if one had had sex with a harlot, becoming poor, and eating *treif*. In the *sugya* that gives us the "eating *treif*" consequence, we are also introduced to the distinction between the first and second washings, that is, the washing before eating and the washing that accompanies *Birkat Hamazon*.

A parallel discussion in a similar part of the *Bavli* – *Chullin* 105a – raises another

24. *Numbers Rabbah* 20:21.

25. See, for example, *M. Sh'vi-it* 7:3.

possible difference between the first and second washings, which might shed light on how seriously the Rabbis took the obligation to wash before eating:

אמר רב אידי בר אבין אמר רב יצחק בר אשיין מים ראשונים מצוה
ואחרונים חובה מיתבי מים ראשונים ואחרונים חובה אמצעיים רשות מצוה
לגבי רשות חובה קרי לה גופא מים ראשונים ואחרונים חובה אמצעיים
רשות.

Rav Idi bar Abin said in the name of Rav Yitzchak bar Ashian: The first water (meaning the first washing) is a *mitzvah*; the last (meaning after the meal) is an obligation. An objection was raised: the first and last waters are obligations; the middle [washing]²⁶ is a matter of free choice. A *mitzvah* as opposed to free choice can be called an obligation. [To return to] the main text: the first and last waters are obligations; the middle is a matter of free choice.

This passage perhaps can help us to understand why forgetting to wash before eating would lead to eating forbidden meat, while forgetting to wash after eating would lead to divorce or murder. The Rabbis begin by asserting that the first is a *mitzvah*, while the last is a *chovah*. A *mitzvah* is something that is recommended and commendable, along the lines of today's idea that a *mitzvah* is a "good deed." A *chovah*, on the other hand is obligatory. So, on first read, we might conclude that, because the second washing is required and the first washing isn't, the consequence of not washing after eating – divorce or murder – is more serious than the consequence of not washing before – eating *treif*. But at the end of the passage, the Rabbis conclude that both washings are *chovah*,

26. The Roman meal had three courses – *hors d'oeuvres*, dinner, and dessert. Washings occurred before the *hors d'oeuvres*, before the dinner, and before the dessert. The middle washing refers to the washing after the *hors d'oeuvres* but before dinner. A little further on in the *Bavli*, at *Chullin* 105b, the Rabbis clarify that while washing between meat *hors d'oeuvres* and a meat dinner or between dairy *hors d'oeuvres* and a dairy dinner is *r'shut*, washing between dairy *hors d'oeuvres* and a meat dinner is *chovah*.

meaning that washing before eating, as well as after eating, "must be done." If they are of equal importance, than perhaps the consequences of not doing them are also of equal seriousness.

Two passages in the *Yerushalmi* more vividly reflect the distinction between the two washings and stand in sharp contrast to passages in the *Bavli*. The two *Yerushalmi* passages are virtually identical, and they contain elements similar to those found in the two *Chullin* passages cited above. The passage below is from *Yerushalmi B'rakhot* 8:12 (and the similar passage is in *Yerushalmi Challah* 2:58):

תני מים שלפני המזון רשות ושל אחר המזון חובה אלא שבראשונים נוטל
ומפסיק ובשניים נוטל ואינו מפסיק מה הוא נוטל ומפסיק ר' יעקב בר אבא
אמ' נוטל ושונה ר' שמואל בר יצחק אמ' בעי נוטל ושונה ואת אמרת רשות
אמ' ר' יעקב בר אידי על הראשונים נאכל בשר חזיר על השניים יצאה אשה
מביתה ויש אומ' שנהרגו עליה ג' נפשות.

It was taught in a *baraita*: [Washing hands with] water before the meal is a matter of free choice. But after the meal [washing the hands with water] is an obligation. Regarding the first washing, one washes and waits. Regarding the second washing, one does not wait after washing. What does it mean, to "wash and wait"? Rabbi Yaakov bar Aha said: Wash and [wait a moment and wash] a second time. Rabbi Shmuel bar Yitzhak said: You say it is necessary to "wash twice." How then can you [also] say [washing before the meal] is a matter of free choice? Rabbi Yaakov bar Idi said: Because [of neglecting] the first washing, he ate *treif* meat. Because [of neglecting] the second washing, he divorced his wife. There are those who say, three people died.

Although a first washing/second washing tension similar to the *Bavli* passages is found here, the conclusion isn't the same. In the *Bavli*, both washings are *chovah*. Here,

the first is *r'shut* and the second is *chovah*. Neither is referred to as a *mitzvah*.²⁷ When Shmuel bar Yitzchak asks how washing before the meal can be *r'shut*, Yaakov bar Idi answers as follows: When someone failed to wash before eating he ate *treif*, but when someone failed to wash after eating, he divorced his wife or caused three people to die. This seems to imply that the consequence of failing to wash before eating is considered, at least in the *Yerushalmi*, to be less severe than the failing to wash after eating. After all, how could the consequence for failing to do something that is a matter of free choice rise to the level for failing to do something that is an obligation?

This discussion in the *Yerushalmi* continues on for a while. In it, Rav sees Shmuel eating with his hands covered by a napkin. He asks him why his hands are covered, implying "didn't you wash first?" Shmuel answers, "אִיסְתַּנִּיט אֲנִי," or "I am of feeble health/delicate/fastidious in my diet."²⁸ Shmuel doesn't answer the question directly – he never says if he washed. Instead, he suggests that his current state gives him license to act in a way that meets his own needs.

Interestingly, in the *Neusner* translation of the *Yerushalmi*, the editor writes, "Shmuel answered: 'I am sensitive [and even though I washed my hands, I need to act according to my own habits.]'" The editor puts an affirmative response into Shmuel's mouth, perhaps because the *halakhah* has since developed into a clear obligation to wash before eating. But the text from the *Yerushalmi* does not give us such a clear answer, calling the act of washing before eating *r'shut*. In the Babylonian community, on the other hand, a fairly clear picture emerges: One is obligated to wash before eating, even if the Rabbis are not

27. The identical conclusion is asserted in *T. B'rakhot* 5:13.

28. All possible meanings are found in Jastrow, Marcus, *Dictionary of the Talmud* (Shalom Publications, 2000): 58.

consistent about the consequence for failing to do so.

D. *N'tilat Yadayim*: The Procedure

That one must wash isn't the only concern of the Rabbis; they also have much to say about *how* to fulfill this requirement.

One issue that arises is how much water to use – or more accurately, the minimum amount of water that is required. For this question, we find the answer in *M. Yadayim* 1:1, which states:

מי רביעית נותנין לידיים לאחד אף לשנים מחצית לוג לשלשה או לארבעה
מלוג לחמשה ולעשרה ולמאה רבי יוסי אומר ובלבד שלא יפחות לאחרון
שבהם מרביעית מוסיפין על השניים ואין מוסיפין על הראשונים.

From a quarter [of a *log*]²⁹ one must take [water for washing] the hands of one person, even two. From a half of a *log*, three or four [people may wash]. From an [entire] *log*, five, or ten, or one hundred [people may wash]. Rabbi Yosi says: Only if [the water] is not depleted to the point where for the final person [to wash] there remains [less than] a quarter of a *log*. They may add [water] for the second [cleaning]³⁰ but they may not add for the first.

A quarter of a *log* is not a lot of water, and in all cases, it is the minimum amount that may be shared by two people. If the Rabbis do not require the use of a large amount of water, it begs the next question: What is actually meant by “washing” the hands? For this, we find guidance, first, in *M. Yadayim* 2:3:

הידיים מטמאות ומטהורות עד הפרק כיצד נטל את הראשונים עד הפרק
ואת השניים חוץ לפרק וחזרו ליד טהורה נטל את הראשונים ואת השניים

29. According to the glossary of the *Shottenstein Edition of the Talmud*, a *log* is a liquid measure equal to the space occupied by six eggs, or 549 cubic centimetres.

30. The washing that accompanies *Birkat Hamazon*.

חוץ לפרק וחזרו ליד טמאה נטל את הראשונים לידו אחת ונמלך ונטל את השניים לשתי ידיו טמאות נטל את הראשונים לשתי ידיו ונמלך ונטל את השניים לידו אחת ידו טהורה נטל לידו אחת ושפשפה בחברתה טמאה בראשו או בכותל טהורה נוטלין ארבעה וחמשה זה בצד זה או זה על גבי זה ובלבד שירפו שיבואו בהם המים.

Hands are rendered clean and unclean to the wrist. How so? If one poured the first [rinsing] up to the wrist and the second [rinsing] beyond the wrist, [if the water] flowed back to the hand, it is clean. If he poured the first [rinsing] and the second [rinsing] beyond the wrist, [and the water] flowed back to the hand, it is unclean. If he poured the first [rinsing] over [only] one hand and changed his mind and poured the second [rinsing] over both hands [together], they are unclean. If he poured the first [rinsing] over both hands [together], but he changed his mind and he poured the second [rinsing] over one hand [at a time], the hands are clean. If he poured over one hand and rubbed it against the other, it (the washed hand) is unclean. [But if he rubbed his hand] on his head or on the wall [to dry it], it is clean. Water may be poured over four or five persons who [hold out their hands] side by side or above each other, but only if they (their hands) do not touch and the water flows between them [and reach all parts of all hands].

Ritually washing the hands, according to the *halakhah*, is not what we think of when we “wash our hands.” The latter usually involves rinsing the hands to remove obvious dirt and to moisten them, rubbing soap on them, and then rinsing them again. We are concerned with hygiene. But in the above *mishnah*, we learn that ritual hand “washing” is quite different. We take a small amount of water, pour it on one hand, let it roll to the wrist and then back to the hand, and then repeat it for the second hand. This seems to have nothing to do with hygiene, and seems more likely that it has everything to do with

ritual purification.

A second passage, this one from *Sotah* 4b, reinforces how to get the water up to the wrists or beyond, and adds a final step to the ritual:

אמר רב חייא בר אשי אמר רב מים ראשונים צריך שיגביה ידיו למעלה מים
אחרונים צריך שישפיל ידיו למטה תניא נמי הכי הנוטל ידיו צריך שיגביה
ידיו למעלה שמא יצאו המים חוץ לפרק ויחזרו ויטמאו את הידים אמר רבי
אבהו כל האוכל פת בלא ניגוב ידים כאילו אוכל לחם טמא שנאמר ויאמר
ה' ככה יאכלו בני ישראל את לחמם טמא וגו'.

Rav Hiyya bar Asi said in the name of Rav: For the first water (washing before the meal), he must lift his hands upward. For second water (washing after the meal), he must drop his hands downward. It was taught in a *baraita*: The one who washes his hands [after the meal] must [not] lift his hands up lest the waters go past the wrist, return, and [re-] contaminate the hands. Rav Abahu said: Anyone who eats bread without drying the hands, is [regarded] as if he eats impure bread, as it is written: "God said, 'Thus the children of Israel will eat the impure bread, etc.'" (*Ezekiel* 4:13).

In this *Sotah* passage, we learn to raise or lower the hands for the first and second washings respectively, re-affirming the rolling of the water up to or beyond the wrists.³¹ Furthermore, Abahu adds that for the ritual to be complete, we must not only wash the hands, but also dry them.

E. The Blessing for *N'tilat Yadayim*

So now we know the details of the washing. What about the blessing? I was unable to find any *tannaitic* or *amoraic* passage that identifies any blessing specifically applied to washing before eating. It is quite possible that, originally, the act was not accompanied by

31. Perhaps the *halakhic* obligation to lift one's hands when washing them before eating sheds light on how "*natal*" meaning "to lift" eventually came to mean "to wash." This development is briefly discussed in the opening of Chapter 4.

a blessing – like *Shabbat* candle lighting. There, the Rabbis used the language of the *Chanukah* candle blessing (changing “*Chanukah*” to “*Shabbat*”) when they created the blessing over the *Shabbat* candles. Perhaps they did the same for the blessing accompanying hand washing, using the text of the blessing for washing upon waking. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת יָדַיִם (it is found in *Bavli B'rakhot* 60b, and is discussed more fully in Chapter 2), without having to alter anything. We will never know for certain if a blessing accompanied handwashing before eating in *talmudic* times, or if the one used for washing upon waking eventually became the one used for washing before eating. In either event, many contemporary rabbis point to a passage from *B'rakhot* 35a to provide guidance on *why* we say a blessing:³²

אסור לו לאדם שיהנה מן העולם הזה בלא ברכה.

It is forbidden for a person to benefit from this world without [reciting] a blessing.

In the *mitzvah* system, the primary objective of the Rabbis is to serve God. They teach that each person must recite at least one hundred blessings per day to serve God and to thank God for the bounty we are given. The *Talmud* indicates that reciting a blessing before eating could go a long way toward helping a person achieve his one hundred blessings per day.

The Rabbis derived the obligation to recite one hundred blessings a days from *Deuteronomy* 10:12, “Now, Israel, what (מה) does Adonai, your God, ask of you?” by changing מה to מאה, “Now, Israel, one hundred [things] Adonai, your God, asks of you.”

32. One contemporary interpretation of this passage is that a person must recite a blessing before eating. That blessing is the *motzi* (if the meal includes bread), but hand washing and *n'tilat yadayim* are included because they precede the *motzi*, as they are considered part of the same activity – preparing to eat a meal that includes bread.

Halakhic authorities note that it is easy to recite one hundred blessings on a weekday, as saying the *Amidah* three times daily accounts for fifty-seven blessings. On *Shabbat*, however, reciting the shorter *Amidah* four times yields only twenty-eight blessings. *Menachot* 43b suggests making-up some of the missing blessings on *Shabbat* by snacking, which would require the blessing for washing before eating, the blessing on the food, and the blessing after eating.

Perhaps we can use the above passage from *B'rakhot* to tell us *why* we are to recite a blessing, but only if we read back the *amoraic* reasoning to *tannaitic* times. Similarly, because there appear to be no *tannaitic* or *amoraic* sources giving the text of the hand washing blessing said before eating, it follows that there is no indication of *when* to say the blessing. Perhaps the best we can do is to draw a parallel from two passages that tell us when the hand washing blessing after eating (*Birkhat Hamazon*) should be said in relation to washing after eating. One passage is from the *Bavli* (*B'rakhot* 42a) and one is from the *Yerushalmi* (*B'rakhot* 1:2). First, from the *Bavli*:

דאמר רבי חייא בר אשי אמר רב שלש תכיפות הן תכף לסמיכה שחיטה
תכף לגאולה תפלה תכף לנטילת ידים ברכה.

Rabbi Hiyya bar Asi thus said in the name of Rav: Three [things] should follow [immediately] and they are: The killing of the sacrifice should follow the laying on of the hands. The *t'filah* should follow the *g'ulah*. The blessing [for *Birkat Hamazon*] should follow the washing of the hands.

And from the *Yerushalmi*:

דמר ר' זעירא בשם ר' אבא בר ירמיה שלש תכיפות הן תכף לסמיכה שחיטה
תכף לנטילת ידים ברכה תכף לגאולה תפלה ... תכף לנטילת ידים ברכה
שאו ידיכם קודש וברכה את יי'.

Rav Zeira said in the name of Rav Abba bar Jeremiah: Three [things] should follow [immediately] and they are: The killing of the sacrifice should follow the laying on of the hands. The blessing [for *Birkat Hamazon*] should follow the washing of the hands. The *t'filah* should follow the *g'ulah*. ... The blessing [for *Birkat Hamazon*] should follow the washing of the hands, [as it is written]: "Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Eternal" (*Psalms* 134:2).

Thus we now know the full ritual: We take a certain minimum amount of water, rinse one hand and then the other³³ up to the wrists while lifting each hand,³⁴ and then we dry them. Then we recite the blessing. And finally, according to *T. B'rakhot* 5:26, we are ready to eat. That text reads:

אין נטילת ידים אלא סמוך לסעודה.

Hand washing must immediately precede the meal.

F. The Vessel and the Water for *N'tilat Yadayim*

How the ritual is done isn't the Rabbis' only procedural concern. They also want to know about the water and the type of vessel that may be used for the washing. In *M. Yadayim* 1:2, we find the following:

בכל הכלים נוטנים לידים אפילו בכלי גללים בכלי אבנים בכלי אדמה.

All vessels may be used for [washing] the hands, even vessels of dung, vessels of stone, or vessels of clay.

Quite interestingly, a vessel that we might think of as unclean does not appear to transmit uncleanness to the water that is put into it. Thus, one may use a vessel made of any possible material, porous or not, to wash one's hands. But what if one doesn't have a

33. Starting with either the right or left hand.

34. The fact that we lift our hands when we wash before eating (and drop our hands when we wash after eating) – as discussed in *Sotah* 4b, above, perhaps adds support for the idea that this *Yerushalmi* passage can be applied to washing before eating.

vessel for washing? *Chullin* 105a tells us the following:

ראשונים נוטלין בין בכלי בין על גבי קרקע ואחרונים אין נוטלין אלא בכלי
ואמרי לה אין נוטלין על גבי קרקע מאי בינייהו איכא בינייהו קינסא.

The first washing may be over a vessel or over the ground. The second washing requires a vessel. Others say: [The second] washing cannot be over the ground. What's the difference between these? The difference is twigs.

One does not need a vessel for washing before the meal. But one does need a vessel in order to wash for *Birkat Hamazon*, unless the ground is covered with twigs and one follows the custom that permits washing under such circumstances. Requiring that the second washing only be over a vessel is more strict than prohibiting the second washing from being over the ground.³⁵ The concern is that the water, after leaving the hands, cannot directly hit the ground.³⁶ So some would allow the second washing over the ground, if twigs cover the ground and therefore come between the water and the ground. Others would require that the second washing only be over a vessel to avoid any possibility of the water hitting the ground.

In a long discussion, the Rabbis cover both the requirements for the vessel and the source of the water. How quickly we forget that, in *talmudic* times, one did not simply run to the kitchen sink and fill his "*n'tilat yadayim*" cup in order to wash. Thus we find in *Chullin* 107a the following discussion:

אמר רב פפא האי אריתא דדלאי אין נוטלין ממנו לידיים דלא אתו מכח
גברא ואי מיקרב לגבי דולא דקאתו מכח גברא נוטלין ממנו לידיים ואי בזיע

35. It might also be more consistent with the *Yerushalmi's* distinction between *r'shut* (the first washing) and *chovah* (the second washing) than with the *Bavli's* conclusion that both are *chovah*.

36. I was unable to find any passages indicating why it is impermissible for the water used in the washing the follows the meal to touch the ground.

דולא בכונס משקה מילף לייפי ומטביל בה את הידים ואמר רבא כלי שניקב
 בכונס משקה אין נוטלין ממנו לידים ואמר רבא כלי שאין בו רביעית אין
 נוטלין ממנו לידים איני והאמר רבא כלי שאין מחזיק רביעית אין נוטלין
 ממנו לידים הא מחזיק אע"פ דלית ביה לא קשיא הא לחד הא לתרי דתניא
 מי רביעית נוטלין לידים לאחד ואפלו לשנים אמר ליה רב ששת לאמימר
 קפדיתו אמנא א"ל אין אחזותא א"ל אין אשיעורא אמר ליה אין איכה
 דאמרי הכי אמר ליה אמנא ואחזותא קפדינו אשיעורא לא קפדינו דתניא מי
 רביעית נוטלין לידים לאחד ואפי' לשנים היא שאני התם משום דקאתו
 משירי טהרה אתקין רב יעקב מנהר פקוד נטלא בת רביעית אתקין רב אשי
 בהוצל כוזא בת רהיעית ואמר רבא מגופת חבית שתקנה נוטלין ממנו לידים
 תניא נמי הכי מגופת חבית שתקנה נוטלין ממנו לידים חמצ וכפישה שתקנו
 נוטלין מהם לידים שק וקופה אע"פ שמקבלים אין נוטלין מהם לידים.

Rav Pappa said: A person must not wash his hands in a canal (or dike)
 used for irrigation, because [the water] does not run from human power.³⁷
 But if he is near the [pail] used for irrigation, it is from human power and
 he may wash hands from it. If the pail is cracked and moisture from
 irrigation enters, [the waters] are made one and he can immerse his hands.
 But Rava said: If a vessel has cracks [and water] enters from cracks, he
 cannot wash his hands from it. Rava also said: If a vessel does not have a
 quarter [log of water], he cannot wash hands from it. Is this indeed so? For
 why did Rava [say]: If a vessel doesn't hold a quarter, he cannot wash
 hands from it? If it can [hold a quarter], even if it doesn't [currently] have
 [a quarter log] in it, [it can be used]? This is not a difficulty. One [passage]
 refers to one [person] and the other [passage] refers to two [people]. We
 have learned in a *baraita*: From a quarter [log], one person may wash his
 hands and even two [may wash]. Rav Sheshet said to Amemar: Are you

37. The *Shottenstein Edition of the Talmud* explains, "The water in the dike is supplied by buckets, which a man fills from a river and empties into the dike, and thence it runs off in its course over fields. It is ... forbidden to dip the hands in the dike because the power of man has already spent itself at the beginning of the dike and the waters run now of their own impetus."

particular about [the vessel] you trust? He said to him: Yes. About the appearance [of the water]? He said to him: Yes. About the amount [of water]? He said to him: Yes. Others say, he said to him: About the vessel and appearance [of the water] he is strict, but about the amount [of water], he is not strict. We have learned in a *baraita*: From a quarter [*log*] one person may wash his hands and even two [may wash]. But this is not so. There it is different [because the less than a quarter water used by the second person] comes from the residue of purification.³⁸ Rabbi Yaakov of Nchar Pakod washed with a standard quarter. Rav Asi of Huzal had a jug with a quarter.

Rava also said: If the cover of the vessel is modified [for washing], it may be used for hand washing. It has also been taught in a *baraita*: If the cover of the vessel is modified [for washing], it may be used for hand washing. If an animal skin or [leather] pouch is modified for washing, it may be used for hand washing. But a sack or basket, even one for holding water, is not to be used for hand washing.³⁹

We learn three additional requirements from this long *sugya*: First, that the water used for hand washing must come to the person by way of a human act. One could not walk down to the stream and using the running water to wash. One would have to fill a vessel with that running water, and then use the water coming from the vessel to properly perform the *mitzvah*.⁴⁰

Second, that the appearance of the water matters.⁴¹

38. Meaning that if there is less than a quarter for the second person, that is not enough water for him.

39. Because sacks and baskets don't "normally" hold water.

40. I do not know from where the requirement of human power comes, but it remains the law today. In the *Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh*, for example, law 40:13 reads, "The water must be poured over one's hands by 'human power.' In contrast, [washing one's hands] in water which flows naturally is not considered washing."

41. I have not found *tannaitic* or *amoraic* passages concerning the appearance of the water. *Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh* 40:8, however, says, "Water whose appearance has changed, either because of the place (where it is contained) or because something has fallen into it, may not be used to wash one's hands. However, if it changed (naturally) by itself, the water may be used." The editor

Third, that the vessel used must be one that normally holds liquid. So a cup, a jar, a skinpouch, or a bucket would be acceptable. But a sack or basket would not, even if the specific sack or basket was made to hold liquid. On the practical level, perhaps the distinction is made because hand washing was required by every Jew, and the Rabbis wanted there to be a common understanding of acceptable and unacceptable vessels for washing. It makes logical sense to prohibit those items what don't normally hold liquids for the simple reason that they didn't want the water to fall out. On another level, the Rabbis may be saying "We do not like to encourage things to be used for purposes other than which they were developed." This might be called "the doctrine of intentionality."

Jacob Neusner has written about water, purity, and the doctrine of intentionality. Although his work concerns the use of the *mikvah* in the context of *t'vul yom* and *parah*, his words could apply here. He writes:

If Israel wishes to attain that status of cleanness that marks the way station to sanctification, enormous efforts alone will make possible the realization of such an aspiration. Perfect concentration on the task at hand, pure intentionality to accomplish the goal to the exclusion of all extrinsic considerations and activities – these alone will make attainable the accomplishment of such purity as is possible, that transient kind that is all for now.⁴²

While Neusner's "pure intentionality" likely refers to the human activities, there is no reason to limit its application. Hand washing before eating is an act of purification

further notes: If the appearance of the water changes because dirt or mud fell into it, it may be used for washing, provided it is fit for a dog to drink from (citing *Shulkhan Arukh HoRav* 160:1 and *Mishnah B'rurah* 160:3).

42. Jacob Neusner, "Contexts of Purification: The *Halakhic* Theology of Immersion - *Mishnah-Tosefta* Tractate *Miqvaot* in the Context of Tractates *Tebul Yom* and *Parah*," in the *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 6.1 (2003).

involving water and a vessel. Pure intentionality would mean that when the human, the water, and the vessel come together to cleanse the hands, the human, the water, and the vessel each participate in the ritual in a way that reflects their most pure function or purpose.

The Rabbis address one final question concerning the water itself, and that is its temperature. In *Chullin* 105a-b, we find the following:

מים ראשונים נוטלין בין בחמין בין בצונן אחרונים אין נוטלין אלא בצונן
מפני שחמין מפעפעין את הידים ואין מעבירין את הזוהמא מים ראשונים
נוטלין בין בחמין בין בצונן אמר רב יצחק בר יוסף אמר רבי ינאי לא שנו
אלא שאין היד סולדת בהן אבל היד סולדת בהן אין נוטלין בהן ואיכא
דמתני לה אסיפא אחרונים אין נוטלין אלא בצונן אבל בחמין לא אמר רב
יצחק בר יוסף אמר רבי ינאי לא שנו אלא שהיד סולדת בהן אבל אין היד
סולדת בהן נוטלין מכלל דראשונים אף על פי שהיד סולדת בהן מותר.

[We learn in a *baraita*]: The first washing may be with hot or cold [water]. The second washing may be with only cold [water] because hot [water] moistens the hands but does not remove the grease. The first washing may be with hot or cold [water]. Rabbi Yitzchak bar Yosef said in the name of Rav Yannai: They taught [that hot water for the first washing is allowed] only if the hand would not be scalded, but if the hand gets scalded by it, [they] cannot use it [for the first washing]. Some say [that Rav Yannai's statement refers] to the end of the *baraita*: The second washing may be with only cold [water] but not with hot. Rabbi Yitzchak bar Yosef said in the name of Rav Yannai: They taught [that hot water is prohibited] only if the hand would be scalded, but if [the water] is not [so hot] that the hand gets scalded by it, [they] can use it [for the second washing]. It follows that for the first [washing], one is permitted to use water [so hot] that the hand gets scalded by it.

Why are the Rabbis so concerned about the temperature of the water, or more precisely, about the possibility of the water being too hot? Rashi suggests two possible reasons for the prohibition against using extremely hot water. First, he says, water that is so hot that it would scald the hand is no longer classified as water.⁴³ Second, he asserts in a similar discussion at *Shabbat* 40b, if the water is so hot, it would likely cause the person's hand to recoil for fear of being scalded.⁴⁴ If we accept Rashi's interpretation, either the person did not wash with water or did not use a sufficient amount of water. Either way, the ritual washing of the hands before eating would not have taken place.

And so we now understand which procedural aspects of *n'tilat yadayim* before eating are of concern to the Rabbis: how to do it, the minimum amount of water one must use, the appropriate vessel, the color of the water, and the temperature of the water. The blessing – whether or not it exists, and if so its contents – was not discussed by the Rabbis.

43. He does not indicate what such water has become. Steam, perhaps?

44. Presumably rendering the amount of water used in washing insufficient. This interpretation seems to contradict the *Bavli* text, and *S.A.*, *O.H.* rejects it, although *Magen Avraham* and *Mishnah Berurah* accept it. It appears that the *halakhah* to this day is not settled on the issue of using very hot water to ritually wash the hands before eating.

Chapter 2 – *N'tilat Yadayim* Upon Waking

As discussed in Chapter 1, after the destruction of the Temple and the end of Temple sacrifices and offerings, specifically the *k'doshim* and the *t'rumah* offerings, the primary purpose of *n'tilat yadayim* eventually became to purify or sanctify oneself. At some point, although I found no *tannaitic* or *amoraic* texts to indicate when, ritual hand washing was expanded beyond before and after eating. One of the new times a person had to wash his hands was soon after awakening in the morning.⁴⁵

A. *N'tilat Yadayim* and Morning Prayers

One portion of the morning prayers Reform Jews refer to as *nissim b'khol yom*, the miracles of everyday. We are fairly certain that the blessings that celebrate *nissim b'khol yom* were originally said in the home, and, at some point later in time were moved to the synagogue service – perhaps because people were not saying them at home.⁴⁶ Why do we believe that these were originally said at home? *B'rakhot* 60b contains a lengthy passage declaring what a person is supposed to say at the beginning of the day. These blessing corresponded to the actions a person undertook as he began his day, in his own home, and the *B'rakhot* text seems to assume that a person said these blessings as he awoke and

45. A complete list of when ritual hand washing applies is in the *Introduction*.

46. Dr. Yosef Tabory, "The History of Prayer" (Notes from his class lectures given in the Spring of 2000; <http://yuca.org/~jyuter/notes/historyofprayer.html>), says that Rav Natronai claimed the *b'rakhot* moved to the synagogue because a person could not recite any blessings before he washed his hands, and the *b'rakhah* associated with hand washing became the *heksheh* to say the other *b'rakhot*. This assumes that the order of the *b'rakhot* in the *Talmud* (discussed just below) reflects something close to the original order, with hand washing near the end, but that the order changed when most of the blessings moved to the synagogue. Tabory would probably disagree with Rav Natronai's conclusion, given that Tabory states that we should assume that the order of the *b'rakhot* in the *Talmud* is random. Furthermore, Tabory does not say why reciting the handwashing blessing first led Rav Natronai to conclude that the other blessings had to be said in the synagogue. Tabory suggests that another option would have been to do all the "rising up actions," wash the hands, and then recite the many *b'rakhot*, all still while at home. But, he points out, this would lead to a loss of the connection between the actions and the blessings, precisely what eventually happened.

arose. Most of the blessings make up the core of today's *nissim b'khol yom*. Some of the other blessings are a part of the larger rubric of *birkhot hashakhar*.

The text of *B'rakhot* 60b is as follows:

כי מתער אומר אלהי נשמה שנתת בי טהורה אתה יצרתה בי אתה נפחתה בי
ואתה משמרה בקרבי ואתה עתיד ליטלה ממני ולהחזירה בי לעתיד לבא כל
זמן שהנשמה בקרבי מודה אני לפניך ה' אלהי ואלהי אבותי רבון כל
העולמים אדון כל הנשמות ברוך אתה ה' המחזיר נשמות לפגרים מתים כי
שמע קול תרנגולא לימא ברוך אשר נתן לשכוי בינה להבחין בין יום ובין
לילה כי פתח עיניה לימא ברוך פוקח עורים כי תריץ ויתייב לימא ברוך מתיר
אסורים כי לביש לימא ברוך מלביש ערומים כי זקיף לימא ברוך זוקף
כפופים כי נחית לארעא לימא ברוך רוקע הארץ על המים כי מסגי לימא
ברוך המכין מצעדי גבר כי סיים מסאניה לימא ברוך שעשה לי כל צרכי כי
אסר המייניה לימא ברוך אוזר ישראל בגבורה כי פריס סודרא על רישיה
לימא ברוך עוטר ישראל בתפארה כי מעטף בציצית לימא ברוך אשר קדשנו
במצותיו וצונו להתעטף בציצית. כי מנח תפילין אדרעיה לימא ברוך אשר
קדשנו במצותיו וצונו להניח תפילין ארישיה לימא ברוך אשר קדשנו
במצותיו וצונו על מצות תפילין כי משי ידיה לימא ברוך אשר קדשנו
במצותיו וצונו על נטילת ידים כי משי אפיה לימא ברוך המעביר חבלי שינה
מעיני ותנומה מעפעפי ויהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלהי שתרגילני בתורתך ודבקני
במצותיך ואל תביאני לא לידי חטא ולא לידי עון ולא לידי נסיון ולא לידי
בזיון וכוף את יצרי להשתעבד לך ורחקני מאדם רע ומחבר רע ודבקני ביצר
טוב ובחבר טוב בעולמך ותנני היום ובכל יום לחן ולחסד ולרחמים בעיניך
ובעיני כל רואי ותגמלני חסדים טובים ברוך אתה ה' גומל חסדים טובים
לעמו ישראל.

When he awakes he says: The soul You have placed within me is pure,

You have fashioned it within me, You breathed it into me, You

safeguarded it near me, and you will lift⁴⁷ it from me and will restore it to me in the time to come. As long as the soul is within me, I give thanks before You God, my God and God of my ancestors, Master of all worlds. Lord of all souls. Blessed are You God, who restores souls to dead bodies. When he hears the voice of the rooster, he says: Blessed [are You] who gives us the wisdom to distinguish between day and night. When he opens his eyes, he says: Blessed [are You] who opens the eyes of the blind. When he straightens and sits up, he says: Blessed [are You] who releases the bound. When he gets dressed, he says: Blessed [are You] who clothes the naked. When he stands, he says: Blessed [are You] who straightens the bent. When he stands on the ground, he says: Blessed [are You] who spreads out the earth upon the waters. When he walks, he says: Blessed [are You] who makes firm the steps of man. When he puts on shoes, he says: Blessed [are You] who provides for all my needs. When he fastens his belt, he says: Blessed [are You] who girds Israel with strength. When he puts a covering on his head, he says: Blessed [are You] is who crowns Israel with splendor. When he wraps himself in *tzitzit* [of his *tallit*], he says: Blessed [are You] who sanctifies us with Your commandments and commands us to wrap ourselves in *tzitzit*. When he puts *tefillin* on his arm, he says: Blessed [are You] who sanctifies us with Your commandments and commands us to put on *tefillin*. When he puts *tefillin* on his head, he says: Blessed [are You] who sanctifies us with Your commandments and commands us to put on *tefillin*. When he washes his hands, he says: Blessed [are You] who sanctifies us with Your commandments and commands us regarding the washing of the hands. When he washes his face, he says: Blessed [are You] who removes the bonds of sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids. And may it Your will, God, my God, that You lead me to Your Torah and attach me to Your commandments. Do not bring me to the realm of error, nor to the realm of sin, nor to the

47. Most translate this as “take” rather than “lift.” I use “lift” to show the word’s connection to the root *לָפַט*, which is discussed briefly in the opening of Chapter 4.

realm of temptation, nor to the realm of scorn, nor compel my evil inclination to obey You. Send me far from an evil person and an evil friend. Attach me to the good inclination and to a good friend in Your world. Grant to me today, and everyday, grace, kindness, and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see me. Bestow upon me beneficent kindness. Blessed are You, God, who bestows beneficent kindness upon Your people Israel.

From this long passage, we learn a few different things. First, that hand washing, which appears to be a part of person's ordinary morning routine – just like putting on one's shoes – at some time became a sanctified act commanded by God, akin to wrapping oneself in the *tzitzit* of a *tallit*. Second, that, at least as far as the *Talmud* is concerned, ritual hand washing in the morning has a specifically known blessing that accompanies it, unlike ritual hand washing before and after eating. (See Chapter 1, Section E., for the discussion on the text of the blessing for *n'tilat yadayim* before and after eating.)

B. Why Perform *N'tilat Yadayim* in the Morning?

The third insight we gain from the above passage might tell us why the Rabbis feel that washing the hands upon waking is so important. Part of this *B'rakhot* passage reads: "Do not bring me to the realm of error, nor to the realm of sin, nor to the realm of temptation, nor to the realm of scorn." The Rabbis use the words "לא לידי" to express "do not bring me to the realm of." In other words, they engage in metonymy – the use of one word as suggestive for another. In this case, they use the word "hand" to suggest the "body." Perhaps this is a subtle recognition by the Rabbis that the hands represent the parts of the body that "do" things, including commit errors, commit sin, give in to temptation, and act with scorn.

The Rabbis seem to use the activities of the hands as a metaphor for the activities of a person. The hands become shorthand for the body – anything that a person might do in the negative: committing an error, committing a sin, giving in to temptation, or acting with scorn – becomes attributed to the hands. Washing the hands, or ritually purifying them, would be one way to help a person avoid all those potentially evil actions.

The Rabbis greatly feared what might happen if a person's hands remained unclean. They claimed that an evil spirit affected those people whose hands had not been ritually washed. Several passages reflect this concern. The first is in *Yoma* 77b (and the nearly identical text is found in *Chullin* 107b):

תנא דב' מנשה רשב"ג אומר מדיחה אשה ידה אחת במים ונותנת פת לתינוק
ואינה חוששת אמרו עליו על שמאי הזקן שלא רצה להאכיל בידו אחת וגזרו
עליו להאכיל בשתי ידים מ"ט אמר אביי משום שיבתא.

The School of R. Menasseh taught in a *baraita*: R. Simeon b. Gamaliel says: A woman may wash one hand in water [on *Yom Kippur*] and give bread to an infant without fear.⁴⁸ They said about Shammai the Elder – that he did not want to feed [his own child] with [even] one hand. They (his colleagues) decreed it upon him [that he must] feed with both hands. What was the reason [washing was allowed in these cases]? Abaye said: Because of *shibb'ta*.

Rashi⁴⁹ identifies *shibb'ta* as the evil spirit, sometimes called the *bat melech* or “princess” that rests on a person's hands when he wakes in the morning.⁵⁰ It can be removed only by washing the hands. We do not know what happens if the *shibb'ta*

48. Without fear of violating the prohibition against washing oneself on *Yom Kippur*.

49. Jastrow, Marcus, *Dictionary of the Talmud*, concurs with Rashi's definition.

50. The later *Tosafot* identify *shibb'ta* not as the *bat melech*, but as an evil spirit that strikes children who are four or five years old when they are fed by someone who did not wash his hands before feeding, regardless of any previous washing. Once struck by the spirit, the children waste away and die.

remains on the hands or why it comes to rest there in the first place. Perhaps a person who did not remove the *shibb'ta* would be in danger of committing an error, committing a sin, giving in to temptation, or acting with scorn – the very actions the Rabbis prayed each morning that God would help them avoid.

Although the larger context of this *Yoma* discussion is not germane to the topic of ritual hand washing before eating (it's about whether a parent can wash on *Yom Kippur* before giving his or her child bread without violating the laws of *Yom Kippur*), it still provides insight into the thinking of the Rabbis, and perhaps provides an answer to the question of *why* they felt the need to go through ritual purification several times each day.

We find another reference to *shibb'ta* in *Ta'anit* 20b, in a discussion between Rava and Rafram bar Papa concerning the virtues of Rav Huna:

ואיכא דאמרי מילתא דשיבתא הוה גמיר והוה מנח כוזא דמיא ודלי ליה
ואמר כל דצריך ליתי וליעול דלא לסתכן.

And there are some who report: He had a tradition concerning *shibb'ta*.

Therefore, he would take a jug of water, hang it, and say: Anyone who needs [water], let him come and enter so that he will not be in danger.

As the text indicates, Rav Huna was concerned that those who did not wash their hands to rid themselves of *shibb'ta* would be in danger. Of what, he does not say. We can only guess. Perhaps he, too, is concerned that a person would be in danger of committing an error, committing a sin, giving in to temptation, or acting with scorn. Or perhaps, like the later *Tosafot*, he is concerned about the danger of contracting illness. This would be consistent with the third evil spirit-related passage.

In this passage, the Rabbis are discussing medical treatments of the eye. Their discussion leads into words about the hands, and although they do not outright discuss the

"evil spirit that rests on the hands," according to Rashi, it is implied in their discussion.

This passage comes from *Shabbat* 108b-109a:

שלח ליה רבי ינאי למר עוקבא לישדר לן מר מהנך קילורין דמר שמואל
שלח ליה שדורי משדרנא לך דלא תימא צר עין אנא אלא הכי אמר שמואל
טובה טיפת צונן שחרית ורחיצת ידים ורגלים בחמין ערבית מכל קילורין
שבעולם תניא נמי הכי אמר רבי מונא משום רבי יהודה טובה טיפת צונן
שחרית ורחיצת ידים ורגלים ערבית מכל קילורין שבעולם הוא היה אומר יד
לעין תיקצץ יד לחוטם תיקצץ יד לפה תיקצץ יד לאוזן תיקצץ יד לחסודה
תיקצץ יד לאמה תיקצץ יד לפי טבעת תיקצץ יד לגיגית תיקצץ יד מסמא יד
מחרשת יד מעלה פוליפוס.

Ravi Yannai sent [a message] to Mar Ukva: Could master send us some of the *collyria*⁵¹ of Mar Shmuel? He sent [this message back]: I will certainly send [it] to you so that you will know that I am not stingy. But Shmuel [has] said the following: A drop of cold [water in the eyes] in the morning and washing the hands and feet in warm water in the evening is better than all the *collyria* in the world. This was also taught in a *baraita*: Rabi Mona said in the name of Rabi Yehuda: A drop of cold [water in the eyes] in the morning and washing the hands and feet [in warm water] in the evening is better than all the *collyria* in the world. He (Rabi Mona) would say: A hand [that is put] to the eye should be cut off.⁵² A hand [that is put] to the nose should be cut off. A hand [that is put] to the mouth should be cut off.⁵³ A hand [that is put] to the ear should be cut off.⁵⁴ A hand [that is put] to a lancet puncture⁵⁵ should be cut off. A hand [that is put] to the penis

51. *Collyria* is an eye salve.

52. If, according to Rashi, he puts the hand to the eye before he washes his hands in the morning. If he hasn't yet washed, then his hands would still have the *bat melech* upon them, and the *bat melech* causes blindness.

53. Because the *bat melech* causes *polypus*, a foul odor, in the nose or mouth.

54. Because the *bat melech* causes deafness.

55. From blood letting, according to the *Shottenstein Edition of the Talmud*.

should be cut off.⁵⁶ A hand [that is put] to the anus should be cut off.⁵⁷ A hand [that is put] to the [spiggot of a beer] barrel should be cut off.⁵⁸ The hand causes blindness [if it touches the eyes before being washed in the morning]. The hand causes deafness [if it touches the ears before being washed in the morning]. The hand generates a *polypus* [if it touches the mouth or nose before being washed in the morning].

This *sugya* does not specifically mention the *shibb'ta* or the *bat melech*, yet Rashi is certain that the *bat melech* was the Rabbis concern. If we assume that the *shibb'ta* and the *bat melech* are one and the same, then the concern was not so much that unwashed hands would lead one to commit an error, commit a sin, give in to temptation, or act with scorn. Instead, the unwashed hands could lead to illness. Note that all the places where the Rabbis are concerned that a person should not touch before washing are bodily openings – the eye, the nose, the mouth, the ear, a lancet puncture, the penis, and the anus. Perhaps their concern is that the demon would make contact with bodily liquids, and then cause disease or harm to enter the body.⁵⁹ It would seem that purity of the self is inextricably linked to hygiene, and one can understand what influenced the *Tosafot* interpretation of the evil spirit being something that harmed (and eventually killed) young children.

On the other hand, perhaps the *shibb'ta* and the *bat melech* are two separate concerns. Not washing the hands in the morning could lead the hands or person toward evil behavior (the *shibb'ta*) and it could lead to disease if the hands touch another part of the

56. Because the *bat melech* would otherwise harm the penis if the hand has not been washed.

57. The concern, according to Rashi, is not that the *bat melech* would harm the anus, but rather, that one might touch his eye or ear after touching his anus without washing in between.

58. Because the *bat melech* would contaminate the beer and harm anyone who subsequently drinks beer from the barrel. According to *Mishnah Berurah* 4:14, this applies to any food touched before one washes his hands in the morning.

59. For this same reason, the Rabbis caution against touching the spiggot of a beer barrel. The spiggot is the location in which any contamination would enter the barrel.

body or something eventually consumed (the *bat melech*).

If the *shibb' ta/bat melech sugayot* were the only ones that discussed washing in the morning, it might be reasonable to conclude, given the length and detail of the discussion in *Shabbat* 108b-109a, that the Rabbis were concerned with hygiene. But two other discussions suggest that the Rabbis did indeed have a spiritual concern. The first one is from *Shabbat* 50b:

אמימר ומר זוטרא ורב אשי הוו יתבי אייתו לקמיהו ברדא אמימר ורב אשי
משו מר זוטרא לא משא אמרו ליה לא סבר לה מר להא דאמר רב ששת
ברדא שרי אמר להו רב מרדכי בר מיניה דמר דאפילו בחול נמי לא סבירא
ליה סבר לה כי הא דתניא מגרר אדם גלדי צואה וגלדי מכה שעל בשרו
בשביל צערו אם בשביל ליפות אסור ואינהו כמאן סברוה כי הא דתניא
רוחץ אדם פניו ידיו ורגליו בכל יום בשביל קונו משום שנאמר כל פעל ה'
למענהו.

Amimar, Mar Zutra, and Rav Asi were sitting when *barda*⁶⁰ was brought before them [on *Shabbat*]. Amimar and Mar Asi washed [their hands with *barda*] but Rav Zutra did not wash. They said to him: Do you not accept Rav Sheshet's ruling that [washing the hands with] *barda* is permitted? Rav Mordecai answered them: Exclude Mar [Zutra], who holds it is not [permitted], even on weekdays. His view is as what was taught: One may scrape off the dirt scabs and wound scabs on his flesh because of the pain,⁶¹ but not to beautify himself.⁶² Whose [view] do they adopt? As it was taught: One must wash his face, hands, and feet daily for his Maker, as it is said: "God makes everything for His own purpose" (*Proverbs* 16:4).

In this passage, we are told that daily hand washing is for God. Although the root for

60. A cosmetic lotion used as a detergent, mixing aloes, myrtle, and violet, according to Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud*.

61. Caused by the scabs.

62. Rashi claims that the Rabbis prohibit a man from undertaking any activity that might be interpreted as feminine behavior, such as beautifying oneself.

washing in this passage is רחץ and not נטל, it seems to make little difference, as both mean “to wash.”⁶³

In a second *sugya*, we learn perhaps another spiritual reason for washing in the morning. This one is from *B'rakhot* 14b-15a:

ואמר רבי יוחנן הרוצה שיקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים שלמה יפנה ויטול ידיו
ויניח תפילין ויקרא קריאת שמע ויתפלל וזו היא מלכות שמים שלמה אמר
רבי חייא בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן כל הנפנה ונטל ידיו ומניח תפילין וקורא
קריאת שמע ומתפלל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו בנה מזבח והקריב עליו קרבן
דכתיב ארחץ בנקיון כפי ואסובבה את מזבחך ה'.

Rabi Yochanan said: The one who wishes to accept upon himself the yoke of Heaven in a complete manner should [in the morning] relieve himself, wash his hands, put on *t'fillin*, recite the *Sh'ma* and pray. And this is the complete acceptance of [the yoke of] Heaven's sovereignty. Rabi Chiya bar Abba said in the name of Rabi Yochanan: [Regarding] anyone who [in the morning] relieves himself, washes his hands, puts on *t'fillin*, and then recites the *Sh'ma* and prays, Torah regards this as if he built an altar and offered a sacrifice upon it. For it is written, “I wash my hands⁶⁴ in cleanliness and circle around Your altar, Adonai” (*Psalms* 26:6).

We now discover another reason for washing the hands in the morning: to ready a person for reciting the morning *Sh'ma*. It's unlikely that it refers to a second morning washing, given that this one comes right after “relieving himself,” certainly one of the first acts a person undertakes after awakening, prior to donning the morning *tefillin*.⁶⁵

63. According to Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud*, רחץ means “to wash” and נטל means “to wash the hands.”

64. The word used here for “my hands,” כפי, appears in another form in *I Kings* 8:22, and, according to the *Shottenstein Talmud* commentary, indicates a connection to prayer.

65. According to Rabbi Naftali Hoffner, in his *Sefer Halakhah: D'nei T'khilat Hayom*, the two main reasons for washing upon waking are (1) to remove the *ru'ach hatuma*, or “unclean spirit,” that attaches itself to a person during the night and remains on the fingertips upon waking, and (2) to prepare to recite *Sh'ma*. The distinction between the two isn't always so clear. For example, the

In a highly cryptic discussion in *B'rakhot* 22a, the Rabbis are concerned that the Palestinian community seems to have abolished the requirement of washing the hands.

They elaborate as follows:

מאן דאמר בטל לנטילותא כי הא דרב חסדא לייט אמאן דמהדר אמיא
בעידן צלותא.

The one who says, "they abolished the washing of the hands" [was saying] the same thing as Rav Hisda, who would condemn a person who went looking for water when the time for prayer began.⁶⁶

So we now have three possible reasons why the Rabbis made ritual hand washing before eating an obligation: to sanctify or purify oneself, to eliminate the evil spirit that rests on the hands (which could lead one to sin and/or cause health problems), and to ready oneself for reciting the *Sh'ma* (and perhaps other prayers).

C. N'tilat Yadayim Only in the Morning?

Ritual hand washing in the morning so clearly became the norm during *talmudic* times that the Rabbis actually contemplated the possibility that washing in the morning could double for other washings during the day. We find in *Chullin* 106b-107a the following:

אמר רב נוטל אדם את שתי ידיו שחרית ומתנה עליהן כל היום כולו אמר
להו רבי אבינא לבני פקתא דערבות כגון אתון דלא שכיחי לכו מיא משו
ידיכו מצפרא ואתנו עליהו לכולא יומא איכא דאמרי בשעת הדחק אין
שלא בשעת הדחק לא ופליגא דרב ואיכא דאמרי אפילו שלא בשעת הדחק

Rosh, in his commentary at *B'rakhot* 9:23, says that "because ones hands are in constant motion, even when one sleeps, and it is inconceivable that they did not come into contact with unclean parts of the body during the night, the Sages instituted a *b'rakhah* (referring to the one associated with hand washing) before a person recites the *Sh'ma* and prays."

66. Apparently, Rav Hisda felt that one should wipe his hands with rocks, wood, or other material to ritually clean, rather than search for water, if one had not washed his hands when the time for prayer arrived.

Rav said: The person may wash both of his hands in the morning and declare for himself [that the washing renders his hands clean for the purposes of eating] for the entire day. Ravi Avina said to the people of the Valley of Aravot: For example, for you people, there is not enough water [to wash many times during the day], therefore you may wash your hands in the morning and declare for yourselves [that your hands are clean for eating] for the entire day. There are those who say: In a time when there is a dire need, yes [one may wash in the morning and have it cover the meals for the day], but not in a time when there is no dire need. [Rav Avina] argues with Rav: There are those who say even not in a time of dire need, and this is [consistent with the ruling] of Rav.⁶⁷

It would seem that washing the hands in the morning became the most important hand washing ritual of the day, given that it could cover all meals of the day as well, if there isn't enough water for additional washings.⁶⁸

D. *N'tilat Yadayim* in the Morning: Procedural Concerns

Unlike hand washing before eating, hand washing in the morning did not seem to generate much *talmudic* discussion, especially concerning procedural questions. Perhaps issues such as how actually to wash, the vessel, and the water were understood to be covered by the rules covering hand washing before (or even after) eating. We will never

67. The *halakhah* today is mostly in accordance with the more lenient ruling of Rav. See, for example, S.A., O.H. 164:1.

68. As I state in the *Introduction*, the *halakhah* now requires a person to wash his hands in nine everyday situations, as well as before eating the parsley during the Passover *seder* and before reciting *Birkat Hakohanim* (this latter situation being limited to priests). In doing research for this thesis, I came across *talmudic* references to washing before eating, washing after eating, washing upon awakening, and washing before reciting the *Sh'ma*, four of the nine everyday situations. I am not sure why the Rabbis contemplated the morning washing to cover a day's worth of pre-meal washes, but not the other everyday situations. I am not certain when the five other everyday situations became *halakhic* obligations (and thus whether they were omitted from the discussion in the above *Chullin* passage because they were not yet required or for some other reason). Researching this question is beyond the scope of this thesis.

know for certain.

One procedural question unique to washing in the morning (before praying) is discussed by the Rabbis. The question is what to do if you have no water for washing. The Rabbis propose two possibilities – using something other than water or traveling a certain distance where you know there is water. This discussion is taken up in *B'rakhot* 15a:

אמר ליה רבינא לרבא חזי מר האי צורבא מרבנן דאתא ממערבא ואמר מי
שאין לו מים לרחוץ ידיו מקנח ידיו בעפר ובצרור ובקסמית אמר ליה שפיר
קאמר מי כתיב ארחץ במים בנקיון כתיב כל מידי דמנקי דהא רב חסדא
לייט אמאן דמהדר אמאי בעידן צלותא והני מילי לקריאת שמע אבל
לתפלה מהדר ועד כמה עד פרסה והני מילי לקמיה אבל לאחוריה אפילו
מיל אינו חוזר מיל הוא דאינו חוזר הא פחות ממיל חוזר.

Ravina said to Rava: Has master seen this young student who came from the west and said: One who does not have water to wash his hands may clean his hands with earth or with pebbles or with chips of wood? He said to him: He has spoken well. Is it written "I wash in water" (*Psalm* 26:6)? "In cleanliness," it is written. Indeed, Rav Hisda condemns the one who goes to find water at the time of prayer. And this ruling is regarding the *Sh'ma*. But for the *Amidah* he must go after [water to clean]. How far? Until a *parsah*.⁶⁹ And this ruling [is when water] is in front of him, but if [the water] is behind him, he does not need to go back even a *mil*. A *mil* he does not need to return, but if it is less than a *mil*, he must go back [to the water].

In the first part of this passage, we learn that it is acceptable to use something other than water to ritually wash. A young student who taught that if one does not have water he can wash with earth, pebbles, or chips of wood is cited for his proper ruling. Beyond

69. A *parsah* is equal to four *mil*, or between two and a half and three miles.

the first part of the passage, however, it is not clear if the Rabbis are discussing the morning washing. It seems more likely that this passage is a compilation of a series of separate rulings. The first ruling provides an alternative for the person who has no water for washing. Next, we find a series of statements regarding washing before prayer, the *Sh'ma* and the *Amidah*, and whether or not a person should travel to find water for washing. Finally, we switch to another topic – the location of the water (behind the person or in front of him) and how far he must travel in which direction to get to the water.⁷⁰

The other procedural issue to arise is whether or not one is allowed to wash his hands and recite the *b'rakhah* in the bathroom.⁷¹ This issue comes up with the morning hand washing because that washing usually takes places around the same time that one relieves himself first thing in the morning. Thus we read in *B'rakhot* 26a:

אמר רבא הני בתי כסאי דפרסאי אף על גב דאית בהו צואה כסתומין דמו.

Rava said: These Persian toilets, even when they contain excrement, are considered as if they are sealed.

On its face, this passage doesn't say much. Rashi explains, however, that the toilets "were dug into the ground, with the mouth of the hole at a distance from the hole itself

70. The later laws in this passage probably have nothing to do with the morning washing. I reach this conclusion because the current *halakhah* regarding how far to travel in the morning before washing one's hands has nothing to do with traveling a *parsah* or a *mil*, or whether the water is behind a person or in front of him. Today's law prohibits a person from walking more than four *amot*, approximately six to eight feet. The law regarding the *amot* is not mentioned in the *Talmud* or in other early *halakhic* sources. It is first mentioned in the 13th century by the Rashba, in his commentary on *B'rakhot* 25b (in a different context).

71. The *halakhah* generally prohibits one from reciting a *b'rakhah* in the bathroom, with a number of exceptions. For example, it clearly would be permissible to wash and say the *b'rakhah* in the washroom of a "Victorian bathroom," where the tub and sink are in one room and the toilet is in another. If all three fixtures are in the same room, however, some modern scholars prohibit a person from reciting the *b'rakhah* while he is still in the bathroom; others permit it as long as he puts down the toilet seat cover first.

which was on a slant so that the excrement would roll down into the hole.” Thus, he concluded, that Rava was saying it would be permissible to wash one’s hands and recite the *b'rakhah* in the “Persian toilet” room because any excrement would not be present.

Chapter 3 – *N'tilat Yadayim* Before Eating in a New Context: The Role of Communal Silence

As discussed in Chapter 1, the current *halakhah* requires that once a person washes his hands before eating, he remains quiet until he recites the *Motzi* and eats the bread. The simplest explanation is that hand washing and the *Motzi* are two parts of the same action – sanctification before eating. One reason that the two are linked has to do with the order in which the *b'rakhot* are recited and the actions are done.

Normally, the *b'rakhah* connected to a *mitzvah* precedes it. But with *n'tilat yadayim*, the *b'rakhah* is made after the action because a person cannot make the *b'rakhah* beforehand if his hands are dirty.⁷² Thus, the order of the entire ritual is to (1) wash the hands, (2) recite the blessing of *n'tilat yadayim*, (3) recite the blessing of the *Motzi*, and (4) eat a piece of bread. If one speaks at any time between washing and eating, then a break in the ritual would occur, and one would have to repeat the entire process. On this law, the *Shulkhan Arukh* is a bit more lenient, prohibiting any conversation other than something about a person's needs related to the food. He can speak about that (if he must); if he speaks about anything else, he must repeat the entire process.⁷³

No matter which interpretation we accept, the *halakhah* is clear: Once a person begins to ritually wash before eating, he is not permitted to speak until he reaches the *Motzi* and subsequently eats after that.

A. *N'tilat Yadayim* in Communal Settings

When I have been at gatherings with Jews of all denominations and we have a meal

72. *S.A., O.H.* 158:11.

73. *S.A., O.H.* 167:6.

together.⁷⁴ I have noticed that the “hand washing” station is often near the beginning of the food line. Not only does the table contain a bowl of water, a vessel for washing, and a towel for drying, but a plate of bread as well. After an individual ritually washes, he immediately (and privately) recites the *Motzi* and eats some bread. Then he gets in the food line, and chats away with people around him. The point is that he quickly does what is required of him *halakhically*, and then he returns to the group, his absence having barely been noticed.

When I have been at gatherings of Reform Jews and we have a meal together, the ritual preceding the eating is very different. On *Shabbat*, we light candles, make *Kiddush*, and then we say the *Motzi*. For each one of these, we participate both individually (or per table) and as a part of the group. Someone usually leads each blessing in the front of the room, but each table has a set of candles, and each person has a glass of wine and a piece of *challah*. When it is not *Shabbat*, we invite everyone in the room to pick up a piece of bread, and then, together, we say the *Motzi*. In either case, the point is to create community through sharing a traditional Jewish ritual.

In both situations – the traditionally observant Jew washing and reciting the *Motzi* on his own, or the Reform community reciting the *Motzi* together – the silence is lost. In the former situation, the person does the actions and recites the blessings so quickly that there’s no real time to ponder the silence. In the second situation, hand washing and the silence between it and the *Motzi* are not a part of the community *minhag*, so no one is aware of the absence of silence.

74. As I have been often, in gatherings, for example, of Wexner Heritage Foundation participants, of Wexner Graduate Fellows, and of CLAL rabbinic interns.

B. Jews and Silence

In general, I don't believe that Jews "do silence" terribly well, especially not in worship or ritual. We are a people of words. We are created in the image of God⁷⁵ and the first thing God did was speak.⁷⁶ While I have not undertaken any scientific study of Jews and silence,⁷⁷ I have observed many different communities during worship and communal gatherings. Rarely are we given – or do we take – time for silence.⁷⁸

Last summer, after I decided to focus this chapter of my thesis on the possible role that silence might play in a Jewish communal setting, I posed a question on the HUCALUM listserve.⁷⁹ I asked congregational clergy to share with me how their communities handled moments of silence during prayer, such as the "silent prayer" following the *Amidah*, or when the service leader finished singing before the *hakafah* or Torah undressing was complete. I clearly struck a nerve, as nearly thirty congregational rabbis and cantors responded.

The responses reflected a number of trends. First, many clergy agreed (to their dismay) that Reform Jews are uncomfortable with silence. One rabbi wrote, "we do silence here dreadfully."⁸⁰ Some clergy described how congregants would start squirming if the silence during the *Amidah* seemed "too long." Another group of clergy acknowledged that a very short silent prayer during the *Amidah* was the norm in the past.

75. *Genesis* 1:27, "And God created *adam* (human) in God's image."

76. *Genesis* 1:3, God said: "Let there be light."

77. Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin has told me through private correspondence that he is researching the question of Jews and silence.

78. Last fall, I was speaking with an Orthodox rabbi, and shared with him my thesis topic. He was intrigued, especially when I told him what I was doing for Chapters 3 and 4. Then he chuckled and said, "You know, it's not only Reform Jews who have a problem with silence. Why do you think we Orthodox mumble our way through the "silent" parts of *davening*? Silence drives us crazy!"

79. This is the email listserve for all *alumni* of HUC-JIR, regardless of year or program.

80. Rabbi Myra Soifer.

but that they have undertaken special efforts to change the climate. Some have made changes through language, changing "silent" prayer to "private" or "individual" prayer, emphasizing the time for personal communication with God. Others, once a year or more often, sermonize about the role of silence and personal prayer.

Others simply have increased the time for silent prayer, from thirty or forty-five seconds (a commonly mentioned length of time) to as long as "a few minutes." A few rabbis mentioned that on Friday nights, their congregations do the entire *Amidah* silently. Still, several recognized that they cannot change the culture of most *Shabbat* services, and so they experiment or incorporate silence into other settings, such as in a meditative service, during a *S'lichot* service, or on *Yom Kippur* afternoon.

Another pronounced trend falls at the other end of the spectrum. These clergy, mostly older rabbis ordained some time ago,⁸¹ find that silent prayer, as one rabbi put it, "is enhanced by music."⁸² In his congregation, the organist or accompanist plays music during silent prayer. Another rabbi echoed this sentiment, suggesting that "quiet music for silent prayer [can be] soothing rather than distracting, and facilitates private prayer by covering what can otherwise be distracting whispers, coughs, and outside traffic noises."⁸³

We are well aware of how music acts as our cue to "do something." In the childhood game, "Musical Chairs," we circle round, relaxed, sometimes giggly, until the music stops. When the silence takes over, we become frantic, trying to find a seat, knowing that the game has been set up deliberately so that one person will be left standing, and ejected

81. I did not say ordained or invested because none of the cantors who responded stated this position.

82. Rabbi Samuel M. Stahl.

83. Rabbi Ralph D. Mecklenburger.

from further participation.

One of the most insightful comments came from a cantor who wrote:

A more basic issue is not so much how we deal with silence, but how Reform Jews approach the whole notion of personal prayer. I have seen time and time again, from little *minyanim* to big biennials, that we/they are drawn in to – often powerful – worship with communal readings, songs, and Hebrew chants; but when the leader cuts the cord and lets people off into their own personal prayer space it is for many akin to drifting in a boat without a paddle. Personal prayer is much more than silence. ... It may involve reading, *davening*, meditation, silent prayer, or daydreaming. It may involve vocalized chanting or reading, recitation of memorized prayers, in some cases crying. My point simply is, most of our congregants don't know what to do (because it's never been explained to them) when the music and readings stop, and they are on their own.⁸⁴

C. Which Communal Settings?

As I propose new communal rituals involving silence, I am cognizant of the range of approaches to silence expressed by these clergy, as well as the caution offered by the cantor cited above. In addition, I appreciate the words of one rabbi, who wrote, not so much about silence, but about ritual in general. He said:

I think that one area that could be explored in Reform-Judaism rituals is the reluctance/discomfort that some Reform Jews may feel in performing rituals. When one does not have any experience in performing a ritual, the person may feel reluctant to do so in a public setting for fear that he/she may be doing it incorrectly or for fear that he/she may be viewed (even if doing it correctly) as "becoming Orthodox."⁸⁵

With all this in mind, I began to think about when Reform Jews come together to

84. Cantor Jeff Klepper.

85. Rabbi Fred V. Davidow.

share a meal, and what kinds of silence-related rituals prior to eating might be introduced. At first, I considered a congregational *Shabbat* dinner, Passover *seder*, or even annual dinner-dance. But then I began to envision more problems than not with attempting to introduce rituals in these settings. I eliminated the *seder* because it already includes two washings as a part of the rite; adding a third would only be confusing and redundant. In addition, adding time for silence during a communal *seder* following one of the washings would only lengthen a community event that most clergy want only to shorten.

As for the annual dinner-dance, people rarely bring a sense of communal spiritual intentionality (*kavanah*) to the event. Furthermore, people in attendance often have a wide range of reasons for being there – for example, some might feel obligated to attend because they are part of the congregation's lay leadership; others may go because they want to support the congregation in its fundraising efforts; some attend to see friends; others enjoy formal dinner dances. Introducing a ritual of communal silence to such a diverse crowd would probably fall flat.

That left the *Shabbat* dinner. The congregational *Shabbat* dinner has many of the same problems as the dinner-dance, especially the lack of *kavanah* inherent in American festive meals. (I would guess that most people bring their *kavanah* to the worship, not the meal.) But, I cannot imagine writing rituals to be used when members of a Reform congregation come together for a meal, and not including a *Shabbat* dinner. And so, the first ritual I present in this chapter is for a congregational *Shabbat* dinner.

But one ritual felt insufficient. So I challenged myself to consider other times when it might be possible to suggest a new ritual involving communal silence to a group that comes together to share a meal. I came up with three: a *chavurah*'s monthly *havdalah*

and dinner get together; a *Rosh Chodesh* group's monthly dinner and study session; and a youth group's monthly pizza-dinner program. These are small(er) groups that come together for a specific purpose. The members generally already share the same goal, and would be amenable to using a ritual to enhance it. Furthermore, these groups come together regularly; rituals require time and practice for people to become comfortable with them.

In the rest of this chapter, I offer four different rituals for when various members of a synagogue come together to share a meal. The rituals involve handwashing on the part of all participants, followed by silence while the group waits for each person to wash. The washing, of course, is not a new Jewish ritual. (Although to most Reform Jews, it probably will be new.) What makes these rituals truly new, however, is that I propose some ideas of how to do the washing which are consistent with Reform Jews' sense of "doing ritual together," while offering ways to make use of the silence so that no one starts fidgeting, gossiping, or feeling like the silence is "too long."

D. *N'tilat Yadayim*, Silence, and the Congregational *Shabbat* Dinner

This ritual contemplates congregational *Shabbat* dinners held at a set time, such as the first Friday of the month before services. Each month, a core group of regulars attends, as well as families considering joining the synagogue, new members to the congregation, and other members who simply want a different *Shabbat* experience. On average, approximately fifty to seventy-five people attend each dinner. In months when the dinner has a special theme connected to it – such as honoring founding members, saying goodbye to a cherished staff person, or celebrating the tenth graders becoming confirmands – attendance is usually higher, ranging from one hundred and twenty-five to

one hundred and fifty. At least one clergy person attends, along with some board members or other lay leaders.

Although the people joining together for the dinner and the services following may have a myriad of reasons for attending, all are there to experience *Shabbat* as different from the rest of the week. What is essential to experiencing *Shabbat* as something distinct from the previous six days? By slowing down, relaxing, resting, letting go of the hustle and bustle, leaving work at the office, and seeing the world in a sort of "slow motion." Even if we must run errands on *Shabbat*, we can still experience *Shabbat* by driving more slowly, walking when possible, greeting each person encountered with a genuine "hello," and not worrying about the time.

Thus, for the congregational *Shabbat* dinner, the ritual of hand washing will serve to lift the hands away from the work they have been doing all week. The silence following will help each person to slow down, and to move toward experiencing *Shabbat menuchah*, *Shabbat* rest.

Dinner is arranged buffet style. Each table is set up as I described in the introduction to this chapter – a set of candles on the table, and wine and a roll or piece of *challah* at each place setting. At the front of the room, the clergy members (or other leaders) stand next to a table with candlesticks and candles, a *Kiddush* cup filled with wine, and a loaf or two of *challah*. The leaders lead the candle blessing and *Kiddush*, or invite someone from the room to do so. As these *b'rakhot* are recited in the front, one person from each table lights the candles, and then each person takes his or her glass of wine and joins in the *Kiddush*.

After the *Kiddush*, the following passages are read aloud around the room, as each

table designates a reader. (For very large gatherings, these readings should be done around each table, rather than around the room.)⁸⁶

Communal Readings

On the seventh day God, finished the work that God had been doing, and God ceased on the seventh day from all the work that God had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation.⁸⁷

By resting on *Shabbat* as God did, we honor God and *Shabbat*, and we remember that we are created in God's image. We take time for ourselves in ways uniquely different from the other six days of the week. It is a time to relax. It is a time for pleasure. It is a time simply to be.

Our Rabbis taught: As the sixth day ended, the world was still incomplete. What did it lack? *Menuchah*, rest. When *Shabbat* arrived, so did rest, and the world was made complete.⁸⁸

God created tranquility, ease, peace, and quiet on the first *Shabbat* because *menuchah* required its own act of creation. Each *Shabbat*, we re-create that *menuchah*, a refreshment of body and soul.⁸⁹

Our Rabbis tell us too: "Make your *Shabbat* conversation different from your conversation on weekdays. Make your *Shabbat* walking different from your walking on weekdays."⁹⁰ Let us speak in ways that do not detract from the tranquility of *Shabbat*; let us walk as if we have all the time in the world.

In days past, our ancestors prepared for *Shabbat* by visiting the *mikveh*, the community bath. They did not seek to purify themselves, but rather, they sought to separate themselves from the week gone by. Tonight, as we welcome *Shabbat*, we too, will bring ourselves to water.

86. These paragraphs, together with some later "thoughts on how to 'be' in the silence" or "meditations to consider during the silence," would be typed up in advance with copies made for each person. This would be the case for all four ritual settings proposed in this chapter.

87. *Genesis* 2:2-3.

88. Rashi's commentary on *Genesis* 2:2.

89. *Genesis Rabbah* 10.9.

90. *Shabbat* 113b, 113a.

Our tradition teaches that before we eat a meal, we pour water over our hands to ritual cleanse. Let us wash our hands this evening to separate them from the activities that kept them busy all week.

According to tradition, we wash by pouring water from a cup or bowl – not by running our hands under a sink faucet. As we seek to separate ourselves from daily activities, let us begin by letting go of our dependence on machinery.

As we pause to wash our hands one by one, let us remain silent until we have all finished and are ready to recite the *Motzi* together. During the silence, let us recall this passage from *I Kings*:

God called to Elijah to stand where Moses had stood generations earlier, on Mount Sinai. And lo, God passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks; but God was not in the wind. After the wind – earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake – a fire; but God was not in the fire. And after the fire – *kol d'mamah dakah*, a quiet small voice.⁹¹

Washing the Hands

Around the room are several washing stations – perhaps even one station per table. At each station, place a vessel that can hold water, and paper towels for drying. Each table of people form a line at the washing station nearest to that table. One by one, each person fills the vessel and pours a small amount of water over the right hand, followed by a small amount of water over the left.

Customs vary in the Jewish world regarding how many times one washes each hand. In some communities, once is sufficient. Others wash each hand twice. In most places, people wash each hand three times. Why? Ancient Jews often believed that the number three had magical powers. In addition, the number three is connected to making something “legal” in Judaism. For example, a *beit din*, a Jewish court, is made up of three

91. *I Kings* 19:11-12.

people.

After washing, lift the hands and let the water roll down to the wrists. Then dry the hands and recite the traditional blessing for hand washing:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו, וצונו על נטילת ידים:

Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melek ha-olam, asher kid'shanu

b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al n'tilat yadayim.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the World, who sanctifies us through Your commandments and commands us to wash our hands.

One thoughtful touch is to refill the vessel for washing after you are done so that it is ready for the next person. This lovely gesture links the diners at each table to one another.

Meditation to Consider During the Silence

Judaism does not oppose work. The six days do not stand in opposition to the seventh day. It is all within the same commandment. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Eternal One" [Exodus 20:9-10]. Judaism pleads that we attain some degree of independence from the store, from the factory, from the office, from the culture of commerce, from the adulation of commodities.

The Sabbath challenges us to break our addiction to work. *Shabbat* is a cry for sanity, for freedom from the omnivorous monster that eats at our soul and robs us of our family, our friends, and the gentleness in us.

On *Yom Kippur*, the *Hafarah* from the prophet Isaiah concludes: "If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your business on My holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and call the holy day honorable, if you honor it and go not your own ways nor look to your own affairs nor pursue your business nor speak thereof, then shall you delight yourself in the Eternal and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob" [Isaiah 58:13-14]. For the Sabbath to be a delight, it must go beyond lighting the candles, reciting *Kiddush*, and blessing the *challah*. If the

table talk is filled with the making of "deals" or of a "killing" in the market, the *challah* turns hard and dry. If the table talk is ascerbic, sarcastic, and full of gossip, or speaks to the children only of their progress in school and not of their hopes and dream, the *Kiddush* wine turns sour. If there is shouting at the Sabbath table, the candles are extinguished.

Judaism asks for equilibrium. The Sabbath is a declaration of a truce, an armistice for the sake of our liberation. We are lopsided, out of kilter. We need one day out of seven to restore our sanity.

One day out of seven let us erect a barrier to keep out the culture of business, its toughness, its hardness, its obsessiveness, its competition.

One day out of seven let us close our pocketbooks.

One day out of seven let us liberate "in God we trust" from the dollar bill and put it into our lives.

One day in of seven let us halt the motor.

One day in of seven let us not purchase what we covet.

One day out of seven let us let us disconnect the TV, fax, and computer; instead, let us take our time, talking and listening to those whom we love.

One day out of seven let us create the balance indispensable for our sanity, our health, and the solidity of our family lives.

On *Shabbat*, we can begin to take back control of our lives. The Sabbath is our time; the home is our place.⁹²

When Everyone Has Washed, Return to the Table and Sing

וְשָׁמְרוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת, לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת לְדֹרוֹתָם בְּרִית עוֹלָם: בְּנֵי
וּבֵין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אוֹת הִיא לְעוֹלָם, כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה יְיָ אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת
הָאָרֶץ, וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת וַיִּנָּפֶשׁ.

*V'sham'ru v'nei yisra-eil et hashabat la-asot et hashabat, l'dorotam b'rit
olam. Beini uvein b'nei yisra-eil ot hi l'olam, ki sheishet yamim asah
adonai et hashamayim v'et ha-aretz, uvayom hash'vi-i shavat vayinafash.*

92. This entire meditation comes from Schulweis, Harold M., "Serenity Lost - and Found," in Elkins, Dov Peretz, ed., *A Shabbat Reader: Universe of Cosmic Joy* (UAHC Press, 1998): 99-100.

The people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath in every generation as a covenant for all time. It is a sign forever between Me and the people of Israel, for in six days the Eternal God made heaven and earth, resting on the seventh day.

Finally, Pray Together

אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ, רְצֵה בְּמִנוּחֵינוּ.⁹³

Eloheinu veilohei avoteinu v'imoteinu r'tzei vim 'nukhateinu.

Our God, and God of our ancestors, may You be pleased with our rest.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַמוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melek ha-olam, hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the World, who brings forth bread from the earth.

E. *N'tilat Yadayim*, Silence, and the *Chavurah*

This ritual contemplates a congregational *chavurah* that has been meeting for some time. Perhaps they first came together when their children were young to support each other as young parents and to figure out how to have a Jewish home and life with all the demands of marriage, children, work, aging parents, and the like. The children are now grown, out of the house or away at college. The *chavurah* continues to meet, but has changed its focus: The members now come together for themselves, to find ways to enhance their spiritual awareness, as well as to learn together and socialize. They meet anywhere from six to twelve times a year, usually on a Saturday night, rotating among members' homes. They begin with a common exercise: learning, sharing, or just being. They have dinner together, and when the sun sets, they make *Havdalah*.

93. This prayer is part of the traditional *Shabbat Amidah*.

This ritual begins just as the *chavurah* is ready to eat dinner. Each person stands behind his or her chair at the dinner table (if the meal is a sit down) or stands around the table where the food has been placed (in the case of buffet meal). Everyone focuses on the table before them, and, going around the table, members of the *chavurah* take turns reading the following, perhaps paragraph by paragraph:

Communal Readings

The Jewish dinner table is often compared to the ancient Temple altar. Just as our ancestors brought their finest offerings to the Temple to be given to God, we try each day to bring our best selves to the Eternal One. This table reminds us that when we fall short, it is often because we have spoken words that have hurt rather than soothed.

We read in the book of *Exodus*: "Make for Me an altar of stones. Do not build it of hewn stones, for by wielding your tool upon them you have profaned them."⁹⁴ Martin Buber teaches: "The altar of the earth is the altar of silence, which pleases God beyond all else."⁹⁵

Let us take the time to wash our hands to purify them, and, by extension, our bodies, before touching the meal before us. And when we have washed, let us remain silent until all have done so, taking that sacred time together to separate our mouths from any impure, unkind, or hurtful things we might have said earlier in the day.⁹⁶

Immersion in water softens our form, making us malleable, dissolving some of the rigidity of who we are. It allows us to decide who we want to be when we come out of the water. The water changes us, neither by washing away something nor by letting something soak into us, but simply by softening us so that we can remold ourselves into a different image.⁹⁷

94. *Exodus* 20:22.

95. Buber, Martin, *Ten Rungs: Collected Hasidic Sayings* (Carol Publishing Corporation, 2001): 30.

96. Based on a Chassidic teaching of Rav of Chernobyl.

97. Based on a teaching of the faculty of CLAL, the Center for Jewish Leadership and Learning.

Tradition specifies that, for ritual washing, the water must be poured over the hands by human agency, not by machine or faucet. The point is that awakening consciousness cannot be accomplished by mechanical means. Pouring is usually done personally, but it can be done by another as a mark of friendship.⁹⁸

As we pause to wash our hands, let us remain silent until we have all finished and are ready to recite the *Motzi* together. During the silence, let us recall this passage from *I Kings*:

God called to Elijah to stand where Moses had stood generations earlier, on Mount Sinai. And lo, God passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks; but God was not in the wind. After the wind – earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake – a fire; but God was not in the fire. And after the fire – *kol d'mamah dakah*, a still small voice.⁹⁹

Washing the Hands

Next to the kitchen sink, the host places any vessel that can hold water and a hand towel for drying. The members of the *chavurah* form a line at the sink. One by one, each person fills the vessel and then pours a small amount of water over the right hand, followed by a small amount of water over the left. (Or, the next person in line can pour the water over the hands of the person at the sink.)

Customs vary in the Jewish world regarding how many times one washes each hand. In some communities, once is sufficient. Others wash each hand twice. In most places, people wash each hand three times. Why? Ancient Jews often believed that the number three had magical powers. In addition, the number three is connected to making something “legal” in Judaism. For example, a *beit din*, a Jewish court, is made up of three people.

98. Greenberg, Irving, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (Simon & Schuster, 1988): 170.

99. *I Kings* 19:11-12.

After washing, lift the hands and let the water roll down to the wrists. Then dry the hands and recite the traditional blessing for hand washing:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצוותיו, וצונו על נטילת ידים:

Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melek ha-olam, asher kid'shanu

b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al n'tilat yadayim.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the World, who sanctifies us through Your commandments and commands us to wash our hands.

One thoughtful touch is to refill the vessel for washing after you are done so that it is ready for the next person. Especially when members of the *chavurah* wash their own hands, this lovely gesture links the group members.

Thoughts on How to “Be” in the Silence

In the quiet, allow whatever comes up. Emotions, thoughts, images – they are all treated equally. The more you completely accept them, the more present you are and the more fluid your contemplation.¹⁰⁰ You might also want to experiment with visualization. One accomplished Jewish meditator and teacher offers the following suggestions:¹⁰¹

- Imagine yourself in the presence of someone you consider a great spiritual being. How does it feel? Speak to this person as if you were good friends. Don't be shy. Voice both sides of the dialogue – what you are saying and how the other person responds. Don't let your doubts interfere. Just allow the words to flow. Speak spontaneously without mental editing.
- Visualize standing in the heavenly court. You must discover why you are there. There is a prosecuting attorney and a defending attorney. Which side are you on? Who else is in attendance? Let the case proceed. State what the attorneys say and what the witnesses respond.
- Imagine you are walking in a beautiful field. The weather is perfect. There is a special presence ahead. The closer you get, the better you feel. You know this

100. Davich, Victor N., *8 Minute Meditation: Quiet Your Mind. Change Your Life.* (Perigee Books, 2004): 78.

101. Cooper, David A., *Silence, Simplicity and Solitude* (Skylight Paths Publishing, 1999): 198-199.

person you are about to meet is extraordinary. You get close enough to see the person. Describe him or her. Then you get close enough to talk. Engage in a conversation.

- Visualize yourself floating in the hands of God – comfortable, protected, calm. Experience the feeling of being in God's presence.

When Everyone Has Washed, Return to the Table and Read Together

Life as we know it is based on water; without water, nothing can survive. As different as humans are from one another and from other forms of life, we all have this in common: we depend on water for our life. As we have just purified ourselves with water, may we be reminded of our link to every living creature. For water's purifying power is bound up in its essence: it is *mayim chayim*, living water, the water of life.¹⁰²

Finally, Pray Together

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם בורא נפשות רבות וכסרונן על כל מה
שבראת להחיות בהם נפש כל חי. ברוך חי העולמים.¹⁰³

*Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, borei n'fashot rabot
v'khesronan al kol mah sh'baratah l'hakhayot bahem nefesh kol khai.
Baruch khai ha-olamim.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the World, who creates many creatures and their needs. For all that You have created to sustain the life of all living beings. Praised are You, the Life of the Universe.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם המוציא לחם מן הארץ.

*Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, hamotzi lekhem min
ha-aretz.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the World, who brings forth bread from the earth.

¹⁰²Based on a teaching of the faculty of CLAL.

¹⁰³Although this is the traditional blessing recited after eating a small meal, or a meal that does not include bread or wine, I included it before the meal as it fits thematically with the *tyum* that immediately precedes it.

F. *N'tilat Yadayim*, Silence, and the *Rosh Chodesh* Group

This ritual contemplates a congregational *Rosh Chodesh* group¹⁰⁴ that comes together each month to study, share a meal, and provide emotional and spiritual support for one another. During my years at HUC-JIR, I have had the opportunity to facilitate a number of different synagogue *Rosh Chodesh* groups. I have found that while the study is important and eating is a required Jewish activity, the opportunity to give and receive emotional and spiritual support is what holds these groups together. In one community, when I asked the women what they wanted to learn that year, they said something to the effect of: "We don't care what we study. We care about creating a space in which everyone feels welcome and included."

The women sit in a circle. Either they have already studied and are ready to eat, or they have prepared to eat, which will be followed by study. The order is unimportant.

Taking Turns, Recite These Words

In the Jewish tradition, and in our own lives, women nourish and sustain their families, friends, and communities. This nourishment is perhaps best symbolized by food. As it says, "With the bread of understanding she shall feed [them], and give [them] the water of wisdom to drink."¹⁰⁵ For this, we are greatly valued. As it says in Scripture, "A woman of distinction, who can find her? She is more

104. *Rosh Chodesh* is the monthly holiday that celebrates the new moon, and, hence, the new Jewish month. In rabbinic times, this holiday was given to woman, according to *midrashic* literature, as a reward for not participating in the sin of the golden calf. Traditional ways to celebrate *Rosh Chodesh* are to refrain from work and to participate in study. Jewish feminists reclaimed *Rosh Chodesh* celebrations in the 1970s. While few, if any, women take the day off from work, in many congregations, once a month, usually around the time of the new moon, women do come together for study and friendship.

105. *Wisdom of ben Sirach* 15:3; Joshua ben Sirach was a Jew who lived in the second century BCE, in Alexandria, Egypt. The *Wisdom* was written in Hebrew and translated into Greek by his grandson. His words are not in the Hebrew Bible, however, they are quoted in *Talmud* and other works of rabbinic literature. The *Wisdom of ben Sirach* was canonized by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, and appears in their holy scriptures.

precious than rubies."¹⁰⁶

The impulse that we have to nourish through food reflects God's desire that people be cherished. We see that food equals love because it reflects a measure of truth. There is an emotional quality to eating. Food gives pleasure.

Let us transform our desire to nurture others into a spiritual exercise before we eat. A spiritual-healing approach to food is rooted in three areas: *b'rakhot*, "blessings," *kashrut*, "dietary laws,"¹⁰⁷ and *s'udah*, "food as celebration and pleasure." Together, they make the everyday act of eating an essential part of a spiritual path.¹⁰⁸

For this healing, we call on the *mayim chayim*, the living waters that followed the Israelites in the desert while Miriam was alive. According to tradition, on the second day of creation God embedded a precious liquid jewel in the earth, a miraculous well of pure water. This well became known as Miriam's well. It was said to hold Divine power to heal and renew all who drank or drew from it.

As we pause now to wash our hands with the *mayim chayim*, let us remain silent until all are done and we are ready to recite the *Motzi*. During the silence, let us invoke the healing power of water, and entwine it with the healing power of silence. Both can quench what is dangerous. We are told, "Silence is to anger what water is to fire."¹⁰⁹

Washing the Hands

If the *Rosh Chodesh* group meets in individual homes, then the host places the vessel and a hand towel for drying next to the kitchen sink. If the group meets at the synagogue,

106. *Proverbs* 31:10.

107. Or perhaps a more Reform interpretation, such as mindful eating.

108. These two paragraphs are adapted from Strassfeld, Michael, *A Book of Life* (Schocken Books, 2002).

109. Raymond Beyda at www.torah.org/learning/reflections/classes/reflection-29.html. He tells the story of a rabbi who was counseling a couple who constantly argued. He gave them a bottle of water and told them it was special water called "*shalom* water." One spouse asked, "How do we use it? Where do we sprinkle it?" "You don't sprinkle it," he replied, "Whenever you are about to scream at your spouse in anger, fill your mouth with this *shalom* liquid and hold it in your mouth for ten seconds before swallowing. By the time you are able to scream you probably will calm down enough to forget about whatever it is that was aggravating you."

then, in advance of the meeting, they set out on a table a large bowl of water, the vessel, and some paper towels. For a *Rosh Chodesh* group, the ideal vessel to use for hand washing is a Miriam's cup.¹¹⁰

The members of the group form a line at the sink or by the table. One by one, each person fills the Miriam's cup, and then pours a small amount of water over the right hand, followed by a small amount of water over the left. In some Jewish communities, the washing is repeated one or two more times. With the *Rosh Chodesh* group, each participant washes as many times as she feels the need.

After washing, lift the hands and let the water roll down to the wrists. Then dry the hands and recite the traditional blessing for hand washing:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת יָדַיִם:

Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melek ha-olam, asher kid'shanu

b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al n'tilat yadayim.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the World, who sanctifies us through Your commandments and commands us to wash our hands.

One thoughtful touch is to refill the Miriam's cup after you are done so that it is ready for the next person. This lovely gesture links the group members.

Thoughts on How to "Be" During the Silence

During the silence, let us take in nourishment, sustenance, and love from God and each other, mindful of the words of the *Talmud*, "the best medicine of all is silence. For if a word is worth one coin, silence is worth two."¹¹¹

We seek to heal ourselves from whatever ails us – be it physical, emotional, or

110. This is a goblet, now often used during the Passover *seder*, to bring the presence of women to the ritual. During the *seder*, the story of Miriam and her well is told, and all present fill their own water glasses with water from Miriam's cup, or pour water from their water glasses into the Miriam's cup, symbolically helping one another to become renewed and healed.

111. *Megillah* 18a.

then, in advance of the meeting, they set out on a table a large bowl of water, the vessel, and some paper towels. For a *Rosh Chodesh* group, the ideal vessel to use for hand washing is a Miriam's cup.¹¹⁰

The members of the group form a line at the sink or by the table. One by one, each person fills the Miriam's cup, and then pours a small amount of water over the right hand, followed by a small amount of water over the left. In some Jewish communities, the washing is repeated one or two more times. With the *Rosh Chodesh* group, each participant washes as many times as she feels the need.

After washing, lift the hands and let the water roll down to the wrists. Then dry the hands and recite the traditional blessing for hand washing:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת יָדַיִם:

Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, asher kid'shanu

b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al n'tilat yadayim.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the World, who sanctifies us through Your commandments and commands us to wash our hands.

One thoughtful touch is to refill the Miriam's cup after you are done so that it is ready for the next person. This lovely gesture links the group members.

Thoughts on How to "Be" During the Silence

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111. *Megillah* 18a.

spiritual – as did the Psalmist, who said, “Be still and know that I am God.”¹¹²

- Imagine yourself in the presence of someone you consider to be a great nurturer and care taker. Ask this person to nurture you and care for you. What would you request? How would this person respond?
- Imagine yourself being held, nurtured, and sustained by God. What does it feel like? What can you do to hold on to that feeling?
- Call to mind the words or melody of a piece of music that lifts your soul and brings your comfort. Close your eyes and hum the melody or sing the words to yourself.

When Everyone Has Washed, Return to the Table and Recite Together

Let us thank God for bringing us together this night and on every new moon, to wade in the waters of Miriam. Let us also take the time to bless that which gives us life – sweet as the fruit from Eden’s tree, filling as Sarah’s cakes, savory as Jacob’s stew, plentiful as the *manna* in the wilderness, liberating as the crunchy *matzah*, fresh as the harvest brought to the Temple, and heavenly as the taste of the *Shabbat challah*.¹¹³

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם שהחיינו וקיימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה.

Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melek ha-olam, shehekheyanu v'kiy'manu v'higi-anu lazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the World, who gives us life, who sustains us, and who brings us to this time.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם המוציא לחם מן הארץ.

Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melek ha-olam, hamotzi lekhem min ha-aretz.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the World, who brings forth bread from the earth.

¹¹² Psalm 46:10.

¹¹³ Adapted from Kula, Irwin and Ochs, Vanessa L., *The Book of Jewish Sacred Practices: CLAL's Guide to Everyday Holiday Rituals and Blessings* (Jewish Lights Press, 2001): 17.

G. *N'tilat Yadayim*, Silence, and the Youth Group

This ritual contemplates a congregational senior youth group¹¹⁴ that comes together each month for a pizza dinner program. While I would not normally suggest a new ritual for a group of teenagers, I do so in this case for three reasons. First, much of the innovation and creativity in worship and ritual that has made its way into our movement's canon has come from the Jewish camping experience. Second, youth group is often for teenagers the only place where they "do Jewish." And third, the silence ritual I propose for the youth group has them focus on the dangers of gossip and hurtful speech. We are all well aware of the pressures on teens to conform, and the unfortunate cruel streak that can run through children, be it intentional or not.

The boxes of pizza, bottles of soda, and whatever else is being offered to eat and drink are placed on tables in the middle of the room. The teens form a circle around the tables.

Taking Turns, Recite These Words

God has given humans the gift of speech, a means to communicate far beyond the capabilities of any other creation. While animals can convey messages and emotions in limited ways, only humans can share complex thoughts, intricate emotions, and deep, philosophical ideas.

Have we done something significant with this gift from God? Have we used it for its ultimate good? Or have we used it to destroy, malign, denigrate, and separate people from one another?¹¹⁵

In the *Midrash*, Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel had a servant named Tabi. He told him to go to the market and buy some good meat. So Tabi went out and bought

114. High school students.

115. These two paragraphs are from Palatnik, Lori, with Burg, Bob, *Gossip: Ten Pathways to Eliminate it From Your Life and Transform Your Soul* (Simcha Press, 2002): 14.

him a tongue. Then he told him to go out and buy some bad meat. Again, Tabi bought a tongue.

When Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel asked Tabi why he bought tongue both times, the servant replied, "Because from the tongue comes good, and from the tongue comes bad. When it is good, nothing is better; when it is bad, nothing is worse."¹¹⁶

This story of Tabi the wise servant reminds us of this lesson from the book of *Ecclesiastes*: "There is a time to keep silent and there is a time to speak."¹¹⁷

As we prepare to eat this meal, let us take some time to wash our hands. When we are done, let us remain silent until all have washed, purifying our mouths and separating them from any impure, unkind, or hurtful things we might have said earlier in the day.¹¹⁸

Washing the Hands

Next to the kitchen sink, the leader places a vessel that can hold water and paper towels for drying. The members of the group form a line at the sink. One by one, each person fills the vessel and then pours a small amount of water over the right hand, followed by a small amount of water over the left.

Customs vary in the Jewish world regarding how many times one washes each hand. In some communities, once is sufficient. Others wash each hand twice. In most places, people wash each hand three times. Why? Ancient Jews often believed that the number three had magical powers. In addition, the number three is connected to making something "legal" in Judaism. For example, a *beit din*, a Jewish court, is made up of three people.

¹¹⁶ *Leviticus Rabbah* 33:1.

¹¹⁷ *Ecclesiastes* 3:7.

¹¹⁸ Based on a Chassidic teaching of Rav of Chernobyl.

After washing, lift the hands and let the water roll down to the wrists. Then dry the hands and recite the traditional blessing for hand washing:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת יָדַיִם:

Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melek ha-olam, asher kid'shamu

b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al n'tilat yadayim.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the World, who sanctifies us through Your commandments and commands us to wash our hands.

One thoughtful touch is to refill the vessel after you are done so that it is ready for the next person.

Thought to Consider During the Silence

Think about the conversations you have had during the past days or weeks. Were any unsatisfying, either because of something you said or because of something that was said to you? Rewrite the conversation, changing the words that were hurtful, painful, insulting, untrue, or otherwise bothersome. Bring the face of the other person into your mind. Re-play the conversation with that person, but use your new version.

Once you finish [re]having your conversation, consider the possibility of [re]having it for real. What would that take? Is it worth the effort? If you would rather not redo it for real, how else can you mend the hurt that came from the interaction?

When Everyone Has Washed, Return to the Table and Recite Together

A certain peddler would wander among the towns, calling out, "Who wishes to buy the elixir of life?" All the people would assemble before him, eager to buy. The peddler pulls out the book *Psalms* and reads verses 34:12-13: "Who is the one who yearns for life?"

אֱלֹהֵי, נְצוֹר לְשׁוֹנִי מִרַע וּשְׁפָתִי מִדַּבֵּר מִרְמָה:

Elohai n'tzor l'shoni meira us'fatai midabeir mirmah.

[The one who says], "my God, guard my tongue from speaking evil and

my lips from deceitful speech."¹¹⁹

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַמוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

*Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melek ha-olam, hamotzi lekhem min
ha-aretz.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the World, who brings
forth bread from the earth.

¹¹⁹. This *Midrash* is from *Leviticus Rabbah* 16:2.

Chapter 4 – *N'tilat Yadayim* Upon Waking in a New Context: A Ritual for Self Healing

As discussed in Chapter 2, at some point in time (we have no idea when), ritual hand washing was expanded to include early in the morning, almost immediately after awakening. The reasons a Jew became obligated to wash his hands in the morning seems to number three: to sanctify or purify oneself, to eliminate the evil spirit that rests on the hands (which could lead one to sin and/or cause health problems), and to ready oneself to recite the *Sh'ma*.

Ritual hand washing in the morning is not a part of the Reform *minhag*. Perhaps some Reform Jews *do* ritually wash upon waking, but I've never met any Reform Jew who claims to. We don't study it at HUC-JIR, we don't teach it at our congregations, and we don't make it a requirement to become *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. I would venture to say that few Reform Jews (other than those raised Orthodox or who had Orthodox grandparents) even know that ritual hand washing in the morning is an obligation in Judaism.

But many Reform Jews do have morning rituals. Some meditate, do yoga, stretch, exercise, take a walk, or even pray. Are Reform Jews likely to add ritual handwashing, if they were taught the tradition? I doubt it. As mentioned in the *Introduction*, I don't think most Reform Jews are interested in participating in a ritual that is meant to address a state of impurity or ward off evil spirits and that hearkens back to the Temple period.

I do believe, however, that there is a place for *n'tilat yadayim* in the morning for Reform Jews. In this chapter, I offer a ritual that focuses on what might be considered the "original" meaning of the the root נטל: to "lift" rather than to "wash."¹²⁰ In addition, this

¹²⁰ Exploring the etymology of נטל is beyond the scope of this thesis. Rabbi Zlotowitz undertook such an exploration in his thesis and concluded that the root originally meant to "lift." We can see

ritual addresses an issue that has become one of great concern in our movement: healing.

But the ritual covers an aspect of healing that we often overlook: healing of the self.

A. Healing Prayers and Reform Judaism¹²¹

Until twenty or twenty-five years ago, "Reform Judaism" and "prayers for healing" were rarely uttered in the same breath. We were the movement of rationalists, who had little time or patience for mystical, spiritual, or, dare I even say, superstitious notions that God healed.

Early Reform *siddurim* eventually came to reflect this theology, but it took some time and wasn't consistent. In what is perhaps considered to be the first Reform prayerbook, the German "Geiger" *Siddur*, the *r'fa-einu* prayer of the weekday *Amidah* appears in the traditional Hebrew formulation. The same is true in the first American Reform prayerbook compiled by Isaac M. Wise.¹²² In both *siddurim* we read:

רְפָאנוּ יי וְנִרְפָּא הוֹשִׁיעֵנו וְנִשְׁעָה בִּי תְהַלֵּתְנוּ אֲתָהּ. וְהַעֲלֵה רְפוּאָה שְׁלֵמָה
לְכָל-מִכּוֹתֵינוּ בִּי אֵל מֶלֶךְ רּוֹפֵא נֶאֱמָן וְרַחֲמָן אֲתָהּ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי רּוֹפֵא חוֹלֵי
עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Heal us God and we will be healed. Save us and we will be saved, for You are our praise. Grant complete healing for all our wounds, for You are the Almighty Ruler, and a faithful and merciful Healer. Blessed are You, the Healer of the sick among people Israel.

the connection when we consider the *b'rakhah* recited when we waive the lulav and etrog during *Sukkot*. The final three words are "*al n'tilat lulav*," "concerning the lifting of the lulav."

121. Much of the material in this section was developed during the spring of 2004, when I studied independently with Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz, exploring the theology behind why the well pray on behalf of the ill. I thank him for everything he taught me during my independent study, and during all my years at HUC-JIR.

122. In Hoffman, Lawrence A., *My People's Prayer Book, Vol. 2, The Amidah* (Jewish Lights 1998): 119. Dr. David Ellenson points out that Geiger and Wise eventually published the traditional prayer with a universalist twist – eliminating the idea that God heals only those who are *עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל*, "among the people Israel." They were following the tradition of the *Palestinian Talmud*, not of the *Babylonian Talmud*.

David Einhorn, author of another early American Reform *siddur*, took a different approach. His prayer is English; in the *chatimah*, God is praised as the "Redeemer of the distressed," fully eliminating the idea that God plays a role in our physical healing.

The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the professional organization of Reform Rabbis, took over publishing the *siddurim* of the American Reform movement in the late 19th century. The weekday *Amidah* in the first *Union Prayer Book* of 1892 is in English, and has been shortened. The thirteen middle prayers are summarized in seven paragraphs. Within the third paragraph we read, "Help us and we shall be helped, heal us and we shall be healed; for Thou alone art our true Helper; from Thee comes healing of all our ailments and consolation in our sorrows." Here, God as healer seems closely related to Einhorn's God who helps us through our emotional difficulties, but who has no part to play in our physical healing.

A mere three years later, in 1895, even this was too much for the Reform rabbis drafting our movement's prayerbook. The thirteen middle prayers of the weekday *Amidah* appear in five paragraphs. All references to God as healer are gone. Subsequent editions of the *Union Prayer Book* in 1908 and 1918 are the same.

But something seems to have happened between the first and second World Wars. In the 1940 edition of the *Union Prayer Book*, the weekday *Amidah* is in both Hebrew and English. While the full text of the thirteen middle prayers has not been restored (there is no *t'ka b'shofar* for example, calling for the ingathering of exiled Jews), the *r'fa-einu* prayer is back in its traditional Hebrew formulation, with an English translation that is vague enough to reflect a rationalist theology. It reads, "Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed; save us and we shall be saved; for Thou art our God. Thou art a faithful and

merciful healer.”

This same version appears in the 1947 edition of the *Union Prayer Book*, and remains so until the publication of *Gates of Prayer*. While these later editions of the *Union Prayer Book* referred to God as “Healer,” they make no reference to anyone sick who receives God’s healing. One could understand these words along the same lines as those in the *Einhorn siddur* – God consoles us and heals us through emotionally difficult times.

In 1975, the CCAR published its new *siddur*, *Gates of Prayer*. In it we read, in both Hebrew and English, the following:

רְפָאנוּ יי וְנִרְפָּא, הוֹשִׁיעֵנו וְנִשָּׁעָה, וְהַעֲלֵה רְפוּאָה שְׁלֵמָה לְכָל-מַכּוֹתֵינוּ. בָּרוּךְ
אַתָּה יי רֹפֵא הַחַיִּים.

Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed; save us, and we shall be saved;
grant us a perfect healing from all our wounds. Blessed is the Lord, the
Healer of the sick.

Unlike the *Union Prayer Book*, this *siddur* expresses a clear theology – God heals our wounds and heals the sick.

No matter what theology has been expressed in these prayers regarding God’s power (or lack thereof) to heal, one aspect has remained constant: they all begin *r’fa-cinu*, “heal us.” But few Reform Jews would have had any exposure to these various liturgical expressions. Although the Reform *siddurim* contain the weekday service, rarely do Reform Jews actually come together to pray it. Reform Jews who attend services have gone (and still do go) on *Shabbat*, and the middle prayers of the *Amidah* are different from those prayed during the week. This means that since the early days of “Reform” in America, Reform Jews have lost out on the opportunity to pray for healing – either their

own or any one else's.

In theory, Reform Jews may have been exposed to prayers for healing during the Torah service – when (or if) the *shaliakh tzibur* offered a *mi shebeirakh* prayer for healing for someone who had an *aliyah*. I say “in theory” because I cannot find anything to substantiate this practice in Reform synagogues. I grew up attending a Conservative synagogue; furthermore, I have been unable to find any published accounts of this practice in Reform synagogues. I have been told that it was rarely, if ever, done.

Today, Reform Jews still don't generally pray a weekday service, nor do most Reform rabbis or cantors offer a *mi shebeirakh* prayer for healing for someone who has had an *aliyah* during the Torah service. But, we *do* pray for healing – the healing of others.

In 1988, Debbie Friedman composed and began performing her song of healing, “*Mi Shebeirach*.” She clearly touched a raw nerve, as her song was picked up by myriads of Reform congregations and integrated into their *Shabbat* services. How wide spread was the embracing of Friedman's “*Mi Shebeirach*”? At the 1993 UAHC Biennial convention in San Francisco, I remember the delegation of nearly 5,000 singing it with her as the Union unfurled a new panel for the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Everyone knew the words. Friedman's “*Mi Shebeirach*” has become so much a part of Reform liturgy that it will be included in the new CCAR *siddur*, *Mishkan T'filah*, in a section entitled “Special Prayers.”

Friedman's “*Mi Shebeirach*” is as follows:

מִי שֶׁבֶרַךְ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מִקּוֹר הַכֶּרֶךְ אֲמוֹתֵינוּ

May the Source of Strength who blessed the ones before us,

Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing, and let us say, "Amen."

מי שְׁבִירָךְ אֲמוֹתֵינוּ מְקוֹר הַבְּרָכָה אֲבוֹתֵינוּ

Bless those in need of healing with רַפְעָה שְׁלִימָה

The renewal of body, the renewal of spirit, and let us say, "Amen."

While Debbie Friedman's "*Mi Shebeirach*" was the first well-known contemporary song for healing, it is certainly not the last. In 1997, Cantor Lisa Levine composed her own, also called, "*Mi Shebeirach*," which has been adopted by many Reform congregations, and which was included in the *Shabbat* morning service at the 2003 Reform movement Biennial convention. Here is Levine's "*Mi Shebeirach*:"

מי שְׁבִירָךְ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אֲבֹתֵהֶם יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב

מי שְׁבִירָךְ אֲמוֹתֵינוּ שְׂרָה רַבֵּקָה לֵאָה וְרַחֵל

May the One who blessed our mothers, may the One who blessed our fathers,

Hear our prayer (x4) and bless us as well.

Bless us with the power of Your healing, bless us with the power of Your hope.

May our hearts be filled with understanding and strengthened by the power of Your love.

Bless us with a vision for tomorrow, help us to reach out to those in pain.

May the warmth of friendship ease our sorrow,

Give us courage, give us faith, show us the way.

מי שְׁבִירָךְ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מי שְׁבִירָךְ אֲמוֹתֵינוּ

Hear our prayer (x4) and bless us as well.

In 2002, Cantor Leon Sher composed a song for healing called "Heal Us Now," which is slowly being introduced into Reform congregations. This is Sher's piece:

רָפְאֵנוּ יְיָ וְנִרְפָּא הוֹשִׁיעֵנו וְנוֹשְׁעָה

אֵל קָרוֹב לְכָל-קִרְאִיו אֵד קָרוֹב לִירְאִיו יִשְׁעוּ

We pray for healing of the body, we pray for healing of the soul,

For strength of flesh and mind and spirit, we pray to once again be whole.

אל נא רפּה נא

Oh please, heal us now.

רפואת הנפֿש ורפואת הגוף רפואת שְׁלֵמָה

Heal us now.

הוֹשִׁיעָה אֶת-עַמְּךָ וּבְרַךְ אֶת-נַחֲלֶתְךָ וְרַעַם וְנִשְׁאַם עַד הָעוֹלָם

מִי שְׁבֵרֶךְ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מִי שְׁבֵרֶךְ אֲמוֹתֵינוּ אָנָּה יי הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא

We pray for healing of our people, we pray for healing of our land,
And peace for every race and nation, every woman, every child, every man.

אל נא רפּה נא

Oh please, heal us now.

Other contemporary composers, including Cantors Richard Cohn, Lori Corrsin, Benjie Ellen Schiller, Robbie Solomon, and Erik Contzius, as well as Craig Taubman and Sol Zim, all have written songs for healing.

The prayers of healing by Friedman and Levine are probably the most widely used in Reform synagogues, with Sher's coming into increased use. All are broad enough to encompass an ill person to pray for himself or herself using one of these prayers. But in truth, the *sh'likhei tzibur* rarely say anything to facilitate that possibility.

Today, in most Reform synagogues when we gather to pray on Friday nights, we take time to say a prayer for healing. Usually, the rabbi or cantor introduces the prayer with some words in English or in English and Hebrew. We might "call upon God's powers of healing in the presence of our *sefer torah*" or we might ask "for *r'fuat haguf, r'fuat hanefesh, r'fuah sh'leimah*, a healing of body and a healing of soul – a complete healing."

No matter how we introduce the prayer, typically, we read a list of names of

synagogue members and their loved ones who are in need of healing, and then invite the members of the congregation to "say aloud or in your heart the names of those you are thinking of, as my eyes meet yours." This part of the service has become so important that the *sh'likhei tzibur* will be criticized if they omit it. We used to speak of members coming to services to say the Mourners' *Kaddish*. Now, many who attend regularly are there to recite the *mi shebeirakh* for healing. We, the inheritors of the rationalist strain of our religious tradition, have abandoned rationalism in order to pray for healing.

B. When Do We Pray For Ourselves?

The way we introduce healing prayers, and the lack of any real time for private prayer (as discussed in Chapter 3), provide few opportunities for worshippers to pray for their own well-being or to open up to God. Yet, so many people want or need to do just that, and look to Judaism to provide the opportunity.

I suspect that most people who look for time to pray words other than those that appear in the *Siddur* are ill or suffering in some other way. They use the silent meditation time to pray to God on their own behalf, probably because there is no other structured time to do that during the service. Some people can comfortably digress from the words on the page to pray what is in their heart at any time during the service, but I don't think most Reform Jews are at this stage, nor do they want to be.

Even during the communal *mi shebeirakh* prayer for healing, on rare occasion, the *sh'likhei tzibur* will encourage people to name themselves, if they are ill or distressed, but most people are too self-conscious to give their own names. And even if they did, I have to wonder if this would serve as a substitute for genuine prayerful personal conversation with God asking for healing.

So when can Reform Jews truly pray for their own well being? We do not attend daily services, but as I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, many of us have daily, usually morning, routines and rituals. And so what follows as the rest of this chapter is a morning ritual for self-healing that includes *n'tilat yadayim* in its original sense of "lifting," not "washing," one's hands. Following the ritual is an explanation of the liturgy, passages, and poetry included in the ritual.

This ritual is to be done at home, privately, alone, perhaps even while one is still in bed. How is it possible to pray with *kavanah* in bed? According to the *Midrash*, God said to the Jews: I have said to you – when you pray, pray in the synagogue in your city. If you cannot pray in the synagogue, pray in your field. If you cannot pray in your field, pray in your house. And if you cannot pray in your house, pray in your bed. And if you cannot pray on your bed, reflect in your heart.¹²³

C. Ritual for Self Healing

I cry out to You, God. I am in need of healing. Hear my lament:

י Rock of Israel,¹²⁴ I ache, and my bones shake with terror.¹²⁵

Endless is my pain; my wounds seem incurable and resistant to healing.¹²⁶

א Father Abraham prayed to You, and You healed Abimelech.¹²⁷

And so I pray, "Heal me, too, O God."

123. *Midrash T'hilim* 4:9.

124. A name for God that appears in *II Samuel* 23:3.

125. "Heal me, O Eternal, for my bones shake with terror." *Psalms* 6:3.

126. "Why must my pain be endless, my wound incurable, resistant to healing?" *Jeremiah* 15:18.

127. See *Genesis* 20:17.

⌘ Eternal, am I to be plagued forever, like Pharaoh's Egypt?¹²⁸

⌘ Neglected by the bright rays of the *Shekhinah*?¹²⁹

⌘ "I will heal your afflictions," You promised through Jeremiah.¹³⁰

⌘ And so I pray, "Heal me, too, O God."

⌘ Disease ravages me, ignoring the incantations of Solomon.¹³¹

Oak trees of Mamre I have tasted, but they have lost their power.¹³²

⌘ Neither sufferings nor their reward are welcome – thus You heal great and small.¹³³

And so I pray, "Heal me, too, O God."

⌘ I am Babylonia, fallen and shattered; balm to the wounds cannot cure.¹³⁴

⌘ Victim of Hezekiah's unseemly language am I.¹³⁵

128. After God frees the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, God promises them that they will not suffer the diseases of the Egyptians if they heed God's commands, for "I, the Eternal, am your healer." *Exodus* 15:26.

129. Mystical literature teaches that the brightness of the *Shekhinah* makes all upon whom it falls exempt from disease. *Hekhalot Rabbati*, in *Bet Ha-Midrash III*, 161-163.

130. *Jeremiah* 3:22.

131. According to legend, Solomon invented formulas of incantation by which diseases were alleviated. Josephus, *Antiquities VIII*, 2.5.

132. The *Midrash* teaches that the oak tree planted by Abraham in Mamre protected anyone who took of its wood from illness, until the day of death. *Midrash Yerahme-el* 35.5.

133. Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill and Rabbi Yochanan went to visit him. Rabbi Yochanan said to him, "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba answered, "Neither they nor their reward." Rabbi Yochanan said to him, "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and he raised him. One time, Rabbi Yochanan fell ill and Rabbi Chanina went to visit him. Rabbi Chanina said to him, "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" Rabbi Yochanan answered, "Neither they nor their reward." Rabbi Chanina said to him, "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and he raised him. Why couldn't Rabbi Yochanan raise himself? The Rabbis replied: The prisoner cannot free himself from jail. *B'rakhot* 5b.

134. The sins of Babylonia were so great, that crying for her and applying balm to her, could not heal her. *Jeremiah* 51:8-9.

135. One tradition says that Hezekiah's illness was punishment for unseemly language. *Y. Sanhedrin* 10. 28b.

נ Eternal, You saw their tears and healed the children of David.¹³⁶

י Remember this, and "Heal me, too, O God."

נ Anger consumes me; this is my curse.¹³⁷

נ Forsaking the physician's charge, I cannot defeat my enemy-illness.¹³⁸

י Angel of Healing, you dispense your celestial remedies for the Eternal.¹³⁹

Yea, I pray, "Heal me, too, O God."

י Honey may be sweet, but it offers no solace.¹⁴⁰

י O how the waters of Miriam have dried up again.¹⁴¹

י Show me how you healed before giving Your Torah.¹⁴²

י Insistently I pray, "Heal me, too, O God."

י Ephraim fell, never to rise again – is this my fate?¹⁴³

י Noah's book fell with Ephraim; of this I am certain.¹⁴⁴

136. "Thus said the Eternal, the God of your father David: I have heard your prayer. I have seen your tears: I will cause you to be healed." *II Kings* 20:5.

137. "A calm disposition brings bodily health." *Proverbs* 14:30.

138. A sick man called the doctor. After the exam, the doctor said, "You and I and your disease make three. If you will take my side, the two of us shall easily be able to overcome your illness. But if you forsake me and do not cooperate with me, and hold onto your disease, I alone, will not be able to overcome both of you." Adapted from *Bar-Hebraeus*, a 13th century Jewish Syrian historian, theologian, philosopher, and scientist.

139. Raphael was appointed the Angel of Healing; in his safe-keeping are the celestial remedies, the types of medical remedies used on earth. *Midrash Konen* 26:27; *Midrash Yerahme-el* 14.15.

140. "Pleasant words are like honeycomb, sweet to the palate and a cure for the body." *Proverbs* 16:24.

141. The waters of Miriam heal instantly. *Numbers Rabbah* 18.22; *Leviticus Rabbah* 22.4.

142. God healed all Israelites of sickness and disability before giving Torah. *Pesikta deRav Kahana* 12:104a, 106a-107a; *Midrash Tanhuma II*, 75-76.

143. Ephraim refers to the Northern Kingdom. See, for example, *Hosea* 5:3.

144. Noah wrote in a medical book all of the remedies for ailments; he gave it to Shem, and it appeared during the times of various civilizations. *The Book of Noah*, pp. 155-156.

ב In the desert heat, You visited Abraham and brought him the Angel of Healing.¹⁴⁵

י Visit me, and "Heal me, too, O God."

Enemies pray for my demise – and You listen.¹⁴⁶

א I seek out healing springs and bronze serpents, but to no avail.¹⁴⁷

י Valley of dry bones are healed and restored to life.¹⁴⁸

And so I pray, "Heal me, too, O God."

ש Surely, the carriage brings the messenger of death.¹⁴⁹

י Everlasting darkness blocks all of my hope.¹⁵⁰

And yet, I know you answered Moses' cry for Miriam.¹⁵¹

י "Heal me, too, O God, heal me, too."

145. The three angels of God who visit Abraham after his circumcision are Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael; Raphael was there specifically to heal his wound. *Genesis Rabbah* 50.2; *Bava Metziah* 86b.

146. Raba became very ill; he ordered his servants not to tell anyone, as he feared it would affect his good fortune. But, he further instructed them, if the illness lingered for more than a few days, then they should tell everyone in the market place. His enemies would be pleased, and because we are taught not to rejoice when an enemy falls, God would heal Raba to spite his enemies. Further, Raba figured, his friends would pray for him, and God would send great blessings. He would be doubly cured. *Nedarim* 40a.

147. Until the days of Hezekiah, a list of healing springs was circulated among the people. When they were ill, they did not pray to God, but made use of the healing springs. Hezekiah hid the list. Similarly, the hissing of the bronze serpent used to heal the sick of Jerusalem; Hezekiah broke the bronze serpent into pieces. *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* 2.

148. *Ezekiel* 37:1-10.

149. Dr. Marcus Hertz, an 18th century German physician, drove a carriage to the house of his patients. On the door were his initials, M.H. A friend chastised him, pointing out that in Hebrew, "M.H." stood for *malech hamavet*, the angel of death. Hertz responded, that "M.H." also stood for *mechayai hameitim*, the One who resurrects the dead. Epstein, Lawrence J., *A Treasury of Jewish Anecdotes* (Jason Aronson 1989): 96.

150. The healing power of the sun restored Jacob after he wrestled with the angel. *Zohar, Vayishlach*, 203b; *Midrash HaGadol I*, 513-514.

151. *Numbers* 12:14.

God, I pray to You this morning to help me through this day. I ache in body, heart, and soul. I do not move with the ease that once graced me. I struggle to lift myself out of the place where I am, and I need Your help. As you remembered and guided our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, remember and guide me. I need your hand of strength to help raise me.

אָנא בִּכְחַ גְּדֻלַּת יְמִינְךָ תַּתִּיר צְרוּרָה. קִבֵּל רִנַּת עַמְּךָ שֶׁגִּבְנוּ טַהֲרָנוּ נוֹרָא.
נָא גִבּוֹר דּוֹרְשֵׁי יַחֲוּדְךָ כְּבֻבַת שְׁמַרְם. בְּרַכֵּם טַהֲרֵם רַחֲמֵם צְדִקְתְּךָ תָּמִיד
גִּמְלֵם. חֲסִין קָדוֹשׁ בְּרוּב טוֹבְךָ נֶהַל עֲדָתְךָ. יַחֲד גְּאֵה לְעַמְּךָ פִּנֵּה זֹכְרֵי
קִנְדֻשְׁתְּךָ. שְׁוַעֲתֵנוּ קִבֵּל וּשְׁמַע צַעֲקֹתֵנוּ יוֹדַע תַּעֲלָמוֹת.
בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.

*Ana B'ko-akh G'dulat Y'minkha Tatir Tz'rura. Kabeil Rinat Am'kha
Sag'veinu Tahareinu Nora. Na Gibor Dor'shei Yikhud'kha K'avavat
Shom'reim. Barkheim Tahareim Rakhameim Tzidkat'kha Tamid
Gomleim. Khasin Kadosh B'rov Tuv'kha Naheil Adatekha. Yakhid
Gei-eh L'am'kha P'neih Zokhrei K'dushatekha. Shavateinu Kabeil
Ush'ma Tza-akateinu Yodei-a Ta-alumot.*

Barukh sheim k'vod mal'khuto l'olam va-ed.

We beg You, with the strength and greatness of Your right hand, untie our knotted fate. Accept the song of Your people; strengthen us, purify us, O Awesome One. Please, O Strong One, those who pursue Your uniqueness, guard them like the pupil of an eye. Bless them, purify them, pity them, may Your righteousness always reward them. Powerful and Holy One, in goodness lead Your people. Unique and Proud One, turn to Your people who remember Your holiness. Accept our cries, and hear our screams, O Knower of Mysteries.

Blessed is the name of Your glorious Rule forever.

Take a few moments to offer the private prayers of your heart, remembering this lesson of the Lubavitcher Rebbe: His disciple, Moshe, asked him how to *daven* (pray) with great vigor and intention. The Rebbe didn't answer him because the soul of *davening* isn't easy to teach. Instead, the Rebbe called in his deputy, and told him to teach Moshe. He demurred and called in the *rosh* (head) of the *yeshiva*. The *rosh* began to *daven* the morning service with Moshe. They prayed together until the *rosh* announced, "this place is for me alone." He walked to the corner, put his *tallit* over his head, and prayed. The Rebbe leaned over to Moshe and said, "that's *davening*; it's improvising in the private place."¹⁵²

Last night when I laid down to sleep, I took comfort, my God, in knowing that the angel of protection, Michael, would be at my right side; the angel of strength, Gabriel, would be at my left side; the angel of light, Uriel, would be before me; the angel of healing, Raphael, would be behind me; and the *Shekhinah*, Your Divine Presence, would be above me.¹⁵³ I pray that Raphael, who dominates the morning hours, is with me to bring hope and relief.¹⁵⁴

I bless the Eternal who has guided me;
My conscience admonishes me at night.
I am ever mindful of the Eternal's presence;
The Eternal is at my right hand; I shall never be shaken.
So my heart rejoices,
My whole being exults, and my body is secure.¹⁵⁵

Be with me now, O strength of my right hand, as I lift myself to begin my day.
If I cannot lift my body, help me to lift my spirit.

152. Told in Hammerschlag, Carl A. and Silverman, Howard D., *Healing Ceremonies: Creating Personal Rituals for Spiritual, Emotional, Physical and Mental Health* (Perigee Books, 1997): 165-166.

153. Based on the text of one of the traditional nighttime blessings, recited before the *Sh'ma* when going to sleep.

154. Raphael's role as a morning presence is taught in the *Zohar*, *Balak* 204a.

155. *Psalms* 16:7-9.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ וְחַיֵּינוּ וְעֲזָרְנוּ עַל נְטִילַת יָדַיִם:

*Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, asher kid'shanu v'chayinu
v'azarlanu al n'tilat yadayim.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the World, who sanctifies
us, gives us life, and accompanies us as we lift our hands.

D. Explanation of the Ritual for Self Healing

The ritual begins with a modern day *piyyut*,¹⁵⁶ which I wrote.¹⁵⁷ I have adopted some
traditional and not so traditional *piyyut* conventions, as follows:

Acrostic form. The *piyyut* spells out *Refa-eni Adonai Verafay; Hoshi-eni
Ve-ivashe-ah*, “Heal me, God, and let me be healed, save me and let me be saved.”¹⁵⁸ I
had to resort to somewhat unusual transliteration rules in order to avoid apostrophes and
“ei” or “ay” vowels, but I think it works. I chose this verse because in many ways, it
epitomizes what someone feels when he or she prays to God for personal healing: It is a
lament. It uses God’s most common name. It is short. It is explicit. It is in the first person.
Two other biblical verses use the first person to call out to God for healing. One falls
short, for in it, God has already healed.¹⁵⁹ The other I refer to in the opening line of the
piyyut.¹⁶⁰

Number of lines. Because *shin* is one letter in Hebrew, I used the “sh” sound as one
letter, not two, in the two places it appears in the transliteration. This gave me thirty-six

156. A *piyyut* is a poem used in worship. Hebrew poets have been developing *piyyutim* for hundreds of
years; a great many were written during the Medieval period. We find many *piyyutim* in our
Shabbat siddur, as well as our High Holiday *makhzor*.

157. I wrote this *piyyut* in the Fall of 2003 at HUC-JIR as my final project for Dr. Sharon Koren’s class
on the history *piyyutim* and mysticism. I thank Dr. Koren for teaching -- and pushing her students
to think -- outside of the box.

158. *Jeremiah* 17:14.

159. “O Eternal, my God, I cried out to You and You healed me.” *Psalms* 30:3.

160. *II Samuel* 23:3.

letters with which to begin my lines, not thirty-eight. Thirty-six, of course, is double *khaf*. This seemed more than appropriate in a *piyyut* about healing, especially given that the verse I used expresses two different ways to find life – through healing and saving.

Repetition. I decided that each stanza would follow the same pattern: In the first two verses, the prayer pours out his or her soul concerning the illness, affliction, or whatever. In the second two verses, the prayer asks God for healing. The first of the final two verses recalls a time in Jewish history that God did heal; the second asks God, “to heal me, too.” To create a sense of rhythm, I used the same essential last verse for each stanza, but intensified it for the last one.

Reference to texts. Every verse (other than the last of each stanza) quotes or refers to a Jewish text – *Tanakh*, *Midrash*, *Talmud*, mystical literature, and historical literature. I used a concordance to find *Tanakh* references to *rafa* or *refuah*, and I used a number of different collections of parables and *Midrashim* to find the rest.

Following the *piyyut*, appears a personal prayer to God I wrote, asking that God remember and guide the person, and that God’s “hand of strength” help raise the person. My idea is to move from lament toward something that (metaphorically) lifts. This prayer serves as a transition to *Ana B’koakh*.

Ana B’koakh is a Medieval *piyyut* written by the *Kabbalists*, containing an acronym of what they believed to be the forty-two letter, unpronounceable, name of God. It was written as a part of the *Shabbat* liturgy, possibly as a magical incantation, to help the *Kabbalists* achieve a higher level of consciousness and unity with God. I include it in this healing ritual, at a place moving from lament toward lifting, for several reasons:

- The reference to God’s right hand.

- The reference to God's strength.
- The request that God undo the person's "fate."
- The request that God "accept our cries, and hear our screams."
- The characterization of God as the "Knower of Mysteries."

For so many people, illness is about finding strength, questioning what feels like a fate handed to them, crying and screaming – or the inability to do so – and acknowledging that so much remains a mystery. I hope that the inclusion of *Ana B'koakh* allows an ill person to voice much of what often is unsaid, and allows the person to move toward healing.

Following *Ana B'koakh*, I suggest that the ill person take time to pray what's in his or her heart. While many people need only the fixed prayer to say what's they need or want to say, others must have time to offer spontaneous prayer.

I then suggest a prayer based on one of the traditional nighttime prayers, that includes the four angels of protection. I add a *Kabbalistic* interpretation that teaches that the angel of healing, Raphael, stays with the person in the morning, in order to bring healing and relief.

From here, I include an excerpt from *Psalms* 16, which continues on the theme of uplifting, making reference to God who guides, God who is present, and God who is at the person's right hand. The *Psalms* then acknowledges a heart that rejoices, a being that exults, and a body that is secure.

Following this move toward uplifting, I include a call to God that God should help the ill person lift his or her hands. But I also include a line that says, "If I cannot lift my body, the please, God, help to lift my spirit." I felt that it was important to recognize that

some people, no matter how loudly they cry out or how much they pray, cannot always physically lift themselves. They need to ask God for a spiritual lifting.

I end the ritual with a modified version of the traditional *n'tilat yadayim* blessing. In this *b'rakhah*, I have changed God from one who "sanctifies us with commandments" to one who "sanctifies us with life." I also change God from one who "commands us concerning the washing of hands" to one who "accompanies us as we lift our hands."

I make these changes for two reasons. First, when we stop and really think about what the words *asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav* mean, very few Reform Jews subscribe to the idea that God commands us to do much of anything. Ours is a movement that has traditionally valued autonomy. But we do honor the life that we have been given, often speak of that life as a gift from God, and uphold the teaching to "choose life."¹⁶¹

Second, this ritual is not about washing the hands. It's about lifting or healing the hands as a metaphor for lifting or healing the body. So often, illness manifests itself in our inability to move ourselves, to lift ourselves, both physically and emotionally. With God's help, the ill person prays, may I be able to lift my hands, my soul – myself – on this day.

¹⁶¹ *Deuteronomy* 30:19.

Conclusion

In the *Introduction* to this thesis, I ask the question: "Is it possible to re-introduce into Reform Judaism a problematic traditional Jewish ritual, but give it a new interpretation and use?" I believe that the five rituals included in Chapters 3 and 4 show that, at a minimum, it is possible to *develop* new rituals using ancient ones and that it is possible to give those ancient rituals new meaning. If I had an additional six months to work on this thesis, I would seek out a synagogue, various synagogue groups, and ill individuals, and ask them to test whether or not it is possible to *use* these new rituals.

I suspect the hand washing rituals of Chapter 3 would feel awkward, at least at first, especially in the *Shabbat* dinner setting. I doubt that too many congregational members or prospective members attending a *Shabbat* dinner at their own synagogue or one they are considering joining, would expect to encounter a radically unfamiliar ritual as a part of the dinner. We have no data on how many synagogue-attending Reform Jews currently light candles, make *Kiddush*, and say the *Motzi* on Friday nights. But I can say that in my own (highly unscientific) observation of Reform Jewish families, the growing comfort with performing the Friday night rituals has spread only so far. Many families feel awkward, ill-prepared, or ill at-ease when doing candles, *Kiddush*, and *Motzi* together. כמה וכמה, how much more so, when we add something wholly unfamiliar (or worse, familiar as a part of Judaism from which someone has run away)?

That all being said, I would still very much like to see if over time, a community – even one that differs from month to month – could develop the familiarity and comfort with the ritual, and could come to appreciate the role of silence in their lives.

I am far more optimistic that the three smaller groups – the *chavurah*, the *Rosh*

Chodesh group, and the youth group – would take to the handwashing/silence rituals fairly readily. The members of a *chavurah* that has been meeting for some time are often used to experimenting with new ideas and being open with one another. The members of a *Rosh Chodesh* group frequently seek out rituals to help them come together in support of one another. And the members of a youth group, especially the older teens, are coming to the synagogue to “do Jewish.” They may be quite open to new rituals, as long as those rituals help them along their journey to understanding what is meaningful about being a Jew today.

The ritual for self-healing in Chapter 4 has different challenges. It is deeply personal, it is intended for a person with a physical illness, and it contains a fairly sophisticated English *piyyut* and a mystical/magical Hebrew *piyyut* that has been translated into English.

I must admit that I began intensely thinking about the ritual for Chapter 4 during the summer between my fourth and fifth years of school, when most HUC-JIR rabbinical students begin working (or thinking about working!) on their rabbinic theses. That same summer, I was diagnosed with a chronic illness that manifests itself primarily through painful joints. Six months earlier, the joints in my hands had begun to hurt; I simply thought I had bruises that would not heal. Now, over a year after I first began to feel pain, and after consulting several doctors and undergoing many different drug regimens, the joints in most of my body experience high pain days and low pain days, yet my hands remain in a constant state of pain. I have had to learn to live with chronic pain in my hands.

And so, in essence, I wrote this ritual out of my own need, with the hope that others

who live with pain, or who are ill, can take comfort from the laments and the prayers, and can find God in the morning to help them lift their hands, their body, and perhaps most importantly, their spirit.

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