



WASHING THE HANDS

A COMMON FEATURE OF TRADITIONAL JEWISH LIFE IS WASHING THE HANDS. On awaking in the morning, one washes one’s hands. In the daily Prayer Book the first of the Morning Blessings is a blessing concerning washing the hands. Before eating bread, one washes the hands, saying the same blessing. The hands of the Cohanim (Priests) are washed by the Levites before they bless the people on a festival¹. An important source for the practice of washing the hands is found in this week’s Sedra².

The Sedra opens with the conclusion of G-d’s instructions to Moses concerning the building of the Sanctuary. Here we find the description of one more item which would have to be made. This was a copper washbasin on a stand, to be placed in the Courtyard of the Sanctuary. The Priests would use it to wash their hands and feet before undertaking any kind of service of G-d, such as bringing an offering³.

Why is the description of this item left to the very end? All the other objects to be made for the Sanctuary - such as the Menorah and the Altar, and even the garments of the Cohanim - were described in the two previous Torah portions. One answer is that the washbasin is not used for any immediate service of G-d: washing is simply a preparation for service. So it is listed at the very end.

In next week’s Sedra, when there is an account of how the Sanctuary was actually built, we find that the washbasin was made

from the copper mirrors which the women brought to Moses as an offering for the Sanctuary.

The Sages comment that, at first, Moses was hesitant about accepting them: surely, a mirror is made to satisfy the desire for physical beauty. Potentially, if this were taken to an extreme, the mirror could become an instrument of the Evil Desire. Can this really be part of the sacred Sanctuary? Yet G-d told him to accept them. In fact, as reported by the Sages, G-d said: “These are more precious to Me than everything else”⁴. What is the connection between the mirrors which were so precious to G-d and the concept of washing one’s hands?

The purpose of Creation is described by the Sages as the desire “to have a dwelling for the Divine in the lower world”. This is achieved particularly by the Sanctuary or Temple. The Jewish people were granted the power to build this physical structure where the Divine Presence would dwell. At the same time, the Divine Presence would also dwell in the heart and life of each individual. Now, we might think it is sufficient if the Divine dwells only in the most spiritual part of our lives. This is why Moses was at first reluctant to accept the mirrors. Yet G-d told him that the Divine also dwells in our less spiritual dimension. At that very point where we may well need a measure of self-control, the Divine is revealed.

This relates also to washing the hands. This is a preparation for service of G-d by the fact that it signifies washing away that which is not pure. In this sense, hand-washing is similar to the theme of self-control. At this point our true sacred potential as physical human beings is revealed. This step is more than just a preparation for further activities, and is even recognised by G-d as “more precious to Me than everything else”. For then, as real people in the physical world, we truly begin to serve the Divine⁵.

1. In Israel and some communities elsewhere, every day. 2. Exodus 30:11-34:35. 3. Exodus 30:17-21. 4. Rashi to Exodus 38:8. 5. Freely based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 6, pp. 196-200. Note that the theme of purity is also expressed in the second Torah reading this Shabbat, concerning the Red Heifer (Num.ch19). This commemorates the way the Jewish people would purify themselves before going to the Temple in Jerusalem for the Pesach festival.

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SEDRA KI TISA

WHO IS ONE?

The Gold family were eating in silence. Mrs Gold had made honey roasted chicken, and everyone was hungrily munching away. Mr Gold was helping himself to another piece, Mrs Gold was cutting up some chicken into really small bits so the baby would be able to eat, and Hannah was licking her lips and eyeing the last piece of chicken on the serving platter. Only Eva sat in silence. She was moodily pushing the plain white rice around her plate with a fork. She was clearly unhappy.

Mrs Gold looked at her 9 year old daughter and sighed. "Eva dear, I know you refuse to eat the chicken that I made, but will you please try? Look - Hannah is eating it!"

Eva glared across the table at her twin, Hannah. "So what? Who cares if Hannah is eating it!?"

Mr Gold did not look pleased. "Eva. That's enough now. If dinner is good enough for your twin, then it is good enough for you."

Eva pushed her plate away. "I hate being a twin! Everyone always compares us! It's not like we are the same person or something..."

Mrs Gold nervously looked at her husband. "You're right, Eva, you aren't the same person as Hannah. And I'm sorry, I forgot you don't like chicken, but..."

A bright smile suddenly lit up Mr Gold's face. "Eva! Thank you! You have just given me an added clarification into this week's Torah portion. Does anyone remember one of the things G-d command's the Jewish Nation to do, right at the beginning of this Sedra?"

Eva smiled for the first time that evening. "Sure Daddy! G-d commanded Moses to count the Jewish people. This was done by every single person giving half a shekel, which was the currency in those times. Then all the half shekel coins were put together and counted.

Mrs Gold laughed. "Do you mean to say that a twin is a half, like the half shekel? Isn't that just what Eva is complaining about?"

"Actually," said Mr Gold, "each one of us is just a half!"

Eva giggled. "I thought we were the only twins in our class." Mrs Gold was relieved that she didn't seem that bothered about the comparison between twins and halves.

"Half doesn't mean twins," explained Mr Gold. "Half means that a person is only complete with G-d as our other half. Each of us is different, but also each person is a half. When we come close to G-d through Torah and Mitzvot, we join together with Hashem and with each other and become complete!"

"I get it," Eva said. "Being a twin doesn't mean you like the same things. You are yourself and different. But it does probably mean you care about each other!"

She winked at her twin, who responded by poking out her tongue.

Mrs Gold laughed. "So that's why the Jews had to give a half shekel - G-d was teaching us all a lesson. The lesson of who is One!"

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