



TOWARDS MEANINGFUL TEFILLA

REBBETZIN ZEMIRA OZAROWSKI
DIRECTOR OF OU ISRAEL WOMEN'S DIVISION



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Lifted Up: The Deeper Meaning of Morning Hand Washing

When the Kaliver Rebbetzin finally arrived at Bergen-Belsen after the six-week-long, torturous death march, she was barely alive. She was starving, weak, feverish, and her hand was badly infected from a terrible wound. One morning, she was rationed a small cup of black coffee. As she lifted the cup to her lips, she suddenly thought, "What am I doing? Is this going to be the last thing I do before I meet my Creator?" She desperately wanted to perform one more mitzvah before she died.

She hobbled over to an open window, held the coffee in one hand, and used the other to perform Negel Vasser (morning hand-washing), a mitzvah she had not been able to perform in months. As she washed her hands, she thought, "Father in Heaven, I want to come home to You as pure and untainted as You sent me down here." At that moment, something

incredible happened. She suddenly felt new strength and energy flowing through her body. Her infected hand began to heal, even though she had no medicine, no doctor, and no way to treat the wound. The Kaliver Rebbetzin knew that she had been given another chance at life.

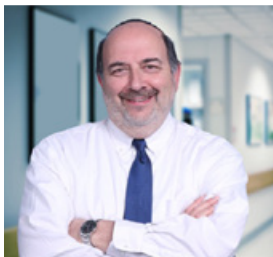
What was it about this particular mitzvah that made it so meaningful to her? And what is the deeper significance of Netilat Yadayim, the washing of our hands each morning?

One of the first brachot we recite each morning is Al Netilat Yadayim. As soon as we wake up, we wash our hands and recite this bracha before beginning our day. Often, we may be half-asleep, stumbling over to the sink without giving much thought to what we are doing. But if we take a moment to understand the deeper significance of this mitzvah, perhaps we can transform this simple morning ritual into a meaningful reminder of our purpose and carry that awareness with us throughout the day.

The Rishonim offer two primary reasons for this mitzvah.

The **Rosh** gives a practical, technical reason. While we sleep, our hands may have touched parts of the body that are normally covered. Before we daven or engage in matters of kedushah, our hands must therefore be washed. The **Zohar** adds that a רוח רעה (evil spirit)

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(a “spirit of impurity”) rests upon a person’s hands upon awakening, and Netilat Yadayim serves to remove it.

The **Rashba**, however, offers a more philosophical understanding. Every morning, Hashem grants us the gift of renewed life. We awaken as a בריה חדשה, a new creation. Each day is a fresh opportunity to dedicate ourselves to His service. Just as the Kohanim washed their hands and feet each morning before beginning the Avodah in the Beit HaMikdash, we begin our own daily Avodah by washing our hands and rededicating ourselves to serving Hashem.

This idea is reflected even in the name of the mitzvah. We recite the bracha על נטילת ידיים rather than על רחיצת ידיים. The root of the word netilah can be understood from Sefer Yeshayahu (63:9): וַיִּנָּשֵׂאם וַיְנַשֵּׂאם כָּל יְמֵי עוֹלָם — “Hashem lifted them up and carried them all the days of the world.” The Navi uses the word וַיִּנָּשֵׂאם to describe Hashem lifting and elevating Klal Yisrael. Chazal intentionally chose this same word for the mitzvah of washing our hands because its purpose is not merely physical cleansing. Through Netilat Yadayim, we symbolically lift up our hands, dedicating them to a higher purpose. Hashem elevates us from a purely physical existence to one of holiness and mission, and we respond by elevating our hands and all that they accomplish to His service.

Rav Shimshon Pincus, in *Nefesh Shimshon*, develops this idea beautifully. He explains that the first thing we say to Hashem each morning is, in essence: “*Ribbono Shel Olam, these hands are the central*

tools through which I act in this world. They enable me to fulfill my mission as one created בצלם אלוקים. Please help me sanctify them. Help me use them not to pursue my physical desires, but to accomplish Your will.”

As Rav Pincus writes:

מעשי ידי וכל מה שאני מקבל מהקב"ה וכל השפע לא נועד עבור התאוות... הכל נועד עבור 'נטילת ידיים'

Everything we receive from Hashem is not meant merely to satisfy our physical desires. It is all intended to be elevated and dedicated to His service.

Through Netilat Yadayim, we symbolically remove Tumaah and everything that distances us from Hashem. We lift up our hands, and our entire lives, to Kedusha. As Rav Pincus concludes: אנחנו וכל אשר לנו שייכים - We, and everything we possess, belong to Hashem and to a life of Kedushah.

How fitting that this is the very first bracha we recite each morning. Before we speak to



Al Netilat Yadayim

The **Rashba** teaches that each morning Hashem gives us renewed life, we awaken as a בריה חדשה, with a fresh opportunity to serve Him. Just as the Kohanim began their daily Avodah by washing their hands and feet, we begin our own daily Avodah with Netilat Yadayim.

Rav Shimshon Pincus explains that our hands are the tools through which we fulfill our mission as beings created בצלם אלוקים. By washing them each morning, we dedicate them, and all that we do, to Hashem.

Al Netilat Yadayim is therefore more than a morning ritual, it is a daily reminder to use our hands and our lives for Torah, mitzvot, and bringing kedushah into the world.



Cut and paste into your siddur

anyone else, before we begin our work or our responsibilities, we pause to remind ourselves why Hashem gave us these hands. They are not merely instruments with which to earn a living or care for our own needs. They are the tools through which we build Torah, perform mitzvot, help other people, and bring kedushah into the world.

And perhaps this is what made that moment so powerful for the Kaliver Rebbetzin. After months in which almost everything had been taken from her — her freedom, her possessions, her ability to live a normal Jewish life — she suddenly had the opportunity to perform one mitzvah. She lifted her hands, washed them, and dedicated them once again to Hashem.

Every morning, with the words על נטילת ידיים, we are given that same opportunity. We lift our hands, and with them, we recommit our entire lives to the service of Hashem. ■



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