

WASHING THE HANDS

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

When a person dies, the soul leaves the body, rendering it impure. Sleep is like death, and while a person is asleep, a similar type of impure spirit (ruach ra'ah) descends on his hands. He should wash his hands as soon as possible, in order that this impure spirit should be removed.

Most authorities agree that one recites the blessing of "netilas yadayim" only when doing a mitzvah. Washing away an impure spirit is only a protective measure and not a mitzvah (Pri Migadim, Eshel Avraham 4,1; Mishna Berura 4,8). Why, then, do we say a blessing after we wash our hands in the morning?

Some early commentators connect this washing to the renewal of our life- force each morning. Just as a Cohen had a mitzvah to purify himself before starting his service in the Temple, we also have a mitzvah to wash our hands each morning to start a new day of Divine service (Responsa of Rashba 1,191).

Others write that there is a mitzvah to wash our hands before each regular prayer, lest we had touched a place on the body that is generally covered (Responsa of Rosh 4,1). Since this act is considered to have the status of a mitzvah, we therefore recite a blessing. These two reasons give the washing the status of a mitzvah and are sufficient to obligate making a blessing on the washing.

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