TEFILA: Netilat Yadayim

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One of the first things we do in the morning is washing our hands in preparation for our prayers. This ritual washing of the hands is called: *netilat yadayim*.

Literally, *netilat yadayim* means “elevating, raising or lifting our hands”. We use that expression because at the conclusion of*netilat yadayim* the hands are elevated. Other rabbis (Abuderham) explained that the Hebrew word *netila* should be understood in the sense of ‘receiving’. i.e., receiving the waters that are poured into our hands.

The rabbis are divided as to what the main reason for the ritual washing of the hands in the morning is.

√ The first Biblical source for the washing of the hands is found in Exodus 30:19-20. The Kohanim (=Priests) would wash their hands (and feet) before performing the holy service. The Rishba says that we imitate the Kohen, preparing ourselves to dedicate our day to serve God, by washing our hands every morning.

√ According to the Rosh the main reason for *netilat yadayim* in the morning is basic hygiene. Our hands might have touched unclean parts of our bodies during sleep and therefore, before the morning prayer, we should clean our hands.

√ The Shulḥan ‘arukh mentions also the reason of impurity (*ruaḥra’a*). In the words of Rabbi Melamed, when we sleep we lost part of our divine image, which we recover upon waking up. But the state of impurity remains in the hands until we wash them ritually. This is why the Shulḥan ‘arukh (4:2) indicates that we have to wash our hands, alternating three times, as a purification ritual.

√ Maimonides mentions the washing of the hands as a prerequisite for *every* prayer. (MT, Tefila 4:2). Thus, according to Maimonides we should wash our hands not only for the morning prayer (*shaḥarit*) but for the afternoon and night prayers as well. Thus, Psalms 26:6 says: “I will wash my hands in cleanliness,and [then I] will go around Your altar, O Lord”.

“When I was young, I used to admire intelligent people; as I grow older, I admire kind people.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972)