

Tefillah Focus Of The Week:

AL NETILAS YADAIM

Our Holy Hands

MEANING: The simple translation of the prayer

Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and has commanded us to wash our hands.

ברוך אתה ה' אלקנו
מלך העולם אשר קדשנו
במצותיו וצונו על
נטילת ידיים

WORD TO THE WISE: Meaning within the meaning

The Hebrew word that normally would be used for “washing hands” is *rochetz yadaim*. Instead, in this blessing we say *netilas yadaim*, which literally means “the lifting up of the hands.” This teaches that, through washing, our hands are “lifted” to a higher level and are consecrated for the fulfillment of G-d’s mitzvos. We wash them out of respect to our Maker.

THEME:

An essential concept of the prayer

Rededicating Our Hands

Each day, a Jew should dedicate his hands to holy purposes.

INSIGHT:

Deeper meanings of the theme

Hands: The Highest or the Lowest

The first of the blessings that a person recites in the morning is “*Al Netilas Yadaim*” upon washing hands. The Mishneh Berurah cites two reasons for washing hands and reciting a blessing in the morning.

The first, stated by the *Rosh*, is that a person’s hands move about during the night and are likely to have touched a part of the body that is unclean. Therefore, before he prays, he should purify his hands.

The *Rashba* offers another reason: Each new day upon awakening, we are like new creations, created for the purpose of serving and blessing our Creator. Like the *Kohanim*, who washed their hands from a vessel before serving in the *Beis Hamikdash*, we, too, sanctify our hands and bless G-d’s name.

But why does this sanctification process focus on our hands? The answer lies in the unique nature of the hands. Both physically and metaphorically, they have the capacity to be the highest or the lowest part of the human body.

Physically, a person can raise his hands high above his head, or touch them to the bottoms of his feet. Metaphorically, a person’s hands can accomplish the lowest, as well as the highest deeds of which mankind is capable.

The worst of human actions—killing—is expressed

in the Torah as an activity of the hands: “...But the hands are Esau’s hands.” Similarly, another verse states: “Your hands are full of blood.” Washing our hands cleanses them and distances us from their unholy potential. We “wash our hands of it” and choose the higher road.

The best of human actions – performing *mitzvos* – is also the realm of the hands. A person’s hands can elevate him by giving charity, helping others, taking lulav and esrog, building a sukkah and so forth. In fact, the hands are the conduit of the *kohain’s* blessing, as the Torah states: “Aaron raised his hands towards the people and blessed them.”

What will our hands do today? Will they hold a *siddur*? Wrap *tefillin* on your arm and head? Touch a *mezuzah*? Lift a crying child? Repair a broken object? Prepare a meal? Earn your livelihood?

Each day on awaking, we have the opportunity to elevate our hands to the service of G-d. Our hands are our agents for all the good and all the harm we do in the world. When we pour *negel vasser* over our hands each morning, we raise them and purify them, readying them to perform the tasks G-d sets before us that day. By reciting the blessing on hand-washing, we are thanking Hashem for the opportunity to elevate our hands, and through them, ourselves.

VISUALIZE:

Images that bring the prayer to life

What Hands Can Do

Rushing along the city sidewalk to catch his bus, Reuven didn’t notice the deep crack a few feet in front of him. As he strode along at top velocity, his toe was caught in the gap and his body was flung forward. In a flash, he dropped his briefcase and reached out his hands to break his fall.

An hour later, moaning with pain in a drab emergency room cubicle, he received the news: he had broken both wrists. He would have to wear casts, which would enclose everything from his fingertips to his forearms.



It took six weeks for those casts to come off, and during those six weeks, Reuven learned about the all-pervasive importance of his hands. Even mitzvos that depended on his intellect, like learning, depended first on his hands, for without someone to assist him, he could not grasp a book from the shelf, open it and turn its pages. Making Kiddush on Shabbos was a problem because he could not hold the cup. He couldn’t drive his sons to yeshiva, give his

elderly neighbor a lift home from shul or help his wife prepare for Shabbos. Each day brought new frustrations for the man with two broken hands.

When at last the day came that the casts were removed, Reuven could not stop marveling at his own hands. They were achy and raw, but they worked! He felt as if he had come back to the land of the living. The next morning, Reuven grasped the large cup by his bedside and poured the cold, clear water over each hand three times. “Today, Hashem, my hands are back in action,” he thought. “And therefore, so am I.”

Try This!

► This week, before you perform *negel vasser* in the morning, imagine that your hands are like a drooping, dried out houseplant. Now pour the water over them, and feel them coming back to life, absorbing purity and vitality from the water. As you say the words “*netilas yadaim*,” raise your hands up slightly and hope in your heart that today, your hands will indeed be instruments of holiness.

Did You Know

► *When to Wash*

Upon arising in the morning, before touching any part of the body, one must wash each hand three times from a utensil which can hold at least 32 ounces of water.

After using the bathroom, wash hands again, and then recite the blessing על נטילת ידיים. Some follow the custom of reciting the blessing על נטילת ידיים in *Shul*, together with the rest of the *Birchas HaShachar*. However, this is acceptable only if a person goes to pray directly after washing the hands.

Women are also required to recite the blessing על נטילת ידיים before praying, even if they do not recite a formal *Shacharis*, but say their own prayer which include praises of Hashem, personal requests and thanks to Him.