

**Maimonides 613 Series**  
*How Do We Prepare to Pray?*

**Rambam's Positive Commandment #24**

Rambam's 24<sup>th</sup> positive commandment is for a *kohen* to sanctify his hands and feet before serving in the Holy Temple. He bases this on 30:19 and 21 in parshas *Ki Sisa*: "Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and feet from it" and "They shall wash their hands and feet so that they will not die."

**A Grammatical Mystery**

In verse 19, in the Hebrew, the words for "hands" and "feet", *yadeihem* and *ragleihem*, are preceded by the direct article *es*. In verse 21, *yadeihem* and *ragleihem* are not preceded by *es*. What is the significance of this difference?

**Preparing to Pray: Two Views**

Today, without the Holy Temple, our daily prayer takes the place of sacrifices. In chapter four of Rambam's *Laws of Prayer*, he writes that a person must wash their hands and feet every morning before praying, or else their prayer is nullified.

In *The Alter Rebbe's Shulchan Aruch*<sup>1</sup>, *Laws of Washing the Hands*, the Alter Rebbe writes that a person must wash their hands before prayer in the morning, but does not mention the feet. He says that this is like a *kohen*, who would wash his hands before serving in the Temple; when we give our souls over to G-d at night, we are tired, but when we awaken in the morning, we are refreshed and ready to serve all day with renewed strength and vigor.

Why does the Rambam say that a person must also wash their feet before prayer, and the Alter Rebbe does not?

**Two Levels of Sanctity**

The answer to this question, and also the solution to our grammatical mystery, lies in understanding two levels of sanctity<sup>2</sup>:

- 1) *Tahara* – Purity: This concept is exemplified by immersing in a *mikvah*. To remove impurity and become pure, a person cannot immerse one half of their body and then the other. They must immerse their entire body, hands and feet, all at once. The concept of *tahara* is related to verse 21 above, where *yadeihem* and *ragleihem* are not each distinguished by the direct article *es*. This implies that they are together, part of one whole, like the purifying *mikvah* immersion.
- 2) *Kedusha* – Holiness: At this level, one is already pure. This is exemplified by washing the hands; it is an act of holiness that adds to the pre-existing purity. The concept of *kedusha* also corresponds to verse 19 above, where *yadeihem* and *ragleihem* are each set apart by the direct article *es*; hands and feet are separate, the hands are cleansed and ready to work in the Temple, and the feet are there merely to give support.

When Rambam writes that the hands and feet must be washed, he is alluding to the concept of *tahara*. His opinion is that in order to pray, a person must remove impurity from the hands *and* feet, from top to bottom. Implied in this is that today, without the Temple, we can achieve the level of *tahara*, but not *kedusha*.

The Alter Rebbe, however, says that all we must do is wash our hands – he is alluding to the level of *kedusha*. Why? Because he is not writing about preparation for prayer or Torah study done at irregular intervals throughout the day. Here he is dealing with the preparations of a person full of zest and energy to serve G-d unconditionally all day – to “know G-d in all [one’s] ways.” This person is going to serve G-d everywhere he goes, in everything he does, so he needs a greater level of holiness to impact that which is unholy. The Alter Rebbe writes this, not in his Laws of Prayer, but in his Laws of Hand Washing, because the preparation is not just about prayer, it’s about dedicating the whole self to serving G-d.

### **Washing the Face: The Inner Dimension**

The majority of editions of Rambam we have today state that before the morning service, a person must wash their face in addition to one's hands and feet. If

Rambam bases his law on the *kohen's* washing his hands and feet before the morning service in the Temple, why does Rambam add the face?

The difference between the face and the rest of the body, is that the face represents a person's inner qualities – their thoughts, emotions, spirituality. The hands and feet are external, utilitarian; a person works with them externally.

When a Jew works in the world, engages in business, his heart and mind, his inner faculties, should remain with G-d . Our patriarchs and matriarchs, our prophets and prophetesses, were constantly connected with G-d. This was their *raison d'etre*, as it should be ours. We should engage our hands and feet in earning a living, but in our minds and hearts, we should be saying, “I can't wait to pray, I can't wait to learn Torah, I can't wait to connect to G-d.”

The *kohen* in Temple times washed his hands and feet, and he was ready to serve. He did not have to wash his face because his inner faculties, his mind and heart, were always with G-d. He had to purify his hands and feet because he engaged in business to make a living when he was not serving in the Temple, but even then, his face was with G-d. Today, most of us do not solely dedicate ourselves to holiness; most of us engage our hearts and minds, our faces, in things outside the realm of G-dliness. So Rambam says, when you want to pray, to bring a sacrifice, to be a *kohen*, you must purify your face to be fit to serve.

The Alter Rebbe, however, says that a person must only wash their hands, not their face or feet. Why? Are we not in *golus*, in exile, don't we need extra cleansing? Furthermore, the Alter Rebbe came centuries after the Rambam, when the generation's spiritual stature was degraded even more. It seems that one would especially need extra purification then.

The answer: the Alter Rebbe is talking about the level beyond purification, the level of *kedusha*. When we awaken in the morning, we have a refreshed soul and a new energy with which to serve G-d. We are dedicated to our service from the moment our eyes open. Before washing, we say the *Modeh Ani*, we nullify ourselves and acknowledge G-d as our King. How can we say *Modeh Ani* before purifying our hands? According to Jewish Law<sup>3</sup>, we can say the *Modeh Ani*

without washing because it does not contain a proper name of G-d. Chassidus, however, teaches that we can say *Modeh Ani* before washing because even though on one level we are lacking, we are impure. The *Modeh Ani* of a Jew is beyond all impurities – it comes from the essence of the soul, which can never, ever become defiled, which every Jew can access through the knowledge that G-d is with you at all times. Because the Alter Rebbe is talking about the essence of the soul, the *real* you, the *modeh ani*, which can never be impure, we learn that we already possess the foundation of purity. All we need to do is wash our hands in order to take ourselves to the next level of holiness, so that throughout the day, every single thing we do will be imbued with this *kedusha*.

Each one of us today can be a *kohen*. Rambam says<sup>4</sup> that a person's father does not have to be a *kohen* in order for a person to have this status – any Jew who dedicates his or her life to G-d is now a *kohen* and can even reach the level of a *kohen gadol!* This is the power with which the Torah charges us and the responsibility that G-d puts on us: to utilize all our potential to rise to the highest heights, to reach into the deepest depths of our souls and become a High Priest. All we have to do is wash our hands – and from there we will go straight into the Third Temple with the coming of Moshiach, may it be speedily in our days. Amen!

## Footnotes

- 1) Laws of Washing of the Hands 4:1
- 2) Lekutei Sichos Vol. 31 Ki Sisa 1
- 3) Alter Rebbe's Shulchan Aruch, Laws of Waking up in the Morning 1:6, Siddur Tehilas Hashem Al Pi Nussach Ha'Arizal, at the beginning
- 4) Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Shemittah and Jubilee Cycles, 13:13