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**Shiur#06: *Netilat Yadayim***

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**Introduction**

The first of the *birkot ha-nehenin* which we will discuss this year is the *Birkat Ha-Motzi*, the *berakha* recited before eating bread. However, before addressing this blessing, we must first study the laws of *netilat yadayim*, the ritual washing of the hands before eating bread, as it naturally precedes the blessing of *Ha-Motzi*. In the upcoming *shiurim*, we will investigate the reasons for *netilat yadayim* and discuss when and how it is performed.

The Talmud ascribes great importance to the *mitzva* of *netilat yadayim*. For example, the *gemara* teaches:

Whoever eats bread without previously washing the hands, it is as though he had intercourse with a harlot… R. Zerika said in the name of R. Eliezar: Whoever makes light of washing the hands [before a meal] will be uprooted from the world. (*Sota* 4b)

Furthermore, the *gemara* elsewhere lists three behaviors which bring man to poverty, among them “treating the washing of the hands with disrespect” (*Shabbat* 62b).

The *mishna* describes the severity of this *mitzva*:

Eliezer the son of Chanoch demurred against the laws concerning the purifying of the hands. When he died, the court sent and laid a stone on his coffin. This teaches that whoever is excommunicated and dies while under excommunication, his coffin is stoned. (*Eduyot* 5:6)

Finally, the *gemara* relates regarding R. Akiva:

Our Rabbis taught: R. Akiva was once confined in a prison-house, and R. Yehoshua the grits-maker was attending on him. Every day, a certain quantity of water was brought in to him. On one occasion he [R. Yehoshua] was met by the prison keeper, who said to him, “Your water today is rather much; do you perhaps require it for undermining the prison?” He poured out a half of it and handed to him the other half.

When he came to R. Akiva, the latter said to him, “Yehoshua, do you not know that I am an old man and my life depends on yours?” When the latter told him all that had happened, [R. Akiva] said to him, “Give me some water to wash my hands.” “It will not suffice for drinking,” the other complained, “will it suffice for washing your hands?” “What can I do,” the former replied, “when for [neglecting] the words of the Rabbis one deserves death? It is better that I myself should die than I should transgress against the opinion of my colleagues.”

It was related that he tasted nothing until the other had brought him water with which to wash his hands. When the Sages heard of this incident, they remarked, “If he was so [scrupulous] in his old age, how much more must he have been so in his youth; and if he so [behaved] in a prison-house, how much more [must he have behaved in such a manner] when not in a prison-house.” (*Eiruvin* 21b)

We will discuss the halakhic ramifications of this passage in a future *shiur*.

**The Reasons for *Netilat Yadayim***

The Talmud cites different reasons for the *netilat yadayim* performed before eating bread. One *gemara* relates *netilat yadayim* to the laws of *tum’a* and *tahara*:

R. Idi bar Avin said in the name of R. Yitzchak bar Ashian: The first washing (*netilat yadayim*) is a *mitzva*; the last washing (*mayim acharonim*) is a *chova*... R. Idi bar Avin said in the name of R. Yitzchak bar Ashian: Washing hands for ordinary food is [obligatory] by extension from *teruma* (*serach teruma*)… (*Chullin* 105a–106a)

The *gemara* asserts that *netilat yadayim*, referred to here as the “first washing,” is obligatory by extension from “*serach teruma.*”

“*Serach teruma*” refers to an enactment made towards the end of the Second Temple period. The *gemara* relates that Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel instituted that one must wash his hands before eating *teruma*, as unwashed hands invalidate *teruma* (*Shabbat* 13b; see also *Eiruvin* 21b). The Talmud explains that since one’s hands are “*askaniyot*” – that is, they are always active – we fear that they may have touched something impure or an unclean part of one’s body (see Rashi, *Shabbat* 14a, s.v. *askaniyot*), and the Rabbis therefore instituted that they must be washed before touching *teruma*.

The passage cited above refers to a later enactment in which the Rabbis prohibited everyone from eating bread before washing one’s hands. They apparently wished that the *kohanim* would accustom themselves to washing their hands, and therefore demanded that everyone wash their hands before eating bread. This enactment is observed even after the destruction of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* so that we will be ready for the speedy rebuilding of the Temple.

Interestingly, other sources point to a different reason for *netilat yadayim*. First, the *gemara* cited above continues:

The first washing (*netilat yadayim*) is a *mitzva*… Washing hands for ordinary food is [obligatory] by extension from teruma (*serach teruma*) and also because of a *mitzva*. What *mitzva*? Abbaye said: The *mitzva* to listen to the words of the Sages. Rava said: The *mitzva* to listen to the words of R. Eliezer ben Arakh. [For it was taught:] It is written: “And whomsoever a *zav* touches without having rinsed his hands in water.” Herein, said R. Eliezer ben Arakh, the Sages found a Biblical support for the law of washing the hands. Raba asked R. Nahman: Wherein is this indicated? For it is written: “Without having rinsed his hands in water.” Can this mean that if he had rinsed his hands, [whatsoever he touched] would be clean? Surely he requires immersion, does he not? The meaning must be: And any other person that has not rinsed his hands is unclean.

This passage implies that washing one’s hands before eating bread may be due to a different reason, described as a “*mitzva*.” Tosafot (*Chullin* 106a, s.v. *mitzva*) explains that in addition to the first reason of *serach teruma*, there may be a second reason for this *mitzva* to ensure the cleanliness of one’s hands before eating bread. Indeed, the *gemara* teaches:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav… “Sanctify yourselves” – this refers to washing of the hands before the meal. “And you should be holy” – this refers to washing of the hands after the meal. (*Berakhot* 53b)

R. Yehuda maintains that washing one’s hands before eating bread is a fulfillment of “Sanctify yourselves” (*Vayikra* 20:7). The passage cited above equating one who does not wash his hands before eating bread with one who has sexual relations with a harlot (*Sota* 4b) may also indicate that washing one’s hands may be an act of sanctification, and not one which removes ritual impurity (see Maharal, *Netiv Ha-Avoda* 16).

**The Quantity of Bread That Requires *Netilat Yadayim***

The *mishna* relates that “they gave to R. Tzadok food less than the bulk of an egg; he took it in a towel and ate it outside the *sukka* and did not say the benediction after it” (*Sukka* 26b). The *gemara* (27a) asks:

But if it was the bulk of an egg, must he need [eat it in] the *sukka*? … Perhaps [it means that] less than the bulk of an egg (*ke-beitza*) does not necessitate washing of the hands and the benediction.

The *Rishonim* question why R. Tzadok did not wash his hands for a quantity of bread smaller than a *ke-beitza*. Some suggest that since a quantity of food less that the size of a *ke-beitza* cannot be rendered impure (*Pesachim* 79b; see Tosafot, *Sukka* 26b, s.v. *natlo*), it seems reasonable that the Rabbis would not institute *netilat yadayim*, which was originally intended to protect *teruma* from impure hands, for a quantity less than a *ke-beitza* (see Beit Yosef 158). Others suggest that *netilat yadayim* is only required when one eats a quantify of bread that would obligate one to recite *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, and *mi-de’orayta*, one only recites *Birkat Ha-Mazon* after eating a *ke-beitza* of bread (see *Berakhot* 49b).

Based upon this passage, R. Eliezer of Worms (c. 1176–1238) writes in his *Sefer Rokei’ach* (*Hilkhot Seuda* 328) that one who eats less than a *ke-beitza* of bread should wash *netilat yadayim*, but without reciting the blessing. The Beit Yosef (158) explains that while the *gemarot* cited above may imply that the obligation of *netilat yadayim* is dependent upon the laws of *tum’at okhlin* or the Biblical obligation of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, one might argue and maintain that the Rabbis instituted *netilat yadayim* for whenever one eats bread.

It is notable that regarding *tum’at okhlin*, Tosafot (*Sukka* 26b, s.v. *natlo*) and the Rambam (*Hilkhot Tum’at Okhlin* 4:1) rule that food less than the size of a *ke-beitza* can become ritually impure. Similarly, the halakha is in accordance with those who rule that *mi-derabbanan*, even one who eats a *ke-zayit* of bread must recite *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. Therefore, the Vilna Gaon (*Biur Ha-Gra*) rules that one who eats a *ke-zayit* of bread should wash and recite the blessing. Alternatively, the Eliya Rabba (158:3; see also Lechem Chamudot cited by Magen Avraham 158:4) suggests that *netilat yadayim* might depend upon the blessing of *Ha-Motzi*. Therefore, even one who eats less than a *ke-zayit* should wash *netilat yadayim*!

In practice, the Shulchan Arukh writes that “there is one opinion that if one eats less than a *ke-beitza*, one should wash without recited the blessing” (158:2). Therefore, one who intends to eat less than a *ke-beitza* of bread should not recite the blessing of *al* *netilat yadayim*. As for one who eats less than a *ke-zayit* of bread, the Mishna Berura (158:10) concludes that although many *Acharonim* (including the Bach, the Taz and the Gra) rule that one does not have to wash *netilat yadayim*, one should preferably follow the more stringent opinions and wash without a blessing even for bread less than the size of a *ke-zayit*. (The Arukh Ha-Shulchan (158:3) reports that that was apparently not the custom.)

Next week, we will discuss the manner in which *netilat yadayim* is performed.