



## Why is Water so Essential in Judaism?

### Water – The Flexibility of the Feminine

I'm sitting here at my desk, taking long sips out of my deep blue water bottle. We all need water. Water is the most vital, essential substance of life. All living beings are completely dependent on water. Without water, nothing can sprout forth, grow and flourish. This hit home recently, when we had no water, on several subsequent Friday afternoons. We desperately kept opening the faucets, but only tiny drops trickled into our empty vessels. They were fixing the waterpipes in Bat Ayin, which somehow kept becoming unfixed, week after week, just at the moment of the great pressure of Friday-afternoon water-usage. It was devastating to enter Shabbat with dishes in the sink, dirty floors and without a decent shower. I tried not to complain, but I could certainly identify with the cries of the Israelites in the desert, when the well of Miriam dried out. The Hebrew word for water מַיִם/*mayim* begins with מַי/*ma* – 'what/something.' Without water, there is no 'what' or substance to anything. Water, therefore, represents nullification of our ego. When we ask, "what am I?" replacing our ego with a question, then we are ready to be reborn with its answer (Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Waters of Eden*). The word מַיִם/*mayim* is a palindrome – it is spelled the same frontward and backward. All waters must eventually return to their source. Through the water libations at the Temple, reality reconnected with its Divine Source. Water symbolizes teshuva (literally return). When Israel does teshuva, it is compared to pouring out the heart like water, as it states, "Pour out your heart like water before the presence of Hashem" (*Eichah* 2:19); (*Midrash Tehillim* 119). Water is the prototype of the fluid state – change. Since Hashem never changes (*Malachi* 3:6), one of the first ingredients of creation had to be the very concept of change. Ego is the essence of permanence, while water is the essence of impermanence. In order to allow birth and growth, we need to make space for something other than ourselves by shrinking our ego. The seed decomposes to sprout forth as a new plant. The inwards of the pregnant woman become squished to make room for her growing womb. Water is intrinsically connected to the flexibility of the feminine. Therefore, we received the well in the merit of Miriam.

### Waters of Transformation and Purity

Through water we become transformed from the status of being ritually impure to becoming pure. A woman in a state of niddah (ritual impurity) returns to a state of taharah (ritual purity) only after immersing in a mikvah. The word 'mikvah' – a halachically acceptable body of water – literally means 'gathering of waters' (*Bereishit* 1:9-10). Rather than tap water, the water of a mikvah must gather together naturally from an underground spring or from rainwater. The basic mikvah must contain a minimum of forty *se'ah* (around 750 liters or 198 gallons) of rainwater. To this rainwater, ordinary water may subsequently be added. If spring water is used, then the water can be flowing. However, if the source is rainwater, then the water must be stationary. The ocean, halachically, is considered a spring. Thus, although the water is flowing, it can still be considered a kosher mikvah. Rivers and lakes are more complicated. They may or may not fulfill the halachic requirements of a kosher mikvah. Consult a competent Rabbi if you are in a situation where you need to use a natural body of water as a mikvah.

Water is essential for ritual purity in Judaism. Before burial, the dead person must be washed in a ritual act of purification called *tahara*. Just as a baby is washed and enters the world clean and pure, so do we leave the world cleansed and pure. The cleansing is performed by *Chevra Kadisha* (holy society) – a group of specially trained Jews who care for the body and prepare it for burial. Men handle male bodies and women prepare female bodies so that modesty is preserved even in death.

Handwashing for ritual purity is also essential in Judaism. This is one of the reasons why less Jews were affected by 'the Black Death.' The halacha dictates to wash our hands upon waking up in the morning, before eating bread and after using the bathroom. Since the fingers are the place where impure forces can get a hold, we must do a special ritual of washing the hands upon rising in the morning to expel negative spirits that enter the body at night (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 4:2). *Netilat Yadayim* is done by pouring water from a cup alternately on each hand, from the fingertips to the wrist for six times (pouring water on each hand three times, one after the other). The purifying water is poured first on the right hand from the left hand – representing the power of *chesed* over *gevurah*. Besides removing the residue of the external forces, it also permeates our consciousness with the idea that the hands are an extension of our holy soul and prepares them to be raised in purity, in prayer and supplication ([Adapted from the RaMaK and Mikdash Melech By Shmuel-Simcha Treister](#)).

### Taking a Shower on Shabbat and Yom Tov

When we had no water in Bat Ayin and I had to go without a shower before Shabbat, I couldn't wait to get clean in honor of Shabbat as soon as our water returned. This happened only after candlelight on Shabbat. Would I then be able to take a regular shower on Shabbat? Unfortunately, there are a lot of restrictions on taking a shower on Shabbat. First of all, it is not permitted to heat up water on Shabbat. For even if the hot water was heated up before Shabbat in a boiler (as is in most hot water systems in Israel, and many overseas), if the boiler is still on during the Shabbat (overseas most boilers are left ignited constantly, whereas in Israel they are only turned on as needed), then when the hot tap is turned on, cold water runs into the boiler in place of the hot water that is flowing out. This is totally forbidden on Shabbat as we would be 'cooking' this cold water. This also applies to hot water systems that heat up the cold water on demand, as it flows out towards the hot tap, heating up the water as needed. Even when the boiler was turned off before Shabbat, cold water will still flow into it when the hot tap is turned on. This cold water will come in contact with the hot water in the tank (from before Shabbat) and be heated up by it. This too is prohibited and considered 'cooking' the cold water. What about taking a shower in water heated by a sun heater before Shabbat? There are those that forbid it completely (Rav Shlomo Zalman Orbach zt"l, the Minchat Yitzchak), whilst others permit it (The Tzitz Eliezer, and Rav Ovadyah Yosef). *Shmirat Shabbat KeHilchatah* Chapter 14:3 rules that even the cold water that was heated up by the sun on Shabbat itself, (and even the cold water that ran into the tank and solar panels on Shabbat as a result of our turning the hot tap on) may be used – according to those who permit the use of solar powered water systems on Shabbat. This is because although the water was heated up on Shabbat (in a permitted manner), it was heated up by itself, without needing any action from a person to heat it up. Even the new water that flowed into the system on Shabbat, when turning on the hot tap was only heated up as a very indirect result of our action, with no specific intent to do so, and as such is considered as having been heated up by itself on Shabbat. Unfortunately, for me, and most Ashkenazim, we hold by the first view that forbids using water heated by a sun heater before Shabbat. So, I had to take a cold shower on Shabbat, leaving out washing my hair, to ensure that I wouldn't be squeezing out water (*Magen Avraham* 326:8). While, Sephardim permit bathing their whole body in cold water on Shabbat,

Ashkanazim have a tradition not to do so (allowing only to wash up to half their bodies). In a situation of discomfort (even mild discomfort) they may bath their whole bodies in cold water on Shabbat.

On Yom Tov, when it is permitted to use the hot water tap, Sephardim may wash their entire bodies in hot water heated up before Yom Tov, or water from a solar unit. Ashkanazim may only wash their entire body in such hot water limb by limb, but not the whole body at one time. There is room to allow even the Ashkanazim to wash their entire bodies in hot water heated up before Yom Tov; or water from a solar unit. The use of hot water heated up on Yom Tov (which includes water from most gas or electric units) is allowed for washing of face, hands and feet. There are opinions that allow washing even the whole body in such water in our day and age when daily washing is the norm. If you feel discomfort, you have all the more reason to rely on this ruling. When washing on Shabbat or Yom Tov, we need to take care not to use a sponge or washcloth. Only liquid soap and shampoo are allowed ([Rabbi Da'vid Sperling](#)).

### Washing Dishes on Shabbat

I'm kind of a neat freak, meaning, I grew up in a *Yekkish* home (of German Jewish descent), where everything had its place, and every dish was immediately cleaned up and put away. Consequently, I rarely leave dishes in the sink. Not only do I like things to look neat, seeing a pile of dishes or laundry takes away my peace of mind, reminding me of the work to get done later. Especially on Shabbat, I love to relax with a book in my clean and orderly home without any dish reminding me of the upcoming work. However, there are restrictions on exerting ourselves on Shabbat for something which is not necessary for Shabbat itself, as it is not permitted to prepare for a weekday on Shabbat. So, if the dishes are not necessary for Shabbat, the general rule is to abstain from washing them on Shabbat. However, if the washing of the dishes is done for a purpose on Shabbat, for example for hygienic purposes, it is permissible to wash the dishes even on Shabbat (Hagaon Harav Waldenberg zt"l, *Tzitz Eliezer*, Volume 14, Chapter 37). Similarly, dishes may be removed from the table following the third Shabbat meal for the room to look neat and orderly, for this is not considered a necessity of Motza'ei Shabbat; but, rather to make the room look organized on Shabbat itself (*Shemirat Shabbat Ke'Hilchata* Chapter 19). Luckily for me, the best responsa to permit me to do dishes and making my home look orderly on Shabbat is from [Harav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l, Shulchan Shlomo Chapter 323](#): "If one is unable to handle a mess, if one has ants in his home which are attracted to the leftover food, or if one is worried that guests will arrive and his house will look unorganized, one may wash dishes on Shabbat, for this is not considered a necessity of Motz'aei Shabbat; rather, it is for the purpose of Shabbat itself."

### Cleansing Waters of Tears

I was about to conclude this article when I received devastating news. I'm writing this as tears are rolling down my cheeks. I feel alone and abandoned, crying out my soul to the Almighty. He has plans for me, and specifically through the greatest breakdowns, new beginnings emerge. Let the waters of my tears become cathartic outlets. Rather than fearing this unknown change, I must prevail in emunah that the cleansing waters of my tears, will eventually sail me to safe shores, where the old evaporating structures will make way for new and deeper existence.