

Washing - for what?

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Later on we will do '*rachtzah*'—the washing over the *matzah*. Now we are doing '*urchatz*', which amounts to washing before eating a vegetable. This is not something we do every day.

To explain, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, first chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, writes of dividing life into two categories: the goal, and everything else. We set goals for ourselves and set out to reach them. Everything we do that helps us reach that goal is worthwhile. But how do we relate to all the other things we do? This is an important question that addresses how we feel about the aspects of our lives that are not essential. And this is one of the central points of the Seder.

What is the goal of the Seder? The peak spiritual moment of the Seder is when we fully absorb the spiritual impact of the *matzah* when we eat it. So why don't we cut to the chase? Let's get that *matzah* inside of us as quickly as possible! But the truth is, the Seder wants to help us experience every moment of our lives as an encounter with the Divine. It demands that we let go of our usual distinctions - important and unimportant, sacred and profane, good and bad, needs and wants.

Tonight, we are going to learn how to experience the Divine within all moments. Not only prayers and *mitzvot*, but also eating and conversation. Not only goals, but journeys. Finally free to let go of the reins for a moment, we can celebrate every moment equally. Not only will we recognize the holiness of the process, we will even sanctify ourselves toward this pursuit: *urchatz*.

R' Kook deepens the concept for us: vegetables, in the Talmud, are thought to enhance hunger - 'appetizers'. If eating is an unfortunate concession we make to our animal nature, then vegetables are antithetical to the goal of living life more spiritually. But if eating is another opportunity for encounter with the Divine - if *pleasure* is an encounter with the Divine – then the vegetable we are about to eat is a holy sacrament, drawing us in to a moment of Encounter. So of course we should wash our hands to prepare ourselves.

Washing toward the *matzah*-goal and the vegetable-distractions represent two kinds of freedom: the first is freedom to live an intentional life. We celebrate our right and capacity to point ourselves in a specific direction and actually follow through. But there is another kind of freedom: freedom to let go, to know that wherever we go we will find Hashem and meaning and direction and connection. It is told that the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidut, when embarking on a journey, would have his coachman, Alexi, let go of the reins and sit backward, facing away from the horses. With the freedom to let go of the reins, we allow our desires to guide us as much as we allow the Torah to guide us.

Rebbe Natan of Breslov writes that '*urchatz*' is from the root-word in Aramaic that means 'trust'. At this moment in the Seder, pay closer attention to your capacity to trust and let go. The goal is to trust enough to sanctify aspects of yourself and the life you live that you never allowed yourself to see as holy. Can you trust the holiness of the night, the 'night of protection', to guard you from any negative impact of what's inside of you? Do you trust the people around this table, each of them looking at you tonight with holy Pesach-eyes, to be with you in your search for true freedom?

We have nothing to fear except holding back. We will never reach true freedom if we do not free our desires and appetites to be in service of the Divine.

As you wash, consider that you are preparing yourself for an encounter with something holy – your own desires! Use the washing as an opportunity to shift your perspective on those desires.