

The general law

Introduction:

Certain actions that are performed cause a spirit of impurity to reside onto the hands similar to the evil spirit that resides upon sleeping at night. Nevertheless this is not the same form of impurity and hence does not follow the same laws as the morning washing. The following chapter will discuss all the actions that cause impurity to reside and hence require washing of the hands, and their subsequent details.

Impurity versus dirt: There is a difference between impurity and filth or dirt. Not all actions that dirty the hands bring an impure spirit.

1. List of actions that require washing of the hands:^[1]

The following actions require one to wash his hands one time after performing them:

1. Arising from ones bed.
2. Leaving the bathroom.
3. Leaving the bathhouse.
4. Cutting ones nails.
5. Removing ones shoes with ones hands.
6. Touching ones feet or [covered] parts of body with ones hands.
7. Scratching ones head.
8. Touching lice and checking for lice.
9. Marital relations.
10. Visiting a cemetery.
11. Touching a corpse.
12. Being in the same room as a corpse.
13. Attending a funeral.
14. Getting a haircut.^[2]

2. The reason why the above actions require washing of the hands:^[3]

The impure spirit resides on one's hands after any of the above actions are done. It is for this reason that one is required to specifically wash his hands with water, as opposed to other cleaning methods, after any of the above actions are done [see next Halacha].

3. The detailed laws of the washing:[4]

One is to wash his hands with water [immediately^[5]] after the above mentioned actions are done.

Washing with water:[6] The hands must be cleaned specifically with water. It does not suffice to clean the hands in other ways [such as to rub them on something].^[7]

How many times must one pour water on the hands?[8] One does not need to pour the water on the hands three times [as is required when washing upon awakening, rather a single wash suffices]. [Nevertheless the custom of the world is to be stringent, after certain actions^[9], to wash three times inconsecutively, as will be explained in Halacha 4.]

What occurs if one does not wash his hands? If one did not wash his hands after any of the above actions, then if he is a Torah scholar, he will forget his learning. If he is a layman he will lose his mind.^[10]

Q&A

Must one wash his hands after the above actions even if he does not plan to learn Torah or Daven afterwards?^[11]

Yes. One needs to wash his hands after the above actions even if he does not plan to pray or learn Torah afterwards. The reason for this is because an impure spirit resides on one's hands after these actions are done and hence needs to be removed irrelevant of Torah learning or prayer.

May one learn Torah or say blessings prior to washing hands after the above actions?^[12]

The above washing is only in order to remove impurity, and does not prevent one from studying Torah or praying. [Nevertheless it is best to wash the hands immediately after the above actions, in order to remove the impurity right away, as stated above.] If however one dirtied his hands, such as through touching the normally covered parts of his body, or sleeping without being fully clothed^[13], or doing of the actions mentioned in Halacha 5B, then it is forbidden to learn Torah or recite Hashem's name prior to cleaning the hands on an item.

May one learn Torah while cutting his nails?^[14]

Yes.

Until where on the hand should one wash after the above actions?^[15]

The entire hand is to be washed until the wrist. At the very least it is to be washed until the knuckles. [The evil spirit is definitely not removed if one merely washes the tips of the fingers.]

How much water must one use?

Some Poskim^[16] rule one is to use a Revius of water.

Must one use a vessel to wash the hands after the above actions?

Some Poskim^[17] rule one is not required to wash his hands using a vessel, [and hence one may wash his hands by simply turning on the sink or dipping his hands in a vessel]. Others^[18] however rule one is required to use a vessel. Practically the custom is to wash with a vessel after using the bathroom.^[19]

Do any of the pre-morning washing restrictions apply prior to washing hands after the above actions?

Some Poskim^[20] rule one is to beware of all the morning restrictions mentioned in chapter 3 until the hands are washed. Other Poskim^[21] rule this is not necessary and so is the custom.

May one pour the washing water over food or vessels?^[22]

Some are particular not to wash the hands, after the above actions, over food or vessels, due to the impure spirit. Nevertheless there is no prohibition from the letter of the law to do so.^[23] If one plans to wash the dishes afterwards then certainly one may be lenient to do so.

May one use liquids other than water for this washing?^[24]

All water based drinks may be used to wash the hands. Non-water based beverages, such as pure fruit juices, milk and the like may only be used in a time of need.

If there is no water available should one clean his hands in other ways after doing the above actions?^[25]

Yes. One should clean his hands on a stone or the like. This applies even if one's hands did not become dirty. [Regarding those actions that it is accustomed to wash the hands three times afterwards seemingly one is to wipe his hands three times on the item he is using to clean with.^[26]]

Are children to be educated to wash their hands after the above mentioned actions?^[27]

Children above Chinuch: Children that have reached the age of understanding are to be educated to wash their hands after the above actions are performed. The teachers [and parents] of the child are to take special care to ensure that the children do not learn Torah and say blessings after scratching their heads or touching the covered areas.^[28] Nevertheless in order not to disturb the order of the class it suffices for the child to clean his hand on his desk and the like, and washing is not required at that moment.^[29]

Children below Chinuch: Children that are below the age of understanding [i.e. below Chinuch] are not obligated to have their hands washed after the above actions. See Chapter 3 Halacha 5 for further details on this matter.