

The Development of Washing Hands Before Eating Bread

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The ritual washing of hands before eating bread is a standard part of daily life for many traditional Jews. In this article we explore how this practice began and what factors led to the way it gained acceptance and evolved into its current form.

The obligation of washing hands before eating non-sacred food is described in the Mishnah and Talmud as part of a process of expanding Rabbinic rulings which led to applying concepts of priestly purification to the regular Israelite. In the Torah, washing hands is mandated for the priests when they enter the sanctuary to offer sacrifices:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Make a laver of copper and a stand of copper for it, for washing; and place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar. Put water in it and let Aaron and his sons wash their hands and feet [in water drawn] from it. When they enter the Tent of Meeting they shall wash with water that they may not die; or when they approach the altar to serve, to turn into smoke an offering by fire to the LORD, they shall wash their hands and feet that they may not die. It shall be a law for all time for them, for him and his offspring, throughout the ages. (Ex. 30:17-21)

This was later expanded, traditionally by King Solomon in First Temple times,¹ to require priests to wash their hands before eating any sacrificial foods. This is the earliest association of washing before eating

¹ TB *Eruvin* 21b. On the significance of this attribution, and the fact that it is found exclusively in Babylonian sources, see Yosef Tabory, *The Passover Ritual Throughout the Generations* (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 2002), p. 200, n. 30.

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something, a shift from the Biblical ordinance which required washing before entering the sanctuary. The other change is that only the washing of hands was required, not the feet.²

This rule in turn was expanded to priests washing their hands before eating *terumah*, the portion of agricultural produce given to the priests. “Solomon decreed regarding sacrificial foods, and they (Shammai, Hillel, and their students) decreed it also for *terumah*” (TB *Shabbat* 15a).

Mishnah, Zavim 5:12 states the Rabbinic ruling, “The following disqualify *terumah*: ... [unwashed] hands,” one of the eighteen decrees where the Sages ruled in accordance with Beit Shammai in TB *Shabbat* 13b. Since this was ultimately derived from the washing of both hands and feet before entering the sanctuary, *Sifri*, Numbers 116, contains a teaching specifically excluding an obligation to wash feet before a priest eats holy foods.

“As a service of gift have I given your priesthood (to you)” (Numbers 18:7). This equates the eating of holy things in the provinces (i.e., outside of the Temple) with the service of the Temple in the Temple...Rebbi says: “This equates the eating of holy foods in the provinces with the service of the Temple in the Temple”—Just as with the service of the Temple in the Temple, he first washes his hands and then serves, so, with the eating of holy foods in the provinces—he first washes his hands and then eats.—But perhaps just as there, he washes both his hands and his feet, so, here!—Would you say that? In a place (the Temple) where he must wash his hands and his feet (in that he is standing on holy ground), he does so; but in a place where he needs to wash only his hands, that is what he does.

This necessity of hand washing was explained based on the idea that “hands are busy” (TB *Shabbat* 14a); people’s hands tend to touch all kinds of things, and people do not always pay attention to what their hands touch. Because of this the Sages decreed general impurity on hands,³ which must be washed before eating *terumah*.⁴ This is stated out-

² Note that in Genesis 18:4, when Abraham hosts the three angels, although water is brought to them before the meal, “Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree,” there is no mention of washing the hands, only the feet.

³ For a general overview of the various approaches as to the nature of purity and impurity in the Bible and in Jewish thought, see Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, pp. 192-198.

⁴ This itself is explained in TB *Shabbat* 14a-14b as the culmination of a process, where at first only hands that came into contact with a sacred scroll were de-

right in TJ *Hagigah* 2:5: “Did they not decide about hands only that he (the priest) should separate from *terumah*? Since you tell him that his hands are impure in the second degree, he will separate from *terumah*.”

The next stage expanded hand washing to be required for the Levitical tithe,⁵ and to non-sacred food for those Israelites who chose to eat non-sacred food with the purity of sanctified food,⁶ “Who is an *am ha’aretz*? Anyone who does not eat his non-sacred produce in ritual purity; this is the statement of Rabbi Meir” (*Tosefta, Avodah Zarah* 3:10, TB *Gittin* 61b).

Hand washing was understood to be the first step when a person wanted to switch their status from being an *am ha’aretz* who isn’t relied upon in various ritual matters, to being considered a trusted *chaver*. “The Sages taught in a *beraita*: (An *am ha’aretz* who wishes to become a *chaver*) is accepted with regard to hands, and afterward he is accepted (as trustworthy) for purity in general. And if he says, I wish to accept only with regard to hands, he is accepted (for this). If he wishes to accept with regard to ritual purity but he does not accept upon himself with regard to hands, he is not accepted even for purity in general” (TB *Bekhorot* 30b). This is based on the understanding that a person is presumed to be stringent about making sure to wash his hands before handling pure items more so than purity in general, because hand washing is a relatively simple and easy act.

The final stage was to require hand washing for all Israelites before touching certain non-sacred foods.⁷ This expansion of purity laws is explained in TB *Hullin* 106a as related to the rule that priests must eat their sacred portion of *terumah* in a state of ritual purity, and the decree that

creed to be impure. On defilement from a sacred scroll, see Chaim Milikowsky, “Reflections on Hand-Washing, Hand-Purity and Holy Scripture in Rabbinic Literature,” in M. Poorthuis and J. Schwartz, eds., *Purity and Holiness: The Heritage of Leviticus* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 154-159; Timothy Lim, “The Defilement of the Hands as a Principle Determining the Holiness of Scriptures,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 61:2, October 2010, pp. 501-515.

⁵ See *Mishnah Chagigah* 2:5, TB *Chagigah* 19b.

⁶ See the detailed discussion in Gedalyahu Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977), pp. 205-235. A brief overview can be found in Menachem Mendel Landa, *Siddur Tz'luta d-Avraham*, vol. 2 (Tel-Aviv: Grafika, 1962), p. 457. See also Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, pp. 201-202, for a brief overview of the difference of opinion between Alon and Büchler regarding how to interpret the Rabbinic sources mentioned.

⁷ This itself started as a requirement only for priests, so that they will be accustomed to eat *terumah* in a state of purity. See TJ *Hagigah* 2:5 and *Korban HaEdah* there, s.v. *v-bi*.

they must wash their hands before eating *terumah*: “Rav Idi bar Avin says that Rav Yitzḥak bar Ashiyan says: Washing hands before eating non-sacred food is on account of *terumah*.” Although *terumah* may only be eaten by priests, this rule applies to everyone, so that priests will become accustomed to washing their hands before eating *terumah*. Furthermore, the rule applies to all situations, even when one is not aware that he is impure, since by Rabbinic decree hands being “busy” are automatically considered to have a second degree of impurity and must therefore be purified as a matter of course.⁸

Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh understood that this Rabbinic ruling was based on Lev. 15:11, “If one with a discharge, without having rinsed his hands in water, touches another person, that person shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening.” Here, in the context of the rules of a *zav* imparting impurity to other people, washing hands in water affords a certain level of purity. It is important to note that even though the verse speaks only of washing hands, a *zav* is understood by the Sages to require full body immersion, and that there is no Biblical concept of hand washing to remove impurity.⁹

The Talmud and Midrash contain homiletic interpretations of aspects of hand washing before a meal that recall the priestly washing from Exodus, preserving the link between hand washing before a meal and the original Biblical source of the practice.¹⁰ For example, in *Tanna d-Bei Eliyahu Rabbah* 15: “We have learned washing of the hands from the Torah, from Moshe and Aaron and his sons, as it says, “When they enter the Tent of Meeting they shall wash with water” (Ex. 30:20), and by the Israelites it states, “You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44). From here Rabban Gamliel would eat non-sacred food in purity, and he said to his students, ‘Not only to the priests was holiness given, but to priests, Levites and Israelites all, as it states, “Speak to the whole Israelite community...You shall be holy” (Lev. 19:2).’

There are numerous warnings about the importance of washing hands before a meal. For example:

⁸ See *Mishnah Berurah*, 158:1.

⁹ Thus, Rava explains that the verse is understood to be hinting to another situation where the person who doesn’t wash his hands is considered like someone who is impure (TB *Hullin* 106a). See also *Sifra* to this verse which interprets the washing of the hands here differently, an interpretation popularized by being quoted in Rashi.

¹⁰ Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994), p. 165.

“Rav Avira interpreted homiletically; sometimes in the name of Rabbi Ami and sometimes in the name of Rabbi Asi: Anyone who eats bread without washing his hands, it is as if he engaged in sexual intercourse with a prostitute, as it is stated: “For on account of a harlot a man is brought to a loaf of bread” (Proverbs 6:26)... Rabbi Zerika says that Rabbi Elazar says: Anyone who treats washing hands with contempt is uprooted from the world” (TB *Sotah* 4b).¹¹

There is evidence that there was opposition to the Rabbinic idea of hand washing, as the idea at the basis of this ruling—that one part of the body (the hands) is considered impure while the rest remains pure—was a novel one.¹² Rabbi Judah taught:

Whom did they excommunicate? Eliezer the son of Hanoch who cast doubt against the laws concerning the purifying of the hands. And 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. (*Mishnah, Eduyyot*, 5:6; TB *Berakhot* 19a)

Still, the practice itself appears to have been generally accepted and widespread.¹³ The practice is noted in the New Testament in Mark 7:3: “For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders.” While this may be an exaggerated generalization, the practice was already widespread enough in the time before the destruction of the Second Temple to be understood as a signifier of Pharisaic Jewish practice.¹⁴

¹¹ On the importance given to the washing of hands before a meal, see also the sources brought in Simcha Rabinowitz, *Piskei Teshuvot*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: 2002), 158:1, p. 335.

¹² Ephraim E. Urbach, Raphael Posner, trans., *The Halakhah: Its Sources and Development* (Tel Aviv: Modan, 1996), p. 21; Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, p. 199.

¹³ See also *Tosefta, Shabbat* 1:15 regarding the widespread observance of ritual purity in a non-hand washing context, regarding eating with impure people.

¹⁴ See Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World*, pp. 219-222, where he discusses the differences of opinion regarding when these rules were established. Regarding New Testament evidence of hand washing, see also John 2:6 where there are “six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification,” of hand washing before the wedding meal, indicating that the washing of hands before a meal was common in the first century. See Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 161. See also the discussion of the New Testament sources in Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, pp. 202-203.

Washing Hands for Cleanliness

A different reason for washing hands is given in 'TB *Berakhot* 53b:

Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak said... Rav Yehudah said that Rav said, and some say that it was taught in a *baraita*: It is stated: "And you shall sanctify yourselves" (Leviticus 20:26), these are the first waters (before the meal); "and you shall be holy," these are the final waters (after the meal); "for holy," this is oil (which one spreads on his hands); "am I, the Lord your God," this is the blessing (after eating).

The washing and anointing listed in this teaching are not related to the avoidance of ritual impurity or anything to do with *terumah*, but rather a general aspect of cleanliness associated with being holy and sanctified.

In halakhic discussions about hand washing, both reasons are given, as a safeguard for the purity of *terumah* and also for cleanliness.¹⁵ This combination of two reasons is understood by Ramban to be at the core of the Biblical injunction that priests must wash their hands before entering the sanctuary:

This washing was out of reverence for Him Who is On High, for whoever approaches the King's table to serve, or to touch 'the portion of the king's food, and of the wine which he drinks' (Daniel 1:5) washes his hands, because hands are busy.¹⁶

Both washing out of reverence and for ritual purposes are intertwined here. This dual reasoning for hand washing is reflective of the ambiguous nature of cleansing with water, where it isn't always clear if the purpose is a ritual or an aspect of cleanliness. This is seen in other contexts as well. For example, *Sifra, Aharei Mot* 5:3 considers whether the washing required of the person who sends off the scapegoat in Lev. 16:26 is for the purpose of purification or a "king's decree" unconnected to purification. Similarly, Josephus writes that the Essenes wash after

¹⁵ For example, *Tosafot* to *Hullin* 106a, s.v. mitzvah; *Arukh HaShulhan*, *Orah Hayyim* 158:2; *Mishnah Berurah* 158:1. See the discussion in Chaim Yosef David Azulai, *Birkei Yosef*, *siman* 158:2. Abraham ben David (Ravad) explains that the washing of hands not for reasons of purity is for health (רפואה). See his note to Maimonides, *Laws of Blessings* 6:2, and his work *Tamim Deim* (Lemberg: 1812), *siman* 66, p. 29.

¹⁶ *Commentary to Exodus* 30:19.

going to the bathroom “as if it defiled them,” while washing afterwards should only be related to cleanliness.¹⁷

Washing Hands Before Eating Bread

Based on this it would appear that washing hands should be obligatory before eating any produce from which *terumah* would be offered. However, in resolving a contradiction in *Mishnah, Hagigah* 2:5¹⁸ based on *Mishnah, Bikkurim* 2:1, TB *Hagigah* 18b brings the explanation of Rav Shimi bar Ashi that hand washing is only required for non-sacred foods when eating bread. Similarly, TJ *Berakhot* 8:2 reports the opinion that this hand washing only applies to bread: “Rav Huna said: Hand washing is only for bread.” The Talmud does not offer an explanation for why this rule would only apply to bread.

The students of the 13th-century Sage Rabbenu Yonah bring his explanation that:

The main rule of washing hands was established for bread which is held in the hands, since the washing is on account of *terumah* and most *terumah* is from bread, but for fruits washing the hands isn’t needed because *terumah* of fruits is not from the Torah, except for grapes after they have been made into wine and olives after they have been made oil, since we haven’t found a Biblical obligation of *terumah* except in three things, as it states, “the first of your new grain and wine and oil” (Deut. 18:4). But since drinks are not held in the hands, a person drinks them with a vessel, they don’t need a rule of washing...¹⁹

Thus, since it was understood that the standard way to eat grain is by making it into bread, the Rabbinic obligation of washing was only applied to bread, and not to any other foods made out of grains.²⁰

¹⁷ G.A. Williamson, trans., Josephus, *The Jewish War* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 2:149, p. 136. See also Zvi Groner, *Berakhot She-nishtakhu* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2003), pp. 137-140 regarding the practice of washing hands with a blessing after going to the bathroom. The ambiguity between purity and cleanliness is found in other acts as well. For example, circumcision, normatively understood in Judaism to function in a ritual covenantal role, was also explained by Philo as reflective of a concern with cleanliness. Philo, *The Special Laws* I, section 5. C.D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrikson, 2011), p. 534.

¹⁸ “One must wash his hands for non-sacred food, and for tithes and for *terumah*.”

¹⁹ Rabbenu Yonah, commentary to *Berakhot*, 41a.

²⁰ See Levush, *Orah Hayyim* 158:1, *Mishnah Berurah* 158:2.

Washing over bread only is the rule as found in the earliest halakhic works, for example the Geonic works, *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*,²¹ and *Halakhot Gedolot*, explicitly state that hand washing is only for bread, and is not mandated when eating the seven fruits, even though those are fruits that *terumah* must be separated from, and even wheat and barley prepared as a cooked dish that isn't bread don't require hand washing.²²

Based on this, the *Shulhan Arukh* rules: "When one comes to eat bread that we bless on it 'HaMotzi,' one should wash one's hands, even if one does not know that [one's hands] have any impurity, one should bless 'al netilat yadayim.' But bread that we do not bless 'HaMotzi' on it... and one does not establish a meal with it, one does not need to wash one's hands" (*Orah Hayyim* 158:1).²³

This ruling is somewhat unusual in light of the fact that obligating everyone to wash in order to remind the priests of their obligation to purify themselves before eating *terumah*, which is not eaten nowadays, appears to be a very wide-ranging decree, and yet it was severely limited to only apply to one kind of food made from the produce from which *terumah* is given, namely, bread. Furthermore, the concern for purity should have made hand washing required even for touching food without the intent of eating it, but the decree was limited to only eating situations.²⁴ The explanation of cleanliness could also have applied to many kinds of foods, but it too was limited to bread. Additionally, hand washing was required in all cases, even when a person was not aware that his hands came into contact with something impure. All of these factors contributed to the perception that hand washing was less an act associated with ritual purity and *terumah*, and more of a ritual preparation before sitting down to a meal, affording it an aura of sanctity.²⁵ This in turn was reflective of the original source of hand washing, that of the priests preparing themselves before working in the sanctuary.²⁶

²¹ Daniel Goldschmidt, ed., *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2004), p. 42.

²² *Sefer Halakhot Gedolot* (Warsaw: 1875), p. 18.

²³ Thus, hand washing became dependent on the halakhic situations surrounding the amount and type of bread that necessitates the *HaMotzi* blessing. See Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, pp. 206-212.

²⁴ *Arukh HaShulhan, Orah Hayyim* 158:1.

²⁵ See *Arukh HaShulhan, Orah Hayyim* 158:3, where he writes that "the sanctity is recognized" at these meals. See also Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, p. 232, where this idea is connected to the practice of washing the hands before making Kiddush.

²⁶ Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, pp. 200-201.

Washing Hands for Foods Dipped in Liquids

Another situation where hand washing was required is when eating food that comes in contact with certain liquids.²⁷ “Rabbi Elazar said that Rav Oshaya said: Anything that is dipped in a liquid before it is eaten requires the ritual of washing of the hands” (TB *Pesahim* 115a). This is based on the principle in *Mishnah Parah* 8:7: “Whatever causes *terumah* to be invalid causes liquid to become unclean in the first degree.” Since the Sages ruled that unclean hands cause *terumah* to become impure, the same ruling was applied to liquids, which, when touched by unclean hands have first degree impurity. Thus, liquids touched by unclean hands can then cause food to become impure.

This has been understood by the early Rabbinic authorities in one of two ways. Most understood it as part of the same ruling that hands must be washed before bread, in order to protect the sanctity of *terumah*.²⁸ It has also been understood as a safeguard to make sure that people do not ingest liquids that have first-degree impurity, which would render their bodies impure.²⁹ Based on the first reason, just as washing hands for bread is in force, so too washing hands when dipping foods into liquids should be in force. According to the second approach, however, that this is a special rule regarding limiting the ritual impurity of a person’s body, “we, who are not particular not to render ourselves impure and not to eat impure foods, we do not need that washing, and if one makes a blessing for this, it is a needless blessing.”³⁰

Because of this second opinion, the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Orah Hayyim* 158:4) rules that no blessing is made for the washing of hands before eating food dipped in liquid.³¹ This view is also the basis for the widespread practice not to wash hands in this situation, to functionally ignore this ruling.³² The well-known remnant of this practice is washing hands

²⁷ See *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim* 158:4 and the *Mishnah Berurah* there regarding which liquids this rule applies to.

²⁸ This is the first opinion brought in *Tosafot* there, s.v. *Kol*. This is brought in the name of Rashi, although it does not appear in the commentary of Rashi that is found here.

²⁹ This is the second opinion brought in *Tosafot* there, s.v. *Kol*.

³⁰ End of *Tosafot*, s.v. *Kol*, printed on TB *Pesahim* 115b. See the discussion of the background to this approach and its subsequent development in Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, pp. 224-229.

³¹ For a discussion of the various views regarding saying a blessing here, see Heinrich Guggenheimer, *The Scholar's Haggadah* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1995), p. 231.

³² *Mishnah Berurah* 158:20. See Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, pp. 240-241.

without a blessing before eating the dipped vegetable at the Passover Seder, retained from Temple times when it was important to remain ritually pure to be able to partake of the Pesah sacrifice.³³

Washing Hands for Fruit

We have seen that washing hands due to concerns about *terumah* was limited to bread, and the concerns about hands causing impurity to liquids only applied to foods dipped in liquid. Therefore, regular fruit, normally eaten dry in the time of the Sages would not require washing.³⁴ TB *Hullin* 106a states:

Rabbi Elazar says that Rabbi Oshaya says: Washing the hands for fruit is only due to cleanliness... Rava said to them: This practice is not an obligation nor a mitzvah, but merely optional... Rav Nahman said: One who washes his hands before eating fruit is nothing other than one of the arrogant.

This ruling was codified in the *Shulhan Arukh*, “Someone who washes for fruit is one of the arrogant. Regarding meat, there are those who from their words it appears that even though its juices are moist on it, its law is like fruits. Cooked grains that are dried are also considered like fruits” (*Orach Hayyim* 158:5). R. Moshe Isserles notes there that one is only considered arrogant “specifically when he washes as an obligation, but if he washed them for cleanliness because his hands were not clean, this is permitted.”

Washing Hands for Meals in the Classical World

It has been noted that some Jewish meal practices found in Rabbinic literature mirror the practices of Greco-Roman culture. For example, *Tosefta*, *Berakhot* 4:8 brings a long description of how meals are to be conducted.

What is the order of a meal? Guests come in and sit down on top of benches and on top of soft seats until all [guests] come in. [After] all [guests] came in, and they (i.e., the servants) have given them [water to wash] hands, every one of them washes one hand. [When] they (i.e., the servants) poured them a cup [of wine], each

³³ Heinrich Guggenheimer, *The Scholar's Haggadah* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1995), p. 231. For a halakhic discussion of why this remained, see *Haggadah Shel Pesach: Mesivta* (Oz v-Hadar, 2014), p. 94.

³⁴ Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, p. 206.

one [of the guests] makes a blessing [for the wine] himself. [When] they (i.e., the servants) brought them appetizers, each one [of the guests] makes a blessing [for the appetizers] himself. [After the guests] have gotten up [from their temporary seats, moved to the main eating hall] and reclined [on sofas], they (i.e., the servants) gave them [water to wash their] hands [again]. Even though he already washed one hand, [still] he [has to] wash both of his hands [again]. [After] they (i.e., the servants) poured them a cup [of wine again], even though he already made a blessing on the first [cup of wine], he makes [another] blessing on the second [cup of wine]. [After] they (i.e., the servants) brought in front of them [more] appetizers, even though he [already] made a blessing on the first [set of appetizers], he makes a [new] blessing on the second [set of appetizers], but [this time] one [person] makes a blessing for all of them. [A person] who comes [late] after three appetizers [have been served] does not have permission to enter [the dining hall].

While the blessings at this meal are Rabbinic, the overall structure of the meal is Greco-Roman. Saul Lieberman notes that “this ruling describes the meal customs of the aristocracy in ancient times, and included here are a number of details that we shouldn’t derive legal conclusions from, since their origin is rooted in the manners of the place and not halakhah. And in general, the order is consistent with the meal customs of the Romans and also those of the Greeks in the latter period.”³⁵

Many examples of the washing of hands before a meal are found in Greek literature.³⁶ Athenaeus of Naucratis, among the dining customs mentioned in his *Deipnosophistae* (early 3rd century CE), notes the washing of hands before eating on multiple occasions. Illustrating the importance of hand washing before a meal, he begins his Book IX with a quote from the *Odyssey* (4:213): “And let us once more think of our supper, and let them pour water over our hands; and in the morning there will be tales,” indicating that Athenaeus will begin his speech on food by pouring water on the hands, thus evoking the prologue to the meal.³⁷ In this section Athenaeus discusses different Greek expressions for the

³⁵ Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah, Zeraim*, part I (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1955), p. 62. Numerous examples are brought there in his notes to this *Tosefta*.

³⁶ See René Ginouvès, *Balanentike: Recherches Sur Le Bain Dans L’Antiquité Grecque* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1962), p. 153.

³⁷ Robin Nadeau, *Les Manières de Table Dans le Monde Gréco-Romain* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), p. 200.

washing of hands before and after eating,³⁸ and quotes Demonicus writing of ill-mannered Boeotians who do not wash before the meal in their haste to begin eating.³⁹ In Aristophanes' (c. 446 – c. 386 BCE) play *The Wasps* we find Bdelycleon saying, "Water is poured over our hands; the tables are spread; we sup."⁴⁰ The poet Xenophanes (c. 570 – c. 478 BCE) also notes that the meal begins once "the floor is clean, as are everyone's hands."⁴¹ In the *Odyssey* (10:182), the sailors make sure to wash their hands before eating even on a deserted beach: "they washed their hands, and made ready a glorious feast."⁴² Hand washing before a meal is also found in Roman works, for example the *Satyricon* (written around 54-68 CE), describing preparations for a meal: "At last when we sat down, and boys from Alexandria poured water cooled with snow over our hands."⁴³ Providing water for hand washing was expected of a good host.⁴⁴ These practices remained a stable element of Greco-Roman meals over long periods of time.⁴⁵

As with the Rabbinic decree, there appears to be a ritual element to the washing of the hands before a meal, in addition to cleanliness. This can be seen on two occasions in the *Odyssey* where the hands are washed before eating even right after bathing, considered typical meal scenes,⁴⁶ "And when the maids had bathed them and anointed them with oil...they sat down on chairs beside Menelaus, son of Atreus. Then a handmaid brought water for the hands in a fair pitcher of gold, and

³⁸ Robin Nadeau, *Les Manières de Table*, p. 201. C.D. Yonge, trans., *The Deipnosophists or, Banquet of the Learned, of Athenaeus* (London: H.G. Bohn, 1853), Book IX, § 79, pp. 646-647.

³⁹ Robin Nadeau, *Les Manières de Table*, p. 200. C.D. Yonge, trans., *The Deipnosophists or, Banquet of the learned, of Athenaeus* (London: H.G. Bohn, 1853), Book IX, § 79, p. 647.

⁴⁰ Line 1216. See Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 27.

⁴¹ Robin Nadeau, "Table Manners" in *A Companion to Food in the Ancient World*, John Wilkins and Robin Nadeau, eds. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 270. Note the connection between a clean floor and washing hands in *Mishnah*, *Berakhot* 8:4.

⁴² Ginouvès, *Balanautike*, p. 151.

⁴³ Michael Heseltine, trans., Petronius: *Satyricon* (and) Seneca: *Apocolyntosis* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1913), p. 47.

⁴⁴ Noel Robertson, *Religion and Reconciliation in Greek Cities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 217.

⁴⁵ Robin Nadeau, *Les Manières de Table*, p. 202.

⁴⁶ Andrew Dalby, "Men, Women and Slaves" in *A Companion to Food in the Ancient World*, John Wilkins and Robin Nadeau, eds. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 202.

poured it over a silver basin for them to wash, and beside them drew up a polished table.”⁴⁷ Note that in these two cases in the *Odyssey* where the characters are described as washing their hands before a meal even right after bathing, the meal is specifically described as beginning with bread.⁴⁸

Even the original Rabbinic decree regarding purification—that of the priests having to wash before eating of sacrifices—may be seen as having a Greek counterpart, as Greek ritual sacrifices are only acceptable if they come from people with clean hands,⁴⁹ an indicator of purity in Greek literature.⁵⁰ This is distinct from the Torah law that both the hands and feet must be washed before entering the sanctuary (Ex. 30:17-21), but is similar to the first stage of Rabbinic expansions requiring hand washing before eating sacrificial foods. Sometimes this purification is a general sprinkling of water, as mentioned by Eupolis (c. 446-411 BCE) in his play *Aíges* (“Goats”), that a firebrand taken from the altar where a sacrifice was being offered was dipped in water, which was then sprinkled on the bystanders to purify them.⁵¹ But far more common in Greek literature are examples of hand washing specifically as demonstration of ritual purity.⁵² For example, in the *Odyssey* (3:439-440): “And Stratius and goodly Echephron led the heifer by the horns, and Aretus came from the chamber, bringing them water for the hands in a basin embossed with flowers.” Similarly, in Aristophanes’ play *Peace*, the hero, Trygaeus, in his preparations for a sacrifice washes his hands.⁵³ In the play *Seven Against Thebes* (467 BCE), the chorus is concerned that the leader of Thebes would not make acceptable sacrifices, which are noted to require clean hands.⁵⁴ This was such a classic element of sacrifice that the disastrous and sacrilegious rejected sacrifice on the Island of the Sun in the *Odyssey* makes sure to leave out the washing of hands to demonstrate that this sacrifice was not performed properly.⁵⁵

Certain halakhic matters regarding the washing of hands are mirrored in Greek practice as well. One of the four exemptions made by the

⁴⁷ *Odyssey* 4:49-54, 17:85-94. Nadeau, *Les Manières de Table*, p. 200.

⁴⁸ *Odyssey* 4:55, 17:94.

⁴⁹ F.S. Naiden, *Smoke Signals for the Gods: Ancient Greek Sacrifice from the Archaic through Roman Periods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 17.

⁵⁰ Naiden, *Smoke Signals*, p. 106.

⁵¹ Yonge, trans., *Deipnosophists*, Book IX, § 76, p. 645.

⁵² Naiden, *Smoke Signals*, pp. 147, 153, 154.

⁵³ Sarah Hitch, “Sacrifice,” in *A Companion to Food in the Ancient World*, Wilkins and Nadeau, eds., p. 339.

⁵⁴ Naiden, *Smoke Signals*, pp. 17, 104.

⁵⁵ Naiden, *Smoke Signals*, p. 29.

Sages for soldiers in a military camp is that they do not have to wash their hands before eating (*Mishnah, Eruvin* 1:10). When explaining why hand washing appears in the Odyssey but not the Iliad, Athenaeus states that the warriors stationed in the Trojan plain weren't able to wash before meals, while the characters in the Odyssey are in a peacetime situation and were able to do so.⁵⁶ The *Satyricon* describes using wine to wash hands in the absence of water,⁵⁷ a matter of halakhic debate (*Shulchan Arukh, Orach Hayyim*, 160:12). The Greeks also had a custom of washing hands at the end of the meal,⁵⁸ reminiscent of *mayim aḥaronim*.⁵⁹ Additionally, in Greek literature, the gestures and utensils of hand washing before meals are very similar to the purifications performed before prayers,⁶⁰ reminiscent of the similarity and need to point out distinctions between the washing of hands in the morning before prayers and before meals noted in the *Shulchan Arukh* (*Orach Hayyim* 4:1, 4:7). Even the term *netilat yadayim* has been connected to the Greek term for washing hands at the start of a meal.⁶¹

A connection to Greco-Roman dining practices also sheds light on the Rabbinic ruling to wash hands before eating foods dipped in liquids. The two courses of the ancient Greek formal meal were the *depinon*, where the meal itself was eaten, and the *symposion*, which was the drinking party afterwards. In the Roman period an appetizer course was added to the beginning of the meal, called *propoma* by the Greeks and *gustaito* or *promulsis* by the Romans.⁶² This is considered the introduction of the idea of an appetizer buffet.⁶³ As well as drinking, this part of the meal included various hors d'oeuvres which were dipped to add flavor⁶⁴:

⁵⁶ Nadeau, *Les Manières de Table*, p. 200.

⁵⁷ Heseltine, trans., Petronius: *Satyricon* (and) Seneca: *Apocolyntosis*, p. 51.

⁵⁸ See the references given in Ginouvès, *Balanentike*, p. 153. This is a subject deserving its own article. Note also the Greek approaches to dealing with the hand towel used to dry the hands noted there on pages 154-155, a subject discussed in *Mishnah Berakhot* 8:3.

⁵⁹ For the development of this practice, see Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, pp. 244-249.

⁶⁰ Ginouvès, *Balanentike*, p. 152.

⁶¹ See Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, p. 199, n. 29; p. 217.

⁶² Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 27, 303.

⁶³ Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *World Food: An Encyclopedia of History, Culture and Social Influence from Hunter Gatherers to the Age of Globalization* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2013), p. 34.

⁶⁴ David Arnow, "Passover for the Early Rabbis" in Lawrence Hoffman, David Arnow, eds., *My People's Passover Haggadah: Traditional Texts, Modern Commentaries*, Vol. 1 (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008), p. 17. For

“diners often dipped individual bites of food in salt, vinegar, brine, or other sauces made from a mixture of the above, or in pastes.”⁶⁵ For example, the Roman *gustatio* included eggs, lettuce, mushrooms, and radishes.⁶⁶ Hand washing before eating this course parallels the Rabbinic hand washing before eating foods dipped in liquids.

Why Hand Washing?

There are various approaches among scholars as to what motivated the Sages to mandate hand washing for everyone before eating bread. The reasons given in the Talmud, concern for the sanctity of *terumah* as well as general cleanliness, are certainly the direct causes of the institution of hand washing; the question is conceptually what this was meant to accomplish.⁶⁷ One approach is that it was intended “as an extension of purity; that at the outset they were observed only by the pious and scrupulous, but in the course of time they grew into a general observance and established Halakhot.”⁶⁸ According to this, the goal of the Sages was to increase the idea of ritual purity among the general population. A somewhat different approach is that the intent of the Sages was to apply the idea of priestly sanctification and Temple practices to all Israelites in their daily lives.⁶⁹ Either way, it was important to the Sages that these practices were practical and not overly difficult to observe.⁷⁰ Notwithstanding the scholarly debate as to why the Pharisees were interested in

the specific Greek dip that continues as the modern *haroset* at the Seder, see Susan Weingarten, “What is the Greek for Haroset?” in B. Isaac, Y. Shahar, eds., *Judea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome: Jews in Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), pp. 16-22.

⁶⁵ S. Douglas Olson, Alexander Sens, *Archestratos of Gela: Greek Culture and Cuisine in the Fourth Century BCE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 102. See also pp. 47, 73, 161.

⁶⁶ Snodgrass, *World Food*, p. 34.

⁶⁷ See the overview and discussion in John C. Poirier, “Why Did the Pharisees Wash their Hands?” *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 47:2 (Autumn 1996), pp. 217-233.

⁶⁸ Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World*, p. 231.

⁶⁹ Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World*, pp. 233-234. See also Hannah Harrington, “Did the Pharisees Eat Ordinary Food in a State of Ritual Purity?” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 26, no. 1 (1995), p. 52, “it seems...logical that many of the laws which center around the Temple actually stem from Temple times when the matter would have been a daily concern.” See also the discussion in Milikowsky, “Reflections on Hand-Washing” in Poorthuis and J. Schwartz, eds., *Purity and Holiness*, p. 162.

⁷⁰ Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World*, pp. 234-235, particularly note 114.

establishing the washing of hands before eating,⁷¹ it is clear that in the context of this being a common practice in the Greco-Roman world, this particular act would be easy to mandate. This also explains why washing hands for fruit was never mandated, as these foods were consumed as snacks and not a meal and therefore did not have the cultural practice of washing associated with them. The fact that washing before eating foods dipped in liquids is not a common cultural practice goes a long way to explain why it is generally ignored even by traditional Jews today, halakhic justifications notwithstanding.

Adolf Büchler posits that the rules of hand washing may have begun as general rules of cleanliness and etiquette, as seen in the context of the disputes between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel in chapter eight of *Berakhot*, which also include washing hands (*Mishnah, Berakhot* 8:2) and later developed into Halakhic rulings.⁷² Similarly, Ephraim Urbach states: “Notwithstanding all the developments through which the custom of *netilat yadayim* passed, its primary origin was in the fixed forms of etiquette which were practiced at meals.”⁷³ We have already noted the ambiguous nature of hand washing reflected in the two reasons given for it by the Sages, purity and cleanliness. This ambiguity is even more pronounced when the practice is also found in other cultures, in this case Greco-Roman, who have their own conceptual understanding of the purpose of hand washing.⁷⁴

These etiquette rules were transformed by the Sages into legal requirements, something not seen regarding other such rules. For example, the teaching in *Tosefta, Berakhot* 4:8 that “[A person] who comes [late] after three appetizers [have been served] does not have permission to enter [the dining hall].” The reason is that hand washing was deliberately chosen because it also had an aspect of purity connected to it, going back to the priestly service in the Sanctuary. The Sages picked a relatively commonplace and widespread meal custom known in the Classical milieu and invested it with an additional layer of meaning. “The rabbis did not completely ignore the meal customs of their wider Greek and Roman world. Like early Christians, they preserved the overall structure of meals in their broader environment but reinterpreted or changed the

⁷¹ See the overview and discussion in John C. Poirier, “Why Did the Pharisees Wash their Hands?” pp. 217-233.

⁷² Adolf (Avraham) Büchler, *Am Ha-Aretz HaGelili* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1964), Israel Eldad, trans., pp. 96-98.

⁷³ Urbach and Posner, trans., *The Halakhah*, p. 21.

⁷⁴ Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, pp. 197-198.

meanings of specific elements.”⁷⁵ Most famously, this has been noted regarding the structural similarities between the Passover Seder and the Greek symposium.⁷⁶ As seen above, TB *Berakhot* 53b teaches that even the aspect of cleanliness was connected to sanctification. In this manner what was once part of washing up to get ready to eat was transformed into a ritual act with sacred meaning.

It is of interest that scholars of Classical Greece understand that hand washing before meals began in ancient times as a ritual act associated with sacrifices and over time became secularized and viewed as a matter of cleanliness and good manners, the association of hand washing in the Classical period being more with physical pleasure and comfort.⁷⁷ This is the opposite of the Rabbinic process which took an aspect of cleanliness and elevated it to have ritual significance.⁷⁸ In this way a common matter of etiquette was recast as a ritual of purification and holiness.⁷⁹ ❧

⁷⁵ Jordan Rosenblum, “Jewish Meals in Antiquity” in *A Companion to Food in the Ancient World*, Wilkins and Nadeau, eds., p. 350.

⁷⁶ There is a large amount of research on this. See S. Stein, “The Influence of Symposia Literature on the Literary Form of the Pesah Haggadah.” *Journal of Jewish Studies* (1957) 8:1-2, pp. 13-44; Baruch Bokser, *The Origins of the Seder* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), chapter 5; Tabory, *Passover Ritual*, pp. 367-377; Richard Hidary, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric: Sophistic Education and Oratory in the Talmud and Midrash* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 69-73.

⁷⁷ Ginouvès, *Balanautike*, p. 155.

⁷⁸ Note also that ritual hand washing is later found in later Christian sources. For example, it mentioned as part of the *Convivium religiosum* of Erasmus, “that we may approach the table with hands and hearts both clean” (*Colloquies* 55). See Thomas M. Greene, “Ritual and Text in the Renaissance,” in Jonathan Hart, ed., *Reading the Renaissance: Culture, Poetics, and Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 26-26.

⁷⁹ Hand washing before meals would become a staple of “good manners,” see for example the 15th-century instructional French works for children on proper behavior, “La manière de se contenir à table,” p. 3, “wash your hands before dinner” and “Les Contenances de la table,” p. 9, “wash your hands on rising, at dinner, and at supper,” in F.J. Furvinall, ed., *Manners and Meals in Olden Time* (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1867).