

What's the Truth about... *Washing One's Hands after Leaving the Washroom?*

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception¹: Upon exiting a bathroom, one should wash by pouring water from a *keli* (utensil) three times on each hand.

Fact: There is an obligation to wash after using the bathroom (*Shulchan Aruch OC 4:18*), but three times is not specified, and a *keli* is not required.

Background: There are many reasons for *halachically* mandated hand washings including cleanliness, removal of rabbinically imposed *tumah* (ritual impurity), removal of *ruach ra* (bad spirit) and emulation of the priestly washing in the Temple. In order to determine the laws of a particular washing, the purpose of the washing needs to be clarified. For example, the *Tur (OC 4)* observes that one washes upon arising in the morning in order to remove a *ruach ra*; he requires that one pour water three times over each hand because of the potent nature of this *ruach ra*. The *Beit Yosef (OC 4)* notes that the only washing requiring a *keli* is the one before a meal, since this washing is designed to remove *tumah* and thus contains various

stringencies. The *Beit Yosef* adds that a *keli* may also be preferred for the morning washing,² but he makes no mention of the need for a *keli* when washing after leaving the bathroom.

The earliest source for washing upon exiting the bathroom is a *mishnah (Yoma 28a)* that states that in the Beit Hamikdash there was a rule requiring a Kohen to immerse in the mikvah after he defecated and to sanctify (i.e. wash) his hands and feet with water from the Temple's laver after he urinated.³ The *mishnah* seems to portray this as a rule unique to the Temple. The Talmud (*Yoma 29b-30a*) explains that the requirement for washing hands and feet is solely for hygienic purposes. Rabbeinu Tam (ibid, Tosafot Yeshanim, s.v. mitzvah) deduces that if a Kohen urinated but his hands remain clean, there is no obligation to wash.

All the sources that mention a non-Beit Hamikdash-related washing after the bathroom are post-Talmudic.⁴ These sources include the Tashbetz, Kolbo and Mordechai, all of whom are cited by the *Beit Yosef (OC 4)*. Other than cleanliness, there are two reasons discussed for the washing. Similar to washing before *davening (OC 92:4)*,

some view it as a preparation for reciting the *berachah Asher Yatzar* after using the bathroom (see *Tur OC 165* and commentaries). Additionally, according to the *Mishnah Berurah (4:40; 227:11)* and others, merely entering a *beit hakisei* (an old-fashioned as opposed to a modern bathroom) imposes a *ruach ra*, which must be removed by washing.⁵ However, the *mishnah* regarding the Temple referred to above presumably refers to a Kohen who took care of his needs in a bathroom,⁶ and yet the Talmud makes no mention of a *ruach ra*. Furthermore, many authorities argue that a modern, clean, multi-purpose bathroom does not convey a *ruach ra* even if an old-fashioned bathroom does.⁷

The *Aruch Hashulchan (OC 7:3)* summarizes these sources as follows: If, while using the facilities, one did not touch anything dirty or any part of his body that is normally covered, there is no requirement to wash at all. Nonetheless, the custom is to wash, either because of cleanliness or because it is proper in order to say *Asher Yatzar*. He observes that some have the custom to wash thrice, but the *Beit Yosef* does not rule that way. The *Aruch Hashulchan* makes

no mention of a *keli* or *ruach ra*.

According to those who hold that the washing is for cleanliness or in preparation for *Asher Yatzar*, there are few ritual requirements. Similar to the washing prior to *davening*, such a washing requires neither a *keli* nor three washings. According to the *Mishnah Berurah (4:38)*, which holds that the washing is due to a *ruach ra*, the washing still has fewer rules than other ritual washings—such as for bread—and does not require a *keli (Mishnah Berurah 165:2)*. The washing after using the bathroom is more akin to a washing for hygienic reasons, such as is required after removing one's shoes or cutting one's hair (*Shulchan Aruch OC 4:18*). Because the *ruach ra* of a bathroom is less potent than that which exists upon awakening (*Sh'arei Teshuvah 4:12*), only one washing is required for the former, while three are required for the latter (*Magen Avraham 7:1*).⁸

The *Yalkut Yosef* (vol. 3, p. 96, parenthetical note based on the teachings of Rav Ovadiah Yosef) similarly indicates that washing after using the bathroom does not require a utensil.⁹ This was stated explicitly by Harav Ben Tzion Abba Shaul (*Ohr Letzion*, vol. 2, p. 25), who reportedly washed from a faucet even when a utensil was readily available, in order to emphasize this point.¹⁰

Rav Yitzchak Yaakov Weiss (*Minchat Yitzchak 5:96*) observes that while most authorities state that a *keli* is not required, in deference to the minority opinion, it is a good idea to use a *keli*, although he reiterates that it is not required.

In the yeshivah world washing with a utensil after using the bathroom is a widespread practice, possibly based on the custom of the Chazon Ish as publicized in *Ta'ama D'kra*.¹¹ However, this custom seems to have been a personal stringency¹² of the Chazon Ish and not intended as a *halachah* for the masses.

As has been demonstrated, the letter of the law does not require a *keli* or three washings upon exiting a bathroom; however, many are strict regarding one or both of these things and they have a basis for their stringency. It would seem

that the only practice without a basis is washing with a *keli in the bathroom*.

Those who require a *keli* do so out of concern for a *ruach ra* in a bathroom. If that is the case, then the washing cannot be done in the bathroom itself. Thus, washing with a *keli* in the bathroom is like one who is *tovel vesheretz beyado* (immerses in the mikvah with an impure insect in his hand)—an oxymoron. However, those who wash because of cleanliness without a *keli* may certainly do so in the bathroom.

Notes

1. I thank Rav Reuven Halpern for help with the research on this topic.

2. The Rema (*OC 4:7*) notes that post-facto (*bidieved*) in the morning one does fulfill the requirement without a *keli*. For a lengthy treatment of the morning washing see Martin L. Gordon, "Netilat Yadayim Shel Shacharit: Ritual of Crisis or Dedication?" *Gesher*, vol. 8 (5741): 36-72. I thank Rav Andrew Schein for pointing out this source.

3. I recall once seeing another *halachah* about hand washing (not pertaining to the Temple) that involved a distinction between the above-stated bodily functions. However, I have been unable to locate the particular halachic source.

4. The Gra (*OC 4*, s.v. *v'ha'yotzei*) cites *Sukkah 46a* (a story of Rava washing upon emerging from the bathroom before putting on *tefillin*), and *Bava Kama 17a* (a similar story about Rav Yochanan) as precedents. However, they are not absolute precedents since both of these stories are descriptive not prescriptive, and involve subsequent donning of *tefillin*.

5. The *Mishnah Berurah* acknowledges that post-facto one may say *berachot* without washing off this *ruach ra*. For instance, if one is in a bathroom and hears thunder, he may immediately exit and, assuming his hands are clean, say the appropriate *berachah* without washing (*Shulchan Aruch, OC 227:3; Mishnah Berurah 227:11*). See also *Yabia Omer 4:4:28*.

6. This assumption is based on a

mishnah (Tamid 26a) that states that the Beit Hamikdash was equipped with a *beit kisei shel kavod*.


7. For sources and a detailed discussion of laws relating to the bathroom, see my article "Your Camp Shall Be Holy: Halacha And Modern Plumbing" in *The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, (spring 1995): 29:89-128.

8. See, however, *Mishnah Berurah 4:39* that states that some people have a stringency to wash three times after the bathroom (and after leaving a cemetery the custom is to wash three times with a *keli*). See Rabbi Akiva Eiger's comment to *Magen Avraham, OC 4:17; Kaf Hachaim 4:66; Shl" a, Sha'ar Ha'otiot, ot tet (taharah)* and *Yalkut Yosef*, vol. 1, p. 16, par. 20 who support washing three times. See *Shulchan Aruch HaRav, OC 4:18* who says explicitly that only one washing is required.

9. The Rema (*OC 4:7*) notes that a utensil is not even crucial for the morning washing. It is only required for washing before a meal. The source for requiring it in the morning is *She'eilot Uteshuvot HaRashba 1:191*.

10. See "Washing from a Faucet after Coming out of the Bathroom" (Hebrew), *Ohr Torah Journal*, vol. 306 (Tammuz 5753-1993), *siman 137*, p. 723-729, 947-948. Much of this material and additional proofs that a *keli* is not needed are developed in this article. See also Chief Rabbi Yonah Metzger, *Mi'yam Ha'halachah 3:3* for other sources that support this.

11. Written by his nephew Rav Chaim Kanievsky (5733), 107. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach was also accustomed to wash using a utensil and suggested others do likewise (see *Halichot Shlomo*, vol. 1, p. 249, notes *mem* and 90). However, it is explicitly referred to as a "hiddur."

12. Based on the fact that it is included in a list of personal stringencies of the Chazon Ish that include not looking at pictures on Shabbat, eating *shalosh seudot* on Yom Tov and advising women in the late stages of pregnancy to be near a hospital on Shabbat. 

Rabbi Dr. Zivotofsky is on the faculty of the Brain Science Program at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.