

## "Halacha Sources" Highlights - Why We Wash Our Hands After Cutting Our Nails Or Hair

**Question:** What is the source for washing our hands after cutting our nails or hair, and what is the meaning behind it?

**Answer:** Most of the Halacha sources on this topic are very vague as to the "meaning" (although some do elaborate regarding *practical details* - when and how to wash). Therefore, we will have to be somewhat more "creative" in our discussion than usual. As is our practice, we will divide it into three steps:

- (1) the basic *sources* for washing one's hands after cutting the hair or nails,
- (2) *supplementary information* about the "evil spirit" and banishing it,
- (3) an attempt to show *meaning* which we can relate to.

### Part 1: The Basic *Sources* for Washing One's Hands After Cutting the Hair or Nails

The Gemara in *Pesachim* (111b) says: "One who eats cress and does not wash his hands will be in fear for thirty days, [112a] one who has blood taken "from the shoulders" and does not wash his hands will be in fear for seven days, one who cuts [lit. "removes"] his hair and does not wash his hands will be in fear for three days, [and] one who trims [lit. "removes"] his nails and does not wash his hands will be in fear for one day, and he [will] not know what he is afraid of."

The Tur (O.C. *siman* 4) focuses on the subject of one's having to wash his hands in the morning before he may pray the morning Service of *Shacharis*, and how to make sure it accomplishes the removal of the "evil spirit" [*ruach ra'ah*] which the Gemara associates with this. The *Beis Yosef* there cites more Halachic sources regarding related necessities for washing one's hands, and one of those sources is the above Gemara in *Pesachim*. He also cites authorities who *list* occasions calling for washing one's hands, and they include the occasion of one having trimmed his nails.

Accordingly, the *Shulchan Aruch* (4:18 and 4:19) includes having trimmed one's nails in his list of occasions after which one must wash his hands, and he quotes the entire substance of the Gemara in *Pesachim* (except for the occasion of having eaten cress).

[The omission of eating cress definitely needs explanation, as does the distinction between trimming nails (which *is* mentioned in the "list") and the other items from *Pesachim* (which are not). However, as of now I do not have such explanations, and we will proceed to focus on other issues.]

### Part 2: *Supplementary Information* about the "Evil Spirit" and Banishing It

At this point we can already see that there are different categories of "evil spirits": In the case of the standard morning washing, the Halacha sources are all very exacting as to the methods that are

necessary for removing the "evil spirit", such as washing three times while alternating hands, and using a proper vessel; all this may not be required in the case of having cut one's hair or nails, possibly indicating that it is a "weaker evil spirit". In addition to this, the *Sha'arei Teshuvah* [R. Chaim Mordechai Margalios, Poland, ~1770 - 1820] notes that some of the other occasions which are listed as calling for washing one's hands involve Halachic "ritual" contamination (not just a "spiritual" force) - such as forms of contact with the dead.

The *Mishnah Berurah* cites the *Pri Megadim* [R. Yosef ben Meir of Frankfurt, ~1727 - 1792], who cites the *Eliyahu Rabbah* [R. Eliyahu Shapiro, Poland, 1660 - 1712], who cites the *Seder HaYom* [*Rabbeinu* Moshe Machir, Israel, ~1550] who wrote that one must *hurry* to remove these "evil spirits". (In other words, the necessity is not just for studying Torah - or even for *prayer* which is technically the main subject of *siman* 4.)

The authorities write that water is definitely required for removing "evil spirits", and the way the *Pri Megadim* explains it is as follows: "There are two types of 'dirtyness': One involves "filthy places", and requires water to eliminate the "evil spirit" [which "rests" there]. The other is when [that which needs to be washed off] is merely "something dirty" like mud - which merely needs to be cleaned off (*however* that can be done). Additionally, it appears that most of the authorities hold that it is the one whose hands or hair were cut that must wash, not the cutter (if, for example, the two are not one and the same).

### Part 3: An Attempt To Show *Meaning* Which We Can Relate To

There are many spiritual forces in the world, some which are conducive to serving Hashem, and others which relate to the darker and more selfish side of a person and therefore hinder our Service. It seems from the *Pri Megadim* that evil forces may be able to "connect" with the "filthy places" in a person's body, i.e. the hair and nails.

For an additional explanation, perhaps we can compare our subject to the Mishnah in *Ahalos* (3:3) in which we see that hair and nails (and teeth) are not in "the main part of the person" [with respect to transmitting the contamination of a dead body], presumably because they do not carry the person's "living spirit" - ot at least not to the same degree as those parts of the body which are more "alive".

Maybe the reason that people's "nervous habits", which might be described as an attempt to establish "our own control over our world", involve these three body parts, is because these body parts "relate better" to those negative spiritual forces for selfishness and unwillingness to let Hashem run the world.

Similarly, just as if we saw off the plank extending from a boat which someone is sitting on, he will grab with all his strength at the side of the boat, so too if one *cuts off* his hair or nails these forces "grab with all their strength" at the closest *living* flesh they can get to, the fingers of one's hand, and therefore we must use the purifying power of water to banish them so they will not affect us spiritually. (This could also be why after sleeping, when negative spiritual forces can "relate better" to our body because its "living spirit" is not "living" in it - whereas when he awakes this is reversed and they are "pushed away" - they similarly "grab on" to the ends of one's fingers and thus necessitate washing one's hands in the morning.)

Therefore, when we wash after cutting our hair or nails, let us remember that our bodies are intended to be used as a tool for Service of - and submission to - Hashem, who truly controls the world, and let us be grateful to Him for giving us the knowledge and the tools to cleanse ourself - physically and spiritually - from all forms of filth and uncleanness.

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