

Urchatz: Purifying Our Hands for Freedom

Hands.

They do a lot. And they say a lot about our self-regard.

Thursday morning, I led davening in the chapel. I felt particularly energized that day in prayer, more, truthfully, than I've felt in months. Perhaps it's the budding of spring. Perhaps it was the lovely residue of coaching Coby's first-of-the-season baseball practice the night before. Perhaps it was the realization that my prayers were really beginning to matter more, to have even greater weight and consciousness, with Passover on our doorstep.

That being said, for whatever reason, I "felt it" Thursday morning in tefillot. The prayers jumped off my lips. Melodies elevated from my mouth. A smile, indiscernible to the congregants as I faced the ark, delightfully overwhelmed my face.

And I was aware of everything. Just everything. Not just the words and meaning of the prayers, but also the limited but still significant pageantry of a Thursday morning service.

And so much centered around people's hands.

Belmont Kershenbaum walked as steadily as his 94 years permit -- hands wagging by his side, balancing his nanogenarian gait, serving an undervalued purpose for him. Michael Golob stoutly grasped the sefer Torah from the ark, one hand on a roller above and the other hand on a roller below, and transferred it mechanically to me, valuing his function as the keeper, roller, and usherer of our sifrei torah for the weekdays. Then I walked around with the sefer torah, and observed the minyan participants gently grab their tallit fringes and prayer books to lovingly touch the parading scroll, showing it the honor it merits eternally as our constitution and the bearer of our national narrative. The scene was, of course, repeated, when we returned the sefer torah to the ark.

Hands balancing to keep us standing and astride, hands grasping and passing to pursue our ritual, and hands touching to do honor to our tradition.

And, lastly, hands continuously embracing each other as a sign of communal bonds, support and friendship. As he walked back from closing the ark, Belmont Kershenbaum grasped my hand with the strength of an NFL lineman, bringing me back – if not personally but rather communally – to the memory of what he has done for the BI community over the years with his hands, from cooking breakfast in the old building on down. His was the handshake of one generation to the next, and did I ever enjoy it and appreciate it Thursday morning!

Friends, in Egypt, sadly, our hands were not free to do any of the tasks above, nor their deftly-manuevered progenitors in the sacrificial tradition discussed in the book of Vayikra, nor their forebears in the tradition of tefilla catalyzed by the rabbis. The Egyptians forced our hands to do everything we didn't want them to do. To bid the idolatry of Pharaoh, not the monotheistic worship grounded by our ancestor, Abraham. To build Pharaoh's temples and pyramids, grand but vacuous structures, instead of building a tabernacle filled with the presence of our God. To deplete instead of strengthen us, making us weep and cry and scream out to our God for help. In Egypt, our hands bent us instead of making us straight. Thanks to Egyptian oppression, our hands, having no choice, brought us and our tradition *gnut*, disgrace, instead of *shevach*, praise.

Pesach is a moment to transform our hands and to let them lead us through the grander transformations of freedom. Our hands need more than a ritual washing before we eat at the seder. They need a whole-hearted cleansing, an immersion in a mikveh of the hands, so to speak before we travel the path of freedom. Therein lies the untapped power of *Urchatz*, the easily overlooked second stage of the seder, the washing without blessing. It does not have to be a poorly-explained step-child to the "real washing," *Rachtza*, with blessing, before the festive meal. *Urchatz* does not need to be just an unusual ploy to prompt children to ask questions.

According to the book, Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice, ritual washing, and ultimately *Urchatz*, came about in the following manner:

"In Temple times, some non-priests who wished to adopt for themselves the laws of priestly purity developed the custom of washing their hands before eating bread and any sort of food that was dipped into a sauce or condiment (the liquids in the sauce were considered a primary agent in the transmission of ritual impurity, not to mention hygienic impurity). *N'tilat yadayim*, the washing of hands, survives today as a ritual requirement before eating bread; traditionally observant Jews will perform this ritual throughout the year, reciting the customary blessing for hand-washing before they say HaMotzi. For this reason, the blessing is recited before the second hand-washing of the seder but not at this point, since many authorities are of the opinion that hand-washing is no longer required before eating foods dipped into condiments. On the other hand, since some authorities *do* think that hand-washing is required, the practice is to require the washing here at *Urchatz* but to dispense with the benediction, lest the hand-washing in fact be unnecessary and the blessing superfluous...."

So washing before eating vegetables which have come into contact with water is a hold-over from Talmudic times, of the rabbis trying to experience in their daily eating the sense of *kedusha*, sacredness associated with the Temple. The custom fell into general disuse, except on the seder night, when we try to create an elevated spirit of sacredness and purity.

And we need to try harder to effect a true transformation of our hands from the filth of slavery to the pure intentions of freedom. *Urchatz* is the ideal scaffolding on which to build a truly serious structure of purification on Pesach eve. We begin the evening by purifying our hands, the unwitting but unrelenting conductors of our subjugation and religious emasculation in Egypt. We should bless after *Urchatz*, with an entirely new blessing that has nothing to do with eating. *Baruch ata hashem elokainu melech ha'olam ha'noten lanu v'la'yadaynu avodat cherut.* "Blessed are you, Lord our God, sovereign of the universe, who gives us and our hands the work of freedom." If you have a better suggestion, or a reading instead, either one you craft or one you've clipped from the internet, let me know.

We should all immerse our hands, not letting the leader of the seder fulfill our obligation by proxy. We should all, mindful of what the Egyptians made our hands do, and what we today let our hands do, rinse off the impurities of the past and present. Then we can proceed to do very different things very with our hands, beginning with the seder – mourning the tears of our brethren, transforming the disgrace of eating on the run to the honor of eating a relaxed meal of freedom, serving the guests we had no ability to serve in Egypt, firmly holding hands and celebrating the unbreakable bonds of our Jewish heritage, and building a true mishkan at our tables, a testament to God's immanent presence amongst us. And, I should add, resting our hands as we could not do in Egypt, and engaging in the learning and intellectual discourse of our tradition.

I leave you with this message on Shabbat ha-Gadol, the great Shabbat before Pesach, when even the small things count a lot, when we raise, with our hands and otherwise, even the most minute details to great significance.