

JEWISH RITUALS AND PRAYERS ON WATER

The following is a short selection of traditional Jewish texts on water. For a longer collection of prayers and descriptions of rituals involving water, see www.greenfaith.org.

Assembled by Rabbi Lawrence Troster

HANDWASHING

In Judaism, the ritual washing of the hands has a variety of functions. The origins of ritual handwashing come from priestly practices (Exodus 30:17-21; Leviticus 15:11). The fact that it is done today by non-priestly Jews is an example of the democratization of ritual that started in the Second Temple Period and continued in Rabbinic Judaism.

Psalm 26:6

I wash my hands in innocence,
and go around your altar, O Lord.

Commentary:

This verse probably refers to a ritual washing that was done by worshippers prior to entering the Temple (cf. Psalm 24:4). It could also have a metaphorical meaning.

Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sotah 39a

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi also said: Any kohen who has not washed his hands may not lift them up [to pronounce the benediction]; as it is said: *Lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless the Lord.* (Psalm 134:2)

Commentary:

This source connects the Priestly Blessing done in the synagogue with the biblical source on raising hands in prayer: Rabbi Joshua takes the “lift up your hands” in the first part of the verse to refer to both washing the hands and literally lifting the hands. Jewish environmentalist Ellen Bernstein sees in this text the idea that water is the “element of spiritual transformation,” just as it is a substance which physically transforms many other substances.ⁱ

WATER FOR PURIFICATION

Mishnah Yoma 8:9

If a person said, “I will sin and repent and sin again and repent,” they will be given no chance to repent. (If they said,) “I will sin and the Day of Atonement will effect atonement,” then the Day of Atonement effects no atonement. For transgressions between a person and God the Day of Atonement effects atonement, but for transgression that are between one person and another, the Day of Atonement effects atonement only if the sinner has appeased the other. This did Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah expound: *From all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord* (Leviticus 16:30) Rabbi Akiba said, Blessed are you, O Israel. Before whom are you made clean and who

makes you clean? Your Father in heaven, as it is written, And I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean. (Ezekiel 36:25) Again, it says *O Lord the hope (mikveh) of Israel* (Jeremiah 17:13)—as the mikvah cleanses the unclean so does the Holy Blessed One cleanse Israel.

Commentary:

This is a well-known text about the importance of sincere repentance. Leviticus 16:30 refers to the atonement of the Yom Kippur ritual in the Tabernacle but this mishnah uses it to justify its distinction between what Yom Kippur can atone for and what it cannot atone for. The purification metaphor of Ezekiel 36:25 and the hope/mikveh pun in Jeremiah 17:13 are used by Rabbi Akiva in this mishnah as a homily on God's process of forgiveness.

TASHLIKH

Micah 17:18-20

¹⁸Who is a God like You,
Forgiving iniquity
And remitting transgression;
Who has not maintained His wrath forever
Against the remnant of His own people,
Because He loves graciousness!

¹⁹He will take us back in love;
He will cover up our iniquities,
You will hurl all our sins Into the depths of the sea.
²⁰You will keep faith with Jacob,
Loyalty to Abraham,
As You promised on oath to our fathers
In days gone by.

Commentary:

This passage from the prophetic book of Micah is the major source for the medieval practice of Tashlikh which is the ritual practiced by many Jews on the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah where bread crumbs are thrown into a natural water source as a symbolic way of casting away our sins. These verses are from the final section of the book of Micah where the prophet speaks about the infinite mercy of God. It alludes to the Song at the Sea in Exodus 15:11 where the question is asked “Who is like You, O Lord, among the celestials; Who is like you majestic in holiness, Awesome in splendor, working wonders?!” There God's power over the Egyptians like God's power over the primordial deep is emphasized. Here it is the forgiving mercy of God that is center stage; the compassion and willingness to cast away the sins of the people in God's loyalty to the descendants of Abraham. The language of “casting all our sins into the depths of the sea” is parallel to Exodus 15:4-5: “Pharaoh's chariots and his army He has cast into the sea. And the pick of his officers are drowned in the Sea of Reeds. The deeps covered them; They went down into the depths like a stone.” There God hurled the Egyptian army into the deep; here it is the sins of Israel.

THE SECOND BLESSING OF THE AMIDAH

You are forever mighty, Adonai; giving life to the dead. You are a mighty savior.

[From Shemini Atzeret to the first day of Passover add:]

You cause the wind to blow and you cause the rain to fall

[From the first day of Passover to Shemini Atzeret add:]

You bring down the dew

You sustain life with kindness, giving life to the dead with great mercy, supporting the fallen, healing the sick, freeing the captive, and keeping faith with sleepers in the dust. Who is like You, Master of might, and who resembles You, a King who causes death and life, and causes salvation to flourish!

You faithfully give life to the dead.

Blessed are You, Adonai, who gives life to the dead.

¹Ellen Bernstein, *The Splendor of Creation: A Biblical Ecology*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), p. 28.