

## Handwashing Source Sheet and Questions for Further Reflection

Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 27a	תלמוד בבלי, חגיגה כז.
<p>The Tanakh refers to a “table” as “wood” as it is written, “The <b>altar</b>, three cubits high, and its length two cubits, was of wood, and so its corners, its length, and its walls were also of wood, and he said to me: This is the <b>table</b> that is before the Lord.” (Ezekiel 41:22) The verse begins with “<b>altar</b>” and concludes with “<b>table</b>”. Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish both said, ‘When the Temple stood the altar atoned for us, now [in a time without the Temple] our tables atone for us.’</p>	<p>דרחמנא קרייה עץ דכתיב (יחזקאל מא, כב) המזבח עץ שלש אמות גבוה וארכו שתים אמות ומקצעותיו לו וארכו וקירותיו עץ וידבר אלי זה השלחן אשר לפני ה' פתח במזבח וסיים בשלחן רבי יוחנן וריש לקיש דאמרי תרוייהו בזמן שבית המקדש קיים מזבח מכפר על אדם עכשיו שלחנו של אדם מכפר עליו:</p>

Siddur Sim Shalom pg. 313
<p>Washing the hands before eating is meant to be a ritual act--to achieve spiritual holiness, not physical cleanliness. The dinner table is often compared in rabbinic literature to the altar in the Temple. As the Kohanim [priests] would wash their hands before entering the Temple to offer sacrifices, we, too, wash our hands immediately before any meal.</p> <p>The two shallot used for Ha-motzi on Shabbat and Festivals are reminiscent of the double Shabbat portion of manna provided by God in the wilderness, as well as the two loaves placed on the Temple altar.</p>

My People's Prayer Book Vol. 7, <i>Shabbat at Home</i> pgs. 108-109
<p>The Chasidim are fond of citing the verse in Exodus 24:11 describing God's encounter with Moses, Aaron, and the seventy elders: “And they saw God, and they ate and drank,” as an indication of the liturgical potential of eating. Not only does the matter (of food) literally become energy, but the Jew who consumes it in holiness effectively frees the holy sparks contained within it. Eating thus becomes a sacred act.</p> <p>According to Chasidic tradition, the Sabbath table thus becomes more than the mere locus of a meal; it is transformed into an altar evoking the sacrificial altar in the Temple of old. And each Jew therefore becomes a priest performing a sacred ritual.</p>

Questions for further reflection:

- 1) Do you ever pause between one task before starting another? What does that brief pause do for you?
- 2) When else in your life do you wash your hands? How might washing hands before eating change your experience if the intention is for holiness instead of health?
- 3) In a pandemic, how does washing one's hands attain new significance? Is there value in resurrecting handwashing as a spiritual practice in addition to being a preventative act?

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ  
הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו,  
וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת יָדַיִם.

*Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al netilat yadayim.*

Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with commandments, and commanded us to wash hands.