

REL 402 - Judaism - Ablutions

To start out, I consider myself very religious in my own faith, which is Roman Catholicism. I am however very interested in the rituals of other religions, and with the use of spiritual aids to help accomplish those rituals. Before starting on this project, I went to my local Priest at the Catholic Church that I attend to get his input on the ideas that I had researched to complete this assignment. We both agreed that the safest thing for me to do while getting the most out of the project was doing the Netilat Yadayim, or ritual hand washing. Another base that I wanted to cover was to make sure that what I was doing to complete this project was OK with those of the Jewish faith. I do believe that knowledge breeds tolerance, so I think that anything I do to learn more about another faith is good. However, I would not particularly care for someone of the Jewish faith to pray the rosary. I went to a local Jewish Temple, where I met the Rabbi. He informed me that he thought what I had picked was a good idea, and he could not see that it would be a problem.

Netilat Yadayim, literally means “to lift the hands,” however in the Jewish faith it is one's obligation to cleanse oneself prior to the blessing of the meal. Lori Palatnik states that the ritual washing is very important prior to the blessing: *“Before explaining this simple action, we need to understand some Jewish symbolism: Water — symbolic of Torah; wisdom. Water is the essence of physical life, for without it we would die; whereas wisdom is the essence of spiritual life, the foundation of self-growth and self-realization. Hands — symbolic of our interaction in the physical world. Bread (challah) — symbolic of physical sustenance; the staff of life. We take the water and pour it over each hand — that's the understanding that all my interactions in the physical world - writing, touching, working — should be done in a wise, meaningful way.” (Palatnik, 2004)*

It is also to remind us that, just as the Rabbis did in the temple long ago, so too are we to clean ourselves prior to sitting at the altar, or in our case our table. The process is fairly simple, especially since the Rabbi at the local temple explained, and demonstrated the entire process to me, and even loaned me the ritual cup to use, although it was a more basic, and modest, version of the cup than the ones I had seen on the internet. I was very grateful to the Rabbi, since he knew that I would not have the other ritual items, he showed me how to do it without them.

The first thing to do is to make sure that you have all of the utensils and plates out that you will need, so as not to have to touch cabinets or any other unnecessary surfaces after washing. You are to make sure that you have towels out to dry with following the wash. You are to remove all rings and jewelry from the hands. Then you fill up the cup while holding it in the right hand. Once it is filled, you pass the cup from the right hand into the left. You then pour the water, completely wetting both sides of the hand. Once it has been washed you are to hold the hand up, this is where the name “lifting of the hands” comes in to play, making sure that any drippage runs towards the wrist and not to the fingers. Normally at this point you would recite the Jewish blessing over the washing of the hands. However, the Rabbi and I agreed that I would say whatever prayer I would normally say prior to our meal.

I would continue to follow this exact same ritual for the next three days. I started it on Wednesday, and continued through Friday. As an added surprise, my wife even joined me on several occasions. I found that the morning washing before breakfast was the most difficult for me to complete. I was normally in a rush, and wanted to make sure to dedicate enough time to give the process the respect it deserved. However, lunch and dinner were no big deal. After completing the process I returned the cup to the Rabbi at the local Synagogue. He asked me about my experience, which I was happy to tell him about, and I thanked him several times for allowing me to use the cup.

One thing that I did learn, or actually say realize, during the project and while completing this paper was the parallel between this and the washing of the hands the Catholic Priest does prior to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. During this time of the Mass, the altar servers most often use a pitcher or cup, and run the water over the Priest's hands while he prays. Until doing this project I would have never considered that practically the same act was done in other religions.

Palatnik, L. (2004, May 15). Washing For Bread. In *Shabbat*. Retrieved February 4, 2012, from <http://www.aish.com/sh/ht/fn/48969461.html>