

Lesson 2-Netilas Yadayim

Welcome to this session of Take 5 for Tefila, a program sponsored by the Orthodox Union, as part of their Tefila Education Initiative. In this session, we will discuss the first Mitzvah that we perform each day.

That Mitzvah consists of washing our hands. How do I know that performing such a menial act as the washing of our hands rises to the level of a Mitzvah? Our Sages sent us that message when in the language of the Bracha.

אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוְּנוּ עָלֵינוּ נְטִילַת יָדַיִם.

Who sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us regarding washing the hands.: That Bracha is found on page 14 of your Artscroll Siddur: Within the words of the Bracha, we acknowledge that we have just performed a Mitzvah that we were commanded to perform. That Judaism views the washing of hands as rising to the level of a Mitzvah is an excellent example of how Judaism instills sanctity into our everyday activities.

That we recite a Bracha upon washing our hands and that it is viewed as a Mitzvah gives us the opportunity to make two observations about how our Sages molded Jewish prayer. Our first observation is that the prayers were built around benedictions, the Brachos. Our second observation is that the Tefilos consist of a combination of Mitzvos.

Let us deal today with the fact that our Sages used benedictions the Brachos as the brick and mortar of the prayers. We need go no further than Tefilas Shacharis to observe the important role that Brachos play in our prayers. The first part of Tefilas Shacharis, Birchos Haschachar, the blessings of the morning, are by their name, Brachos. They are primarily Brachos of thanks; Brachos like Asher Yotzar, who creates, the Bracha in which we thank G-d for providing us with a properly functioning body; found on page 14 of your Siddur, Shelo Asani Goy, found on page 18 of your Siddur, a Bracha in which we thank G-d for not creating us as non-Jews, Malbish Arumim, found on the same page, in which we thank G-d for providing us with proper clothing. Several others can be found on that page and on the next.

Pseukei D'Zimra, the next section of Tefilas Shacharis, consists primarily of chapters from Tehilim, Psalms, whose theme is praise of G-d. Brachos play an important role in this section as well. Pseukei D'Zimra begins with a Bracha, Baruch Sh'Amar, blessed is He who said and the world was created, found on page 58 of your Siddur and it ends with a Bracha: Yishtabach Shimcha, may Your name be praised, found on page 82 of your Siddur.

Kriyas Shema, the next section of Tefilas Schacharis, is surrounded by Brachos as well; We recite two Brachos before reading Kriyas Shema, Yotzer Ha'M'Oros, who creates the luminaries in the sky, found on page 88 of your Siddur and Ha'Bochair B'Amo Yisroel

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B'Ahava, who chose the Jewish people out of love, found on page 90 of your Artscroll Siddur. We follow our reading of Kriyas Shema with one Bracha, Ga'Al Yisroel, who rescued the Jewish People from Egypt, found on page 96 of your Siddur.

Of course, the center of our Tefilos, the reason that we come together to pray in a group of at least ten men, Shemona Esrei, the prayer of 19 benedictions, consists entirely of Brachos.

The Brachos that we recite in Tefilas Shacharis play such an important role that by listing them for you, I have provided you with a basic outline of Tefilas Shacharis. That is the message I meant to convey when I said that the Brachos are the brick and mortar that hold the prayers together. Put in other words, if you understand the theme of the Brachos found within the prayers, you have taken a major step towards understanding Jewish Prayer.