

Insights into Halacha

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(PhiloTorah editor's notes in green)

Understanding Urchatz Comprehending Karpas

Have you ever wondered why, during the Pesach Seder, when we dip the Karpas in saltwater to symbolize our ancestor's tears while enslaved at the hands of the cruel Egyptians *(there are other reasons given for this)*, we precede it by washing our hands (URCHATZ)? Isn't handwashing exclusively reserved for prior to 'breaking bread'? And furthermore, why is this only performed at the Seder? Is there a specific message this action is meant to portray?

All About the Children

The answer to these questions might depend on a difference of understanding. The Gemara in Pesachim (114b) asks why at the Pesach Seder we perform two dippings, i.e. Karpas into saltwater and later the Maror into Charoset. The Gemara succinctly answers KI HEICHI D'LEHAVEI HEKEIRA L'TINOKOT, in order that there should a distinction for children'. Both Rashi and his grandson, the Rashbam, as well as the Rokeach, explain the Gemara's intent, that this

act is performed in order so that the children should ask why we are performing this unusual and uncommon action on Leil HaSeder, as this action serves as a HEKEIRA TOVA, an excellent distinction. This is one of the ways we ensure that the Seder Night's Mitzva of V'HIGADTA L'VINCHA, retelling the story of our ancestors' exile, enslavement, and ultimate redemption and Exodus from Egypt, is properly performed.

But a question remains. Which exact action is the one that is meant to evoke the children's questions? The answer may surprise you. The Bartenura and Tur specify that it is not the seemingly odd act of handwashing for vegetables that is peculiar, but rather the timing of the dipping. They assert that it is unusual to dip food items at the beginning of a seuda. Most other days we also dip, but in the middle of the meal. In other words, the only change we do to evoke children's questions is to perform the dipping right then.

What then of the seemingly atypical handwashing just for vegetables? Isn't that an uncharacteristic change from the ordinary? 'No', they would respond, 'one certainly would have to wash his hands before dipping his vegetables.'

Drip and Dip

But in order to properly understand this, we must first digress to a different Gemara in Pesachim (115a). Rabbi Elazer teaches in the name of Rav Oshiya “any food item that is dipped in a liquid requires hand-washing before eating.” On this statement, Rashi and Tosafos (among others) differ as to the correct understanding of his intent.

Rashi and the Rashbam maintain that this ruling is still applicable nowadays, as it is similar to the requirement to wash before eating bread, while Tosafos is of the opinion that this law is only relevant during the times of the Beit HaMikdash, as it is conditional to Taharot, Ritual Purity, which in this day and age, is unfortunately non-applicable. Although the Maharam MiRottenberg, and several later poskim are of the opinion that one may indeed rely on the lenient view, it should be noted that the majority of halachic authorities including the Rambam, Tur, Shulchan Aruch, Rema, Vilna Gaon, Chayei Adam, Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Ben Ish Chai, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, Mishna Berura, Kaf HaChayim and Chazon Ish, hold that even nowadays one should do his utmost to be vigilant with this and wash hands before eating a food item dipped in liquid.

The lenient opinion is taken into account, however, and that is the reason why according to the majority of poskim, this washing is performed without the prerequisite blessing, as opposed to the washing before eating bread. This is due to the halachic dictum of SAFEK B'RACHOT L'HAKAIL, meaning that in a case of doubt regarding the topic of b'rachot, we follow the lenient approach and do not make the blessing, to avoid the possibility of making a blessing in vain.

This all ties in to our Seder. In fact this, explains the Tur and Avudraham, and echoed by later authorities, is the reason why we wash URCHATZ prior to dipping the Karpas into saltwater. As this action is classified as a DAVAR HATIBULO B'MASHKEH, it requires handwashing before eating. Although Rambam, Tur and Avudraham, as well as the Levush and Vilna Gaon, aver that URCHATZ actually necessitates a b'racha of NETILAT YADAYIM, conversely, the vast majority of poskim conclude that we do not make the a b'racha for URCHATZ, but rather exclusively at RACHTZA immediately prior to Motzi-Matza. This is indeed the common custom.

[Based on footnote 12 - Another interesting question is whether reclining is required for Karpas. Some require it; others do not. Some phrase their opinions that it is not necessary but if one does so, no problem.]

The Chida's Chiddush

The Chida, in his *Simchas HaRegel* commentary on the Haggada, explains that this is the background, as well as the reason for the added VAV by URCHATZ at the Pesach Seder, as it is the only one of the Seder Simanim that starts with that conjunction. We find a parallel by the b'racha that our patriarch Yitzchak Avinu bestowed on his son Yaakov (B'reishit, Parshat Toldot, 27: 28), V'YITEIN L'CHA - 'And Hashem should give you...' According to Chazal and cited by Rashi, the extra conjunctive VAV means YITEIN YACHZOR V'YITEIN - that Hashem should continually and constantly give.

Likewise, the Chida explains the extra VAV in Urchatz. The Baal Haggada is transmitting a message to us. Just as during the Seder we all wash before dipping a vegetable in salt water, that extra VAV is telling us - RACHEITZ YACHZOR V'RACHEITZ - that we should continue to wash our hands, anytime we want to eat a food dipped in liquid, year round.

The Chasam Sofer and his son-in-law, the Chasan Sofer, write in a similar vein in their Haggada, that Urchatz is meant to serve as a tochacha (rebuke) and yearly reminder to those who are lackadaisical with the observance of this halacha, in order to remind everyone that this applies year round

as well. Indeed, the Taz actually writes similarly, and concludes that at least during the Aseret Y'mei T'shuva one should be stringent. The Ben Ish Chai remarks comparably when discussing Urchatz, that praiseworthy is one who is careful with this handwashing year round.

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l adds that the VAV is connecting URCHATZ to KADEISH - meaning KADEISH URCHATZ - (as a command) that we should be M'KADEISH ourselves and continue to wash for food items dipped in liquid - even if we were previously not usually stringent with this all year round.

The Medium is the Message

Yet, it is important to note that other poskim take an alternate view. Rav Yaakov Reisher in his *Chok Yaakov* argues that since the great Maharam MiRottenberg, as well as the Lechem Chamudot and Magen Avraham among other poskim, ruled leniently with washing before eating a food item dipped in liquid following Tosafot's precedent, and most people do not follow the opinion mandating it nowadays, this simply cannot be the reason why we perform Urchatz at the Seder.

Rather, he explains that the Gemara's intent with stating that URCHATZ is performed in order that there should a

distinction for children to ask, is that the handwashing itself for eating dipped vegetables is what is out of the ordinary, not the timing of the washing. According to this understanding, it is the Urchatz itself that is essentially the HEKEIR, highlighting that something different than the norm is occurring, to enable children to ask what is different on Seder night. Meaning, although most do not wash before eating a dipped item year round, at the Seder we do; and that is the atypical action we do to arouse the interest of the children.

Not a DAAT YACHID (lone dissenting opinion), this understanding of Urchatz is also given by the Abarbanel, both the Chayei Adam and Aruch HaShulchan seem to favor this explanation, and it is cited by the Mishna Berura in his Shaar HaTziyun as well.

Alternate Views

On the other hand, the Levush understands Urchatz somewhat differently. He explains that the dipping of Karpas at the Pesach Seder is due to CHO VAT (or in some editions CHIBAT) HaRegel, extra obligation or devotion for the Yom Tov. Ergo, the handwashing is specifically performed at the Seder, as due to its inherent holiness, we do more than usual, to strive for an increase in purity, as opposed to year round, when in his opinion, it would not be mandated.

VAYAGED MOSHE, the renowned classic sefer on the Haggada, after citing several authorities who discuss the extra intrinsic Kedusha of Leil HaSeder, writes that perhaps this can be seen by the VAV in URCHATZ. He explains (in the exact opposite approach of the Chida's) that the VAV is connecting URCHATZ to KADEISH – meaning KADEISH URCHATZ – (as a command) that specifically at the Seder, due to the added inherent Kedusha of Leil HaSeder, we should be M'KADEISH ourselves by washing before dipping our vegetables – even though we would not need to the rest of the year.

An alternate, yet somewhat similar, interpretation is offered by the Netziv, Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin zt"l, venerated Rosh Yeshiva of Volozhin. The Seder reminds us of the eating of the Korban Pesach that took place when the Beit HaMikdash stood. Therefore, we follow the same halachic requirements at the Seder that were in place during the Temple era. Everyone agrees that at the time of the Beit HaMikdash there was an obligation to wash hands for dipped food items, and therefore, at the Pesach Seder we do so as well, regardless of whether or not we actually fulfill this year round.

Rav Yishmael Hakohen maintains an analogous distinction. He explains that earlier generations were indeed stringent with Ritual Purity and hence

certainly washed their hands before dipping vegetables. Since MINHAG AVOTEINU B'YADEINU, we follow in our ancestors' footsteps by performing the Seder as accurately as possible as they did. Hence, our mandated washing Urchatz at the Seder irrespective of our actions the rest of the year.

A slightly similar, yet novel explanation is given in the Zichron Nifla'ot Haggada. He explains that generally speaking, people are lenient year-round with this pre-dipping hand-washing following Tosafot's understanding, that this washing is intrinsically only relevant during the times of the Beit HaMikdash, as it is conditional to Taharot, Ritual Purity. Yet, he explains, when the Beit HaMikdash will be rebuilt, we will also be required to offer and eat the Korban Pesach on Seder Night, in addition to our obligation of eating a dipped-food. As such, if we would not be makpid on washing beforehand at the Seder, people may not realize the import of the new situation and not wash before dipping the Karpas. However, at that point, with the Beit HaMikdash standing, the intricacies of Ritual Purity will once again be 'back in play'. As such, if one would eat his dipped Karpas without the Urchatz pre-wash, he will have made himself 'pasul' (invalidated) from being able to eat Kodshim, including the Korban

Pesach. Hence, explains the Zichron Nifla'ot, although year-round such washing may be currently deemed unnecessary, it is nonetheless mandated on Leil HaSeder.

Another idea, cited by the Rema in his Darchei Moshe, is that the Haggada is akin to a T'fila, that we relate thanks and praise to Hashem for everything he has done for our ancestors and us. Therefore, immediately prior to the recital of the Haggada we wash our hands in preparation, without a b'racha, similar to the requirement of washing before davening.

One more interesting explanation, suggested by Rav Reuven Margoliyus, is that this washing is performed at the very beginning of the Seder night DERECH CHEIRUT, to show that we are doing so as free people and nobility, who are accustomed to washing their hands prior to eating even a small amount. This is opposed to slaves, who do not have the rights or ability for such extravagance, but rather 'eat their bread with sweat'. This 'nobility' reasoning would seem to fit well with the minhag many perform of 'serving' the Baal HaBayit for Urchatz, by bringing him a wash basin and washing his hands.

Divergences of Dipping

Interestingly, Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank zt"l, the former Chief Rabbi of

Yerushalayim, opines that the dispute among Rishonim whether only the head of the household is supposed to wash Urchatz or if everyone at the Seder does as well (the most common custom) might be dependent on this debate of why the handwashing at the Seder was instituted. According to the majority opinion that Urchatz was enacted due to the halacha of DAVAR HATIBULO B'MASHKEH, then everyone would be mandated to wash.

However, according to the opinions that this handwashing is only performed on Pesach at the Seder, it is possible that only the head of the household need wash Urchatz, as that should be deemed sufficient enough to arouse the interest and subsequent questions of the children.

Practically, as mentioned previously, the most common custom is that everyone washes Urchatz. Yet, a notable minority minhag, performed mainly by many of Germanic/Dutch origin, as well as Sanz, Lelov, and Satmar Chassidim, is that only the head of the household wash. So it is remarkable that this modern divergence of minhagim might actually depend on how Poskim understood the brief statement of the Gemara regarding children's questions.

Finger Food?

Another interesting machlokes that might depend on which HEKEIR the

Gemara intended is how to dip the Karpas into the saltwater. If the reason Urchatz was mandated is due to the halacha of DAVAR HATIBULO B'MASHKEH, then it stands to reason that if one used a fork or other utensil to dip and not actually getting 'ones' hands dirty' then many poskim would hold that handwashing is technically not required. On the other hand, if the washing prior to dipping is considered the unusual action of Seder night, then we should perform Urchatz regardless of utensil.

Practically, although there are contemporary authorities, including Rav Moshe Sternbuch and Rav Nissim Karelitz, who maintain preference for dipping the Karpas by hand in order that it should satisfy all opinions, nonetheless, due to the other understandings of Urchatz's role, many poskim rule that even if one used a fork for the dipping, we should still perform the handwashing prior. Just another insight into the seemingly simple and straightforward, yet remarkable Urchatz.

HOW DO YOU KARPAS?

Now that we explained the "Why" and "How" of Karpas, this leaves the "What", as in which vegetable should be used. It is interesting that the Mishna in Pesachim did not tell us a specific vegetable, with the Gemara explaining that if stuck, we may even

use the Maror for Karpas as well.

Although Rashi, the Rambam, and Tur tell us that any vegetable may be used for Karpas, and conversely the Maharil, Arizal, and seemingly the Shulchan Aruch, understanding KARPAS to be referring to a specific vegetable with that name, yet, many sefarim cite PETROZIL or PETRESHKA (presumably parsley) as the vegetable of choice, with the Aruch HaShulchan commenting that “we don’t know what it is.”

Other popular options used over the generations include onions, radishes, scallions, and even cucumbers. The main point is that its proper b'racha be a BOREI PRI HA'ADAMA so that it should exempt repeating this b'racha again when it is time for Maror.

Strictly Celery

However, it seems that the two most prevalent vegetables, at least nowadays, are celery and potatoes. Celery is considered an excellent choice, as the Chasam Sofer relates, his rebbi, Rav Nosson Adler did much research in tracking down the Maharil’s elusive KARPAS vegetable, and his findings were that it is none other than celery. The Chasam Sofer writes that therefore that is what he used as well for Karpas. The Machatzit HaShekel writes similarly, that he was told by a “Great Man” (presumably Rav Adler) that after much research in

Medical books, KARPAS is truly none other than celery. The word he uses to identify it – IPIYA or IPUCH, is also cited as such in earlier sefarim, including the Bartenura in classifying KARPAS.

Rav Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky, in his annual Luach Eretz Yisrael, writes that in Eretz Yisrael the “Mehadrin” use “Karpas” that is known by its Arabic name. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach fills us in that he was referring to celery. The Kitzur Shulchan Aruch cites a preference for celery as well, and this is the minhag of many, including the Mareh Yechezkel, and later, Rav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer.

Pontificating a Perchance for Potatoes

The other common KARPAS, perhaps the most common, is potatoes. Cited by the Aruch HaShulchan and Misgeret HaShulchan, it is the minhag in Belz, Skver, and Spinka, and many Gedolim, including Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, and Rav Moshe Sternbuch, were known to use potatoes as Karpas.

Yet, there are those, including chassidim of Sanz, Bobov, and Kamarna who will not use potatoes for Karpas. This can be traced back to the famed Yismach Moshe, Rav Moshe Teitelbaum, rebbi of the Divrei Chayim of Sanz.

In his T'hila L'Moshe, the Yismach Moshe writes that he used to use potatoes for Karpas, but then heard that the great Rav Naftali of Ropschitz made a Shehakol b'racha on it (and hence would not be fitting for Karpas). He writes that he found that the Aruch, Rav Nosson M'Romi (literally, of Rome; d. 1106), when referring to the proper b'racha of mushrooms and other food items that do not actually get their nourishment from the earth and consequentially their b'racha being Shehakol, translates them as "Tartuffel". Not familiar with the archaic word, the Yismach Moshe maintained that the Aruch must have been referring to "Kartuffel", colloquially known as the potato.

Although there are different rationales for this, this idea is also found in several other sefarim, and there are prominent authorities who therefore made a Shehakol b'racha on potatoes. On the other hand, the facts do not seem to corroborate that potatoes should be classified in the same category of mushrooms, as potatoes not only grow and root in the ground, but they also get their nourishment from the ground, as opposed to mushrooms and their ilk. Several contemporary authorities point out that it is highly unlikely, if not outright impossible, for the Aruch, who lived in Europe in the eleventh century, to have been referring to "Kartuffel"

(potatoes) as the proper translation for mushrooms, as tubers were unknown on that continent until almost five hundred years later!

In fact, according to the Tiferet Yisrael, this act of Sir Francis Drake's, of introducing potatoes to the European continent, merited him to be classified as one of the Chasidei Umot Ha'Olam, as over the centuries potatoes have saved countless lives from starvation.

Moreover, in modern Italian, "tartufo" still translates as "truffle", the prized underground fungus, and not a potato. Therefore, the vast majority of authorities rule that the proper blessing on the potato is indeed "Borei Pri Ha'adama", and hence, it is still the preference for many as KARPAS.

Urchatz Everyday!

Back to Urchatz, the Chida, in his Simchas HaRegel Haggada, continues that although many are aware of the halacha of DAVAR HATIBULO B'MASHKEH, they do not realize that it even applies to something as ubiquitous as dipping cake into coffee! One might contend that the connection between vegetables in saltwater to tea biscuits in coffee seems tenuous, but actually, according to the majority of authorities, from a halachic perspective they are remarkably similar.

So the next time you get that dunkin' urge, it might be prudent to be conscientious by following the Haggada's hidden exhortation, and head to the sink before diving in to your cup-of-joe.

Thanks are due to my 12th-grade Rebbi in Yeshiva Gedolah Ateres Mordechai of Greater Detroit, Rav Yitzchok Kahan, for first enlightening me to this passage of the Chida's.

See website for all the footnotes and sources.

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomot / sources, please email the author: yspitz@ohr.edu

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Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz's English halacha sefer, "Food: A Halachic Analysis" (Mosaica/ Feldheim) containing over 500 pages featuring over 30 comprehensive chapters discussing the myriad halachic issues pertaining to food, is now available online and in bookstores everywhere.