

Halacha Highlight

Levi'im washing the hands of the *kohanim*

Shulchan Aruch Siman 128 Seif 6
והלוי יוצק מים על ידיהם

And a levi should pour water on their hands

Shulchan Aruch (סעי' ו') writes that before *kohanim* recite *birkas kohanim* they must wash their hands, even if they washed their hands already in the morning for *davening*. The washing should be until the wrist as was required of the *kohanim* who served in the *Bais HaMikdash* (מ"ב ס"ק כ"א) and a levi should pour the water on the kohen's hands. In the event that a levi is not available, someone who is the firstborn of his mother – פטר רחם — should wash the hands of the *kohanim* and if a firstborn is not available each kohen should wash his own hands (מ"ב ס"ק כ"ב).

Magen Avrohom (סק"ז) cites an opinion that maintains that if the levi is a Torah scholar and the kohen is an *am ha'aretz* the levi should not wash the hands of the kohen. Other authorities disagree and maintain that even in this circumstance the levi should wash the kohen's hands. Shulchan Aruch HaRav (סעי' א') rules that a levi who is a Torah scholar is not required to wash the hands of a kohen who is an *am ha'aretz* but if he wants to forgo his honor as a Torah scholar he is permitted to do so. Moreover, it is appropriate for a levi to forgo his honor and serve the kohanim. The reason this is permitted is that there is no prohibition for a Torah scholar to degrade himself in order to beautify a *mitzvah*. Mishnah Berurah (ס"ק כ"ב) rules in accordance with the latter opinion who maintains that the levi should wash the kohen's hands.

Rav Moshe Feinstein (שו"ת אג"מ או"ח ח"ד סי' קכ"ז אות ב') writes that it is incorrect for levi'im to not go to wash the hands of the kohanim even in those places where they recite *birkas kohanim* every day. Teshuvos Shevet HaLevi (שו"ת שבט הלוי ח"ח סי' מ"ז) adds that even though levi'im will miss *chazaras hashatz* if they go out to wash the hands of the *kohanim* they should nevertheless do so since they are considered *ones* as a result of the *mitzvah*.

Overview

Siman 128 Seif 6:

Even though the *kohanim* washed their hands in the morning they must wash them again until the joint, meaning the place where the hand and the arm meet. A levi should pour water on the kohen's hands and before doing so the levi should wash his own hands. It is not customary for levi'im to wash their hands before washing the hands of the *kohanim* and they rely on the washing they did in the morning.

- ❖ The washing must be performed with water and something that merely cleans the hands is not sufficient. (M.B. 19)
- ❖ If water is not available we rely upon Rambam who rules if one did not become distracted and knows that his hands did not become dirty his washing in the morning could be applied for *birkas kohanim*. (M.B. 20)
- ❖ Later authorities write that it is possible that the washing must be performed from a vessel, through man's force, the water may not have undergone a change and a minimum of a *revi'is* is necessary. (M.B. 21)
- ❖ If a levi is not available a *bechor* who is the first issue of his mother should wash the hands of the *kohanim*. If even a *bechor* is not available the kohen should wash his own hands. (M.B. 22)
- ❖ If the levi'im became distracted they should first wash their hands and certainly if they touched a covered part of their body they must wash their hands. (M.B. 23)

Siman 128 Seif 7:

If a kohen washes his hands in the morning and recited ידיים he does not repeat the *beracha* when he washes for *birkas kohanim*.

- ❖ There is a disagreement whether *kohanim* recite a *beracha* after washing for *birkas kohanim* if they had touched a covered part of their body or had become distracted. Therefore, a kohen should be careful not to touch anything that obligates a washing of one's hands before *birkas kohanim* to avoid this dispute. (M.B. 24)

Siman 128 Seif 8:

When the *shaliach tzibbur* begins רצה the *kohanim* who are in the *Bais HaKnesses* must "uproot" from their place to ascend the platform. Even if they do not reach the platform until after the *shaliach tzibbur* completes רצה it is acceptable. However, if he did not "uproot" his feet during רצה he does not ascend.

- ❖ *L'chatchila* the *kohanim* should "uproot" their feet at the beginning of רצה but as long as the *shaliach tzibbur* did not complete רצה it is acceptable. (M.B. 25)
- ❖ It is acceptable for the kohen to ascend even if he does not reach the platform until the end of *modim* as long as he "uprooted" his feet in רצה. "Uprooting" of one's feet occurs after one has washed rather than before. If one did not wash his hands before רצה and would not finish by the time the *shalaich tzibbur* completes רצה he should ascend the platform and wash his hands there. (M.B. 27)
- ❖ Even if one "uprooted" his feet to go out to wash it is not considered as though he "uprooted" his feet for *birkas kohanim*. (M.B. 28)

he defended himself with an astounding psak. "I heard that Rav Eliyashiv ruled that a levi is not obligated to wash the kohein's hands at all. It is the kohein who should try to ensure that a levi washes his hands!"

But when Rav Fried checked this psak with Rav Eliashiv, he dismissed it as well. "I never said that. The contrary is true: a levi is definitely obligated to wash the kohein's hands!"

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Stories to Share

A Gadol Misquoted

ש"ע ס' קכ"ז, ו': "והלוי יוצק מים על ידיהם..."

One small minyan had only one kohein and two levi'im. Naturally the two vied for the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah for the levi to wash the kohein's hands, as we find on today's amud. When this began to become unpleasant, the two levi'im came up with a great idea: why not wash the kohein's hands together? That way, they could both fulfill the mitzvah.

One congregant claimed that it was not halachically sound. "I heard that Rav Elyashiv holds that if two levi'im wash one kohein, neither fulfills the mitzvah properly..."

But when Rav Moshe Fried, shlit"a—a close student of Rav Eliyashiv—asked the gadol about this, he categorically denied it. "Two levi'im who wash one kohein each have an equal share in the mitzvah; there is nothing deficient about this practice."

וישמע משה, ע' ס"א

On another occasion, a visiting levi refused to wash the kohein's hands. When he was rebuked for failing to fulfill this special mitzvah,