

Jewish tradition, handwashing, and the concept of “Common”

Levitical priests were mandated to cleanse their hands and feet at a designated washing basin positioned between the temple and the altar prior to entering the Temple.¹ Furthermore, they were obligated to maintain ritual purity before partaking in an offering or even approaching the sacred offerings.²

Jewish tradition maintains there are multiple levels of impurity. The first level of impurity, known as “Avi Avot Hatumah” (meaning ‘grandfather of impurity’) is contracted through contact with a human corpse. The second level of impurity, referred to as “Ava HaTumah” (meaning ‘father of impurity’), encompasses every condition or source of impurity mentioned in the Torah, excluding contact with a human corpse. This includes situations such as contact with a living person who has touched a corpse, menstruating women, men with abnormal genital discharge, etc. The third level of impurity, known as “Vlad Hatumah” (meaning ‘child of impurity’) includes any person, vessel, food, or drink that has made contact with anything holding the impurity of the previous level (aka ‘father of impurity’). Finally, the fourth level of impurity known as the “Sheni letumah” includes any food or drink that has made contact with a “Vlad Hatumah”.³

The Torah outlines procedures for addressing impurity across three levels. For contact with a human corpse (first level of impurity), purification involves receiving the waters of purification derived from the red heifer sacrifice. Impurity stemming from “Ava HaTumah” or “Vlad Hatumah” (impurity of the second and third levels) is resolved in most cases by immersion in water followed by waiting until sunset that same day. In summary, the Torah delineates impurity resulting from contact with a corpse, impurity from a primary source of uncleanness, and impurity from contact with something that has been rendered unclean through a primary source. Anything surpassing these three levels constitutes a departure from the Torah and enters the realm of legal fiction. Logically, if impurity can be transmitted from a source to an object, it is equally plausible for an object rendered unclean to transmit the impurity onward in a cascading manner.

This renders achieving absolute certainty regarding the ritual cleanliness of a Levite impossible. Indeed, when contemplating the infinite potential transmission of impurity among all objects in the world, it becomes more probable to assume that every priest is impure at all times. However, rather than presuming the entire body of a Levite to be perpetually impure, it was pragmatically determined to confine this inescapable potential impurity to the hands. The priests/judges, and later the sages/rabbis referenced the obligation of Levitical priests to wash their hands, along with Leviticus 15:11⁴, as justification for the assertion. If the potential impurity acquired from contact with the world is confined and contained within the hands, then complete assurance of a priest's purity can be reinstated through the ritual of washing

¹ Exodus 30:17-21

² Leviticus 22:3

³ In truth, tradition refrains from assigning a number until the third level of impurity, initiating the count from this stage. Thus, what is commonly referred to as the “first” level is actually the third level, and correspondingly, the “second” level is truly the fourth. To maintain simplicity, I decided to start the count beginning with the level known as the “Avi Avot Hatumah”, the ‘grandfather of impurity’.

⁴ “Anyone the man with a discharge touches **without rinsing his hands with water** must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening.” - Leviticus 15:11

and cleansing the hands. This introduced legal simplicity; if a priest avoided contact with a corpse, all primary sources of impurity, all objects rendered impure through a primary source, and washed their hands accordingly, they could be declared clean.

According to tradition, King Solomon was the first to decree the requirement to wash the hands before a priest should handle consecrated items, and/or eat sacrificial meat.⁵ During the leadership of Hillel and Shammai⁶, this decree was extended to apply to priests before eating 'Terumah' (food tithed to the priests).⁷ As time passed, it became evident that the priests were failing to consistently adhere to the rabbinic mandate of handwashing before partaking of Terumah and consecrated meat. Consequently, a decree was enforced, compelling all of Israel to wash their hands before eating, irrespective of whether the food was consecrated or not. The aim was to establish a collective practice of handwashing to ensure that the priests would also adhere to this ritual.⁸

To be clean and to eat clean is Holiness

Leviticus 16:19, with its instruction to "purify and sanctify," set a precedent for associating ritual purity with holiness. This gave rise to the principle that "purity brings holiness," as seen in the Jerusalem Talmud.⁹ Furthermore, it was understood that the Torah's mandate to distinguish between clean and unclean, aimed to ensure Israel's sanctity by setting them apart as a holy and unique people among the nations.¹⁰ Their fervent dedication to this imperative compelled many to exceed the Torah's requirements, by diligently maintaining cleanliness at all times to guarantee the consumption of only ritually pure food.

The Torah designates certain animals as "unclean," forbidding their consumption on this basis. However, it does not extend these prohibitions to food classified as clean, even if it becomes ritually impure through contact with one of the three main levels of impurity. In terms of clean foods that have been rendered ritually impure, the Torah remains largely silent, except for an inference that can be drawn from Leviticus 7:19, which states: "The meat [sanctified meat of an offering] that will come in contact with any impurity should not be eaten." This statement specifically applies to consecrated meat and highlights its sanctity. In contrast, unconsecrated meat is not subject to the same restriction. Therefore, while most

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 21b

⁶ "In the first century BCE, Babylonian born Hillel (later known as Hillel the Elder) migrated to the Land of Israel to study and worked as a woodcutter, eventually becoming the most influential force in Jewish life...Hillel and his descendants established academies of learning and were the leaders of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel for several centuries. The Hillel dynasty ended with the death of Hillel II in 365 CE. Hillel the Elder's friendly adversary was Shammai, a native of the Land of Israel about whom little is known except that he was a builder, known for the strictness of his views...Hillel did not share Shammai's fear and therefore was more liberal in his view of law. Hillel was the more popular of the two scholars, and he was chosen by the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish court, to serve as its president. While Hillel and Shammai themselves did not differ on a great many basic issues of Jewish law, their disciples were often in conflict. The Talmud records over 300 differences of opinion between Beit Hillel (the House of Hillel) and Beit Shammai (the House of Shammai)." - <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hillel-and-shammai>

⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 14b-15a

⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 106a

⁹ Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat 1:3

¹⁰ "...I wish to elaborate on the overall reason given by the Torah for demanding of the Jew that he follow all its laws and regulations: it is so that Israel will become holy and sanctified." - To Be a Jew; a guide to Jewish observance in contemporary life, Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, page 35.

meats may be consumed after contact with impurity, sanctified meat cannot be eaten after such contact. It was concluded that if purity equates to holiness, the most effective means to safeguard one's holiness was to maintain constant cleanliness and exclusively consume food that has retained its ritual purity. This pursuit was viewed as voluntary, undertaken in devotion to the Lord.

A passage from Maimonides' "Mishneh Torah" effectively encapsulates the sincere belief underpinning the practice and its perceived spiritual advantages:

Even though it is permitted to eat impure foods and drink impure beverages, the pious men of the early generations would partake of their ordinary food in a state of ritual purity and would avoid all of the sources of impurity throughout their lives... This is an extra measure of holiness and a path to piety... For setting oneself apart leads to the purification of the body from wicked actions. Purifying one's body leads to sanctifying one's soul from wicked character traits. And the holiness of the soul causes one to resemble the Divine presence...¹¹

In Ezekiel 4:13, God declares that as a punishment for Jerusalem, its people will be sent into exile. During their exile, they will inevitably eat their bread while in a ritually unclean state. God highlights their hypocrisy, indicating that their outward display of holiness is merely a facade, and the changing circumstances will reveal their true inward state: their uncleanness. This indicates that as early as the first Temple era, Israel was already engaging in this practice. Over time, those who willingly embraced this dietary restriction became identified as the 'Perushim,' which translates to 'separate' and is now recognized as the Pharisees. They formed a close-knit community or brotherhood¹², accepting only those who committed to the rigorous practice of consuming unconsecrated food in a state of purity, abstaining from mingling with the "Am ha-Aretz" (the common people, farmers, poor, and uneducated), and adhering to the payment of tithes to the priests.¹³ The Aramaic translation of the Torah, known as Targum Yonathan paraphrases the Hebrew of Exodus 22:30; "You shall be holy men to me" as "You shall be holy men, tasting non-Temple food in purity, to me." The authorship is credited to Jonathan Ben Uzziel, who was a disciple of Hillel the Elder and belonged to the Pharisee sect.

Not clean, not unclean, but Common

In Leviticus, the Lord exhorts Aaron and his sons not only to discern between what is clean and unclean but also to be mindful of the distinction between what is holy, and that which represents its opposite. Leviticus 10:10 states, "And that ye may put difference between holy and **common [in Hebrew: Chol]**, and between unclean and clean..." Different translations may interpret the Hebrew word "Chol" as "common" or "unholy," yet both express the notion of a state contrary to what is considered holy. If holiness is characterized by being set-apart and distinct, then what is unholy is mundane, ordinary, lacking in uniqueness, hence, common.

¹¹ Tum'at Okhalin 12

¹² Known as 'chavurah', originating from 'Chaver', Hebrew for friend, this term denoted a comrade within the party.

¹³ Tosefta Demai 2

The Greek equivalent of "Chol" or in English: common, is Koinos. This is why it is used to describe believers who "had all things in **common [koinos]**" (Acts 2:44).

In the rigorous adherence to meticulous cleanliness, particularly in the endeavor to consume uncontaminated foods, the hands emerge as the primary source of impurity capable of impeding the efforts of a devout Israelite. According to Rabbinic decree, even if an Israelite is entirely clean in body, the hands are deemed **unholy [Hebrew:Chol/Greek:Koinos]** and capable of transferring impurity until they are washed.

"The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were **defiled [Koinos]**, that is, unwashed." - Mark 7:1-2

To treat what is holy as if it were common is a form of disrespect - an act of "profaning" what is holy. In Hebrew, the term for profane is "Chalal," often evoking the imagery of piercing, symbolizing the disturbance caused to God when sanctified objects, times, or places are treated without reverence. When an Israelite neglected their duty to maintain holiness and instead allowed themselves to become common, it was considered equivalent to an act of "Chalal", signifying a reckless disregard for their sanctity and potential. This is the reason why, even though there's nothing inherently negative about the term "common," its usage was derogatory, suggesting a lowering or a sense of "defilement."

If Holiness is attained through consuming clean food in a state of purity (as was the prevailing belief of the time), it stands to reason that partaking of clean food tainted by impurity must therefore bring about a departure from holiness. Should an Israelite fail to wash their hands before eating, the impurity would transfer from the hands to the entire body, leading to a spiritual decline—a degradation encompassing their body, mind, and spirit.

Matthew 15 and Mark 7 - Eating with unwashed hands does not make a man Unholy

Matthew 15 and Mark 7 both recount the same incident where the Pharisees observed some of Jesus' followers eating without washing their hands. Approaching Jesus, the Pharisees questioned why he permitted his disciples to disregard what they deemed the "tradition of the Elders." In both accounts, Matthew and Mark swiftly highlight the central issue: this dispute centered on tradition rather than any violation of the written Torah. Additionally, this confrontation addresses the superstition surrounding the idea that eating with unwashed hands can render a person unholy—a notion also stemming from tradition. Jesus responds by admonishing the Pharisees for prioritizing tradition above all else, even elevating it above the Torah itself.

Jesus concludes his interaction with a poignant declaration: "Nothing outside a person can **defile [Koinoo, verb form of Koinos]** them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that **defiles [Koinoo]** them."¹⁴

Naturally, the disciples were initially puzzled by Jesus' opposition to tradition, which harked back to the time of the prophet Ezekiel. They sought clarification, possibly because of disbelief. Jesus clarified:

¹⁴ Mark 7:15.

“Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these **defile [Koinoo]** them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what **defile [Koinoo]** a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.” - Matthew 15:17-20

In the book of Mark, the author adds additional context to allow the reader to better understand the point Jesus made, and to reveal that he presented the argument in a way that would have resonated with the more legally minded among his disciples:

“Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him; Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats?” - Mark 7:18-19 [KJV version]¹⁵

Jesus referenced their Halakhic position on human waste. Jewish law treated human and animal dung like stone which cannot contract ritual impurity. The Mishnah lists dung among other materials that could be used to make a vessel to protect its contents from impurity.¹⁶ If what a person eats (even if it's unclean) when digested is purged and comes out clean - how can it possibly affect a person's holiness? The body actually transforms the unclean into clean, therefore the impurity does not endure long enough to affect the heart and the spirit. In fact, as food exits the body, it moves in the opposite direction and away from the heart! This was a quick-witted effort to convey a fundamental truth to those whose legalistic mindset obscured the obvious: that a person's holiness is not determined by what they eat, but by the sincerity of their heart, actions, words, and thoughts.

Peter and Acts 10

In Acts 10, Peter experiences a vision where a large sheet is lowered to earth by its four corners. Within the sheet are a variety of animals including four-footed creatures, reptiles, and birds. A voice commands Peter to approach the animals, kill, and eat. Peter reacts with disgust and reluctance, saying, "Surely not, Lord!...I have never eaten anything **common [Koinos]** or unclean" (Acts 10:14). In this passage, Peter conveys that he has faithfully abstained from anything unclean, as expected. Interestingly, it's also clear that like the Pharisees, Peter was also staunchly committed to avoiding permitted food that had been rendered common. The voice concludes: Again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider **unholy [Koinos]**." This happened three times.

¹⁵ Many would argue for the translation offered by versions like the NIV and ESV, which conclude the verse with: "Thus he declared all foods clean." The discrepancy arises due to the ambiguity of the subject responsible for purging in the text. The Greek text states: "because not it enters of him into the heart, but into the belly, and into the sewer it goes out? Purging/Purifying all the food." The query revolves around identifying the agent purifying the food. Is it the belly, recently mentioned? Or is Jesus referring to himself? I would argue that the context of the situation and the argument strongly suggest that Jesus is referring to the belly as the agent that purifies. Otherwise, it would be peculiar for his detractors to remain silent regarding his announcement that all unclean foods are purged. If this interpretation aligns with Jesus's intended meaning, it seems to have been missed by his opponents. Furthermore, many overlook the logical inconsistency of Jesus rebuking the Pharisees for seeking to nullify the Torah in favor of tradition, only to later nullify the dietary restrictions of the Torah himself.

¹⁶ Mishnah Kelim 10:1

The vision in Acts 10 holds a twofold significance. Firstly, it serves as an allegorical portrayal of Gentiles, depicted by the unclean animals and the sheet's four corners, symbolizing their spread across the world (four corners of the earth¹⁷). Secondly, it points to a real world change: "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." If the vision had included the phrase: "What God has cleansed, no longer consider **UNCLEAN**" a convincing case could be made that at this declaration, God was announcing all unclean animals (as shown in the vision) as clean. However, the use of the Greek word "Koinos" complicates this interpretation. This term was commonly understood in the 1st century to refer to permitted food within the clean category that had been made impure through contact. Therefore, the phrase actually indicates a different meaning. It suggests that the subject of the vision, having undergone purification, is not inherently impure like the animals depicted, but rather something inherently clean that has been made impure and considered common/unholy.

The narrative is less than subtle in guiding the reader to the conclusion that there's a connection between the mysterious subject and the Gentiles who are eager to meet him. The repetition of the message to "kill and eat" occurred **three times**. As Peter pondered the significance of the vision, the Spirit revealed that **three Gentiles** were seeking to meet him. The next day, when Peter arrived in Caesarea to meet Cornelius and his family, Peter explains:

"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. **But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.** So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" - Acts 10:28-29

The Torah does not prohibit ordinary interactions, including business or friendly exchanges, between Jews and Gentiles. For the average Israelite, engaging with Gentiles is entirely compatible with fulfilling all written obligations. Complications arise when an Israelite pursues goals beyond what is prescribed in the Torah, such as striving for constant purity, or when leadership imposes extra regulations like the decree to wash hands before eating. This decree places pressure not only on the Perushim but also on the average Israelite willing to submit to rule, to uphold purity continuously. The Perushim's pursuit led them to separate even from fellow Israelites, considering association with the "Am Ha-Eretz " unacceptable, and proximity to Gentiles strictly prohibited. The issue arises from the belief that Gentiles and the "Am Ha-Eretz," along with anything associated with them, are common, making it challenging to maintain purity in their presence, leading to the preference to avoid interaction altogether.

The purpose of such a practice was to maintain Israel's distinction from the Gentile world. However, Peter now recognizes the outdated nature of such efforts. God is now reaching out to the Gentile world to include them. Continuing to think in terms of common and uncommon would hinder God's purposes:

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." - Acts 10:34

¹⁷ Isaiah 11:12

Romans 14

Paul starts by addressing the discord that has arisen among believers regarding "disputable matters," which pertain to what he considers trivial issues. Evidently, there were some who followed a vegetarian diet and were engaging in disputes over this issue, even showing disdain for those who did not share their conviction about abstaining from meat. Paul concludes that such dietary choices are personal matters, and since whatever a person does, they do it for God, whether eating meat or abstaining, what truly matters is that it is done with reverence for God. Moving on, Paul addresses the matter of regarding certain days as sacred. Similarly, he informs his readers that they are free to worship God in whatever manner they choose.

Paul appears to make a striking theological statement, suggesting that, in his conviction as one fully committed to the teachings of the Lord Jesus, nothing is inherently unclean:

"I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is **unclean [Koinon]** in itself." - Romans 14:14

However, in the Greek, it is clear Paul is not announcing that nothing is "unclean" of itself. Rather, Paul states that nothing should be considered "Koinon" which is a variation of "Koinos", common. Paul's point is that when it comes to permissible food choices, such as meat and vegetables, and regarding certain days as sacred for worship, nothing should be considered inherently more or less holy than the others. All days are equally worthy of worship, and all types of clean food, when consumed with gratitude to God and in moderation, are not inherently superior or inferior to one another.