

## HOW THE JEWISH RITE OF WASHING HANDS BEFORE BREAD CHANGED OVER THE CENTURIES

### Overview

All the historical rabbinical authorities hold that you basically should pour only once on each hand, except that you pour an extra time on each hand if your hands started out dirty, and another extra time on each hand if you pour less than 5 oz of water which almost never happens in practice. So, if your hands are clean and you use over 5 oz of water on each hand, you need to pour only once on each hand. Only two or three rabbinical authorities (**Ra'avad**<sup>1</sup> in year 1150, **Rashba**<sup>2</sup> in year 1300 and maybe **Gra**<sup>3</sup> in year 1750) disagree and hold you still need to pour twice on each hand. **Piskai Tshuvos** (chelek 2, siman 158, section 3, sub-section 122?? entitled "Pouring water for washing hands – Amount") states that all poskim agree that pouring many times (more than twice) on each hand serves no purpose and is a waste of water. But he, **Piskai Tshuvos** (chelek 2, siman 166, section 3, footnote 53) does admit that the followers of kabalah do pour 3 times on each hand.

So it is puzzling why many people in practice pour three times on each hand. In fact, the Lubavitchers teach their adherents to do so. The code of Jewish law (Shulchan Aruch Larav 158:17) written 250 years ago by the founder of the Lubavitcher movement – the famous Shneur Zalman<sup>4</sup> states that if your hands are clean and you use over 5 oz on each hand, you need to pour only **once** on each hand. He also writes (on the page before, probably quoting from Talmud) that whoever washes his hands more than he has to, unless if for cleanliness, is just showing off ("gasut ru'ach"). However, two later Lubavitcher rebbes – Rashab and Maharash – washed 3 times on each hand.<sup>5</sup>

### Background

Background support for the above information is as follows: **Chulchan Aruch** 158:13 and 158:4 middle line and 162:2, and Rama 162:2, and Mishna Brurah 162 sif katan 21 say that only 1 pouring is enough. **Mishna Brurah** there states that only **Ra'avad**, **Rashba** and maybe **Gra** hold you need at least 2 pours on each hand. **Shaylos UTeshovos HaRash** (found in Fuchs Bet Sefer library), chelek 48, Sh'aila 12, requires only one pour per hand if pouring a rev'i's on each hand.

**Aruch Hashulchan** Orech Chaim siman 164 sif 7 states that only 1 pour/hand is needed if using rvi'is and 2 pours/hand is needed if less than rvi'is is used, but never 3 pours/hand even if hands were dirty, as we learn in Tosefta Yadaim perek 1. **Aruch Hashulchan** Orech Chaim siman 164 sif 11 cites **Tur** who cites the **Smag** as requiring 3 pours on each hand for bread – one to remove dirt and another 2 to remove tumah. **Aruch Hashulchan** states he is surprised at the Shulchan Aruch for considering Smag's psak (of 3 pours/hand) as valid since even Tur, who cited the Smag, cited Smag's psak only for educational reasons but not as a valid actually hold Smag even for dirty hands and less than rvi'is.

**Lubavitchers** say that powering 3 times (on each hand) for bread is hinted to by **Shach**, siman 69, sif katan 28, stating "and therefore even by hand needs powering 3 times". However, that statement by Shach refers to pouring water on meat held in the air "by hand" after kashering meat with salt; it does not refer to pouring water on hands for eating bread.

**Piskai Tshuvos**<sup>6</sup> (chelek 2, siman 158, section 3, sub-section 122?? entitled "Pouring water for washing hands – Amount") states that although there is disagreement between the poskim on whether there is benefit in pouring much more than a rvi'is with each power, they all agree that pouring many times (more than twice on each hand) serves no purpose and is a waste of water. But then he, **Piskai Tshuvos** (chelek 2, siman 166, section 3, footnote 53), does admit that the followers of kabalah do pour 3 times on each hand.

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<sup>1</sup> Ra'avad, Abraham ben Isaac of Narbonne (1110-1179) France

<sup>2</sup> Rashba, Shlomo ben Aderet (1235-1310) Spain

<sup>3</sup> Vilna Gaon (1720-1797) Lithuania

<sup>4</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liadi, (1745-1812) Lithuania, aka Shneur Zalman Baruchovitch, RaZaSh, Baal HaTanya, the Alter Rebbe, Rabbeinu HaZokein, Rabbeinu HaGodol, GRaZ. He wrote Shulchan Aruch HaRav and Tanya

<sup>5</sup> Lubavitcher book Hayom Yom, 20 Shvat 5703, p.91.

<sup>6</sup> Piskei Teshuvos on the Mishna Berura, written by Rabbi Simcha Rabinowitz from Jerusalem