



(Ritual) Handwashing Saves Lives

Topic

Handwashing

Relevant Vocabulary

Grade Level(s)

6th – 12th

Big Ideas

- The practice of ritual handwashing, among other things, saved the lives of Jewish people during the Black Plague in the 14th century.
- Handwashing may seem inconvenient, but it can serve as a moment of introspection and gratitude.

Learning Targets

Students will:

- Learn, briefly, about the Black Plague and general health and hygiene during this time.
- Learn or review the blessing for handwashing.
- Create a *kavannah* to recite or think about before handwashing

נְטִילַת יָדַיִם (<i>Netilat Yadayim</i>)	Ritual Washing of the Hands
כוּנָה (<i>Kavanah</i>)	Intention
כֹּהֲנִים (<i>Kohanim</i>)	Priests They worked in the <i>Mishkan</i> and the <i>Beit Hamikdash</i>
מִשְׁכָּן (<i>Mishkan</i>)	The Desert Tabernacle of the Israelites
בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ (<i>Beit Hamikdash</i>)	The Holy Temple in Jerusalem

Materials / Technology Needed

- Students should have pencil and paper
- The ability to share a screen and show videos
- Short videos about the Black Plague:
 - [Black Death Facts](#)
 - [How Rats and Fleas Spread the Black Death](#)
 - [Plague 101 by National Geographic](#) About the Black Plague and other Pandemics
 - [What Made the Black Death \(The Plague\) so Deadly?](#) (Done in cartoon style)



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Background for Teachers

The Black Plague

The Black Plague, also known as the Black Death, killed between 50 and 75 million people across Europe between 1347 and 1353. The disease is caused by a bacterium known as *Yersinia pestis* which traveled on rats and the fleas attached to them. Like many other bacterial infections, it was able to spread between human carriers before symptoms appeared.

The plague got its name from some of the symptoms of the disease: swellings the sizes of eggs or apples in the groin and armpits would turn black days after they appeared; black, pus-filled boils would appear on the body; and extremities would turn black as they rotted.

It's believed that the plague began in China in the early 1340s and traveled along popular trade routes to India, Persia, Syria and Egypt. In 1347, 12 ships arrived in Sicily from the Black Sea. The majority of the sailors on these ships were either dead or near death. Though authorities ordered the ships to leave immediately, the damage was already done. The plague swept swiftly through Europe and, though historians disagree on the number, it is said to have killed between 30 and 60% of the population. At times, entire villages were wiped out.

The bacteria that caused the Black Plague still exist today but can be cured with antibiotics.

The Plague and the Jews

It's important to note that both medical knowledge and hygiene practices in the 14th century were far different than today. Many Europeans thought the plague was an act of God. Additionally, 14th century European citizens neither bathed nor changed their clothes often.

With no visible cause, European society searched for one. The Jews of Europe had been a frequent target from the Crusades forward. Some thought simply that the Plague was God's punishment for Jews not having accepted Jesus. Others thought that Jews had been more proactive; and blamed them for poisoning the wells. This led to pogroms. In 1349, Jews were murdered in Strasbourg, Germany; later that year the Jewish populations of Mainz and Cologne were wiped out.

One of the circumstances that fueled the belief that Jews were responsible, is that Jewish people died at approximately half the rate of the rest of the European population. Though there have been many theories about this, one prominent idea is that Jewish people were less likely to pass the disease from one to another given the frequency with which they washed their hands. Additionally, though some Jews lived in close proximity to their non-Jewish neighbors and traded freely with them, others lived separately and had less contact.



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Handwashing in Judaism

Ritual handwashing dates back to *Mishkan*, in which there was a handwashing vessel. Priests were only allowed to eat certain offerings and gifts after their hands were washed. This is just one of many rituals performed at the *Beit Hamikdash* to ensure physical and spiritual purity.

Traditionally, Jewish people wash hands before meals containing bread, when waking up in the morning, when leaving the bathroom (one would hope!), after touching certain parts of the body, and a number of other reasons mainly connected to sex and the ritual surrounding death.

The traditional method of handwashing is performed using a cup, often with handles. Ironically, hands need to be clean before washing, so that the water comes directly in contact with the skin and isn't blocked by any impurities. One pours water over their dominant hand using their non-dominant hand and then switches. Tradition differs as to the number of times, ranging from one to three. A blessing is said following handwashing. If handwashing occurred in preparation for a meal, some have the custom of not speaking between recitation of the prayer and eating bread, except for reciting *motzi*.

Description of Activities

Tell students that, instead of focusing on the restrictions of the current pandemic, you want to start by sharing some of the positive, community-focused things that have occurred as a result. You could ask students what they have participated in and/or seen, or you might choose to find and share one of the many clips online of people cheering for medical professionals, holding birthday celebrations at a distance, or participating in a sing-along.

Remind students that there is often strength and joy in community even if it is at a distance. Tell students that being part of the Jewish community was allowed for both advantages and disadvantages during another famous pandemic, the Black Plague.

Using the material or one of the videos suggested above, briefly inform students about the genesis and spread of the Black Plague. Ask: What similarities do you see between the Black Plague and the current pandemic? If it's not mentioned, make sure to bring up the following points: it began in the Far East and traveled to Europe via the predominant mode of trade and transportation; it was passed through bodily fluids and close contact; carriers could be asymptomatic for a number of days before symptoms showed.

Tell students that historians think that approximately half the number of Jews died as compared to the rest of European population. Ask: Why do you think that might be the case. If it doesn't come up in conversation, bring up the idea of handwashing.



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Remind students that one of the things they've been asked to do over and over again in the last few weeks is wash their hands. Ask students how they feel about the constant handwashing. Ask if their feeling has changed since the current pandemic began.

Provide information on the genesis of handwashing in Jewish law as well as the practical details of the multiple times a day and ways in which Jewish people traditionally wash their hands. Speak briefly about how, even without soap, this practice might have helped the Jewish people stay safe.

Teach students the following phrase. You may want to put it on a shared screen. "More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." Ahad Ha'am, founder of Cultural Zionism.

Ask students how handwashing might be substituted for Shabbat in Ahad Ha'am's statement. What is your opinion of whether the edited statement rings true?"

Teach students the handwashing blessing, perhaps sharing your screen.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצוותיו, וצונו על נטילת ידים

Baruch atah A-donay, Elo-heinu Melech Ha'Olam, asher kiddeshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al netilat yadayim.

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us with God's commandments, and commanded us concerning the washing of the hands.

No matter where students are, you might encourage students to wash their hands at this point and gather back together to say the blessing. Note: If you are uncomfortable with asking students to recite a *bracha l'vatalah* (a blessing said the purpose of which is not carried out) you might have them learn the blessing without washing their hands or asking them to have a piece of bread available to eat after they have washed hands and recited the blessing.

Ask students how it felt to wash their hands in a ritual manner. Ask if their feeling about handwashing changed since learning that it has saved many Jewish lives.

Invite students to write a *kavanah*, an intention, to be used before washing hands at the times when you feel as though it is just one more thing that you are being asked to do. A *kavanah* helps one focus on both the meaning of the prayer and on the place of the prayer in one's life.

Give five minutes to write a *kavanah*. You might share the following suggested wording which comes from Jewish tradition:

- May it be your will, O God....
- May the one who blessed our ancestors....
- Blessed are you, Adonai our God....
- In these times in ancient days....



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Ask those who are comfortable doing so to share their *kavanot*.

Encourage students to hang what they've written up outside the bathroom or in the kitchen so that they, and their family members, can see it when they are washing their hands. They could also hang the blessing if they choose.