During their formative years, the people of Israel were desert dwellers who moved into the hilly regions of the mountains. They lived there on marginal lands that at least in the beginning were not very fertile and had few water resources. Under these circumstances, water was the limiting factor for their very existence, the basic material source of life. They needed water for the same purposes we need it today: as drinking water for people and animal husbandry, for washing and cleaning, for gardening and agricultural purposes, and, in addition, for ritual purposes, i.e., cleaning the body to make it suited for religious life.

This essay focuses on two uses of water, for drinking, the self-evident basis of human life, and for cleaning the body. Whereas the importance of drinking water is self-evident, let us make clear the high significance of cleaning the body in ancient Israelite society. The first thing every guest entering a house got was a vessel with water for cleaning the feet. This custom, the fulfillment of which was mandatory for the host, goes back to the days of the biblical patriarchs. Abraham and Lot offered their guests water for foot-washing (Gen. 18:4; 19:2), and it is reported that Jesus once accused his host in public for not having given him water to clean his feet after entering the house (Luke 7:44).

Another type of cleaning of great importance to the Israelites took place in public bath houses. Lev. Rabbah V,3 holds that, already in early times, each tribe had thirteen public bath houses, while the hot bastes of Tiberias were common property of all tribes together. In Mishnaic times, bathing was extremely popular. Unlike the Romans, who went to bath houses only for their pleasure and did not consider hot bathing an act of health care (cf., Pliny, Hist. Nat. 29,8 g E), Jews

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considered hot bates an integral part of hygiene and health care. While healthy people were not allowed to go to a bath during the period of mourning for a close relative, bathing was considered so important that the weak and elderly were exempt from this rule. Gamaliel, when he was old and weak, even considered a bath necessary on the day his beloved wife died (M. Ber. 2:6).

Cleaning, however, had also a spiritual meaning: According to Huna, it was the duty of a wife personally to wash the face, hands, and feet of her husband, even if she brought four maids into the household from her dowry. A Hebrew slave, however, was not supposed to wash the feet of his master; this service the master could expect, apart from his wife, only from his disciple or his son (Mekhilta Mish. I. p. 75).

The religious and spiritual importance of water for people living at the rim of the desert can be seen from the fact that in neighboring countries, Egypt and Babylon, the major rivers—the Nile, Euphrates, and Tigris—were deified and major gods. In ancient Judaism, water also was considered a blessing for the earth. But instead of being deified, it was considered a very special and great gift of the one and only god. The Hebrew Bible is full of praises of water as God’s present to the earth, and the Psalms use the presence of good water to describe God’s mercy: “He leads me besides still water” (Ps. 23:2); “Thou visitest the earth and waterest it...the river of god is full of water” (Ps. 65:9). In Ps. 72, water is used as an allegory for God: “He will be like a rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth” (Ps. 72:6). God “turns a desert into pools of water” (Ps. 107:33). Many more quotations can be found not only in the Psalms but in many other books of the Hebrew Bible.

In view of this spiritual appreciation, it is not surprising that water also had a religious meaning for ancient Judaism and was the subject of many laws and numerous discussions in the Mishnah and Talmud.

Microbiology of Water

Prior to the nineteenth century, no sterile water was available, and it was not possible to keep bacteria from multiplying. Bacteria were present everywhere, and, overnight, water with an initially low content of bacteria could turn poisonous for human beings. As all first year microbiology students learn, twenty four hours after inoculation with very few bacteria, a sterile medium will contain up to $10^{10}$ bacteria per milliliter. Water with only $10^6$ bugs per milliliter still has a crystal clear appearance. Thus a drink that looks perfectly clean may