Introduction to Tahara/Tum'a

The *Torah* commands us to be *kedoshim* (holy, or set apart), requiring purity in what we eat, how we speak, what we wear, and how we behave. *Tum'a* is spiritual impurity generally resulting from transitions from life to death (even in a small measure; for instance—sleep or cutting nails). *Tum'a* inhibits or blocks us from achieving holiness.
Since we do not have a "red heifer" with which to make purifying water solutions, all people are considered to have some level of *tum'a* today.
Although there are three reasons to ritually wash hands--to add *kedusha*; to remove *tum'a*; and to remove dirt--*tum'a* normally has nothing to do with physical dirt. There are many types and levels of *tum'a*, with no exact progression. The following guideline is approximately in descending order from most impure to least:

Sources of the Different Levels of *Tum'a*

- Dead body (touching or being in same building with a dead body);
- Cemetery;
- Carcass of any dead animal not slaughtered by *shechita*;
- Women during and after menstruation or after childbirth (but before they immerse in a *mikva*);
- Sleep;
- Possibly a bathroom;
- Your hands' transferring *tum'a* to wet food;
- Your hands' transferring *tum'a* to bread;
- Food from under a bed on which someone slept;
- Intercourse or seminal emission;
- Having your beard, hair, or nails cut;
- Leather shoes;
- Touching body parts.

Depending on the level of *tum'a*, purifying may require:

- Washing your hands by the *Three-Times Method.*
- Washing your hands by the *One-Time Method*.
- Immersion in a *mikva*. OR
- Sprinkling with water that had been treated with ashes from a red heifer (which we do not have now).

NOTE Wearing a glove does not block your hand from receiving *tum'a* from urination or defecation. However, wearing a glove does block *tum'a* from touching your shoes or petting a dog.

NOTE Even though some *tum'a* can only be transmitted by contact (and sometimes by contact when the *tamei* item is wet), *tum'at meit* (the ritual impurity of a dead person) does get transmitted simply by being in the same covered area. Therefore, food stored under a bed will get *ruach ra'a* during sleep, since sleep is considered to be a small version of death.

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