

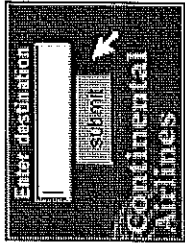
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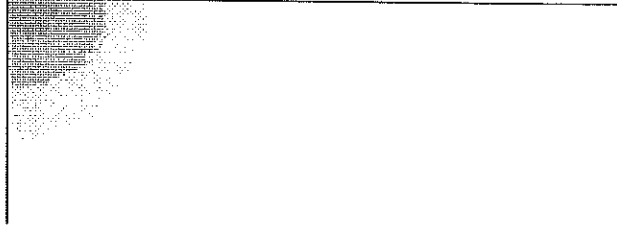
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Server Hangup



Class gives lefties a hand with performing Jewish ritual

By Brianne Korn

NEW YORK, May 22 (JTA) — Left-wingers have interpreted Jewish law, but this summer a different group will look at Jewish rituals through a left-leaning lens.

"Halacha for Lefties" is one of 30 continuing education courses being offered this summer by the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, a Jewish women's study program in New York. The class will focus on left-handedness and its relevance to Jewish law.

"There are many moments in the course of performing a ritual in which the question arises, 'How do I do this?' " explained instructor Laurie Adlerstein. "When you're a lefty, the question is compounded."

Adlerstein, herself a lefty, said ritual precision concerning the left and right sides of the body play a role in many aspects of Jewish law.

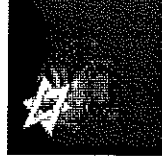
The reasons for the distinction between left and right differ according to which ritual is being performed, though a general explanation emanates from the symbolic representations assigned to the polar sides.

Right extremities are commonly considered stronger than the left and therefore used to represent importance or swiftness in carrying out God's commandments.

Lighting Shabbat candles, for example, is often initiated by the right hand to show the importance of serving God. Often, the left symbolizes weakness.

A left-handed person, however, would associate strength with his dominant hand and not with his right hand, which would be his weaker limb.

"Between right and left, it's not just knowing which hand to use but why you're using this particular hand," said Adlerstein, which is why she said the class is relevant for right-handed people also.



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When washing the hands before eating bread, for example, the right hand is normally washed first in a show of strength.

When praying the Amidah, the silent recitation of a series of blessings, it is necessary to take three steps backward when ending the prayer. Normally, the first step is taken with the left foot to show one's reluctance to leave God. Whether these movements can simply be reversed to properly represent the implied meanings are debatable, but other dilemmas are more easily solved.

Male lefties are confronted with this issue daily when donning tefillin, or phylacteries. The shell, or the arm piece, is normally placed on the left, or weaker arm. Lefties, however, are instructed to bind the shell to their right limb.

"The left hand for him is like the right hand of other people," Adlerstein said, referring to a principle in the Talmud.

According to Kabbalah, Jewish mystical tradition, the right is also associated with God's mercy while the left signifies judgment. This further confuses the issue of whether it becomes appropriate to reverse right and left movements.

"Halacha seems less concerned with branding people righties and lefties than with ensuring that commandments are performed in an appropriate manner," Adlerstein said.

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