

Reclaiming the *Mikveh* in a Reform Jewish Context

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2011 – 5771

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

*Dedicated to my mother,
with whom I shared my first mikveh experience.*

For thousands of years, the *mikveh* has held a vital place in Jewish life and law. The traditions surrounding the *mikveh* date back as early as Torah and Rabbinic times, and are still being reinterpreted and reexamined even today.

This thesis begins (chapter one) by looking at the formation of the Reform Movement in Germany and later in the United States, specifically noting attitudes towards ritual and *mikveh*, and how this way of thinking changed and morphed from the inception of the movement until modern times. The early reformers didn't just do away with ritual in daily life; they also did away with observances that regulated the entry of non-Jews into the Jewish people. Modern reformers, influenced by their reactions to previous generations who had no set ritual as well as historic events such as the women's liberation movement, sought rituals which were rooted in ancient tradition and could still be meaningful and applicable to today. One of these rituals was *mikveh*; a tradition that has been reinvented and reclaimed by women looking to mark life transitions.

The second chapter discusses *mikveh* in light of Torah and Jewish law; what the variety of ancient sources teaches about the requirements of *mikveh*. Even though the basis of *mikveh* is found in Torah, the Torah never specifically mentions the work *mikveh*; therefore most of the specifications we are familiar with today stem from Rabbinic law and interpretation.

Chapter three focuses on modern times, telling how liberal Judaism began to re-embrace various traditions that had been previously cast aside and declared sexist. This chapter looks at the different elements of *mikveh* and how these have

been redefined within ceremonies and projects to meet the needs of modern, liberal women. The final chapter, reflection, shares the impetus for this thesis as well as the impact *mikveh* can have in highlighting transition and marking life experiences.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Chapter 1: <i>Mikveh</i> within the History of the Reform Movement.....	3
Chapter 2: Ritual Immersion – Laws and Practices.....	18
Chapter 3: How <i>Mikveh</i> is being Reclaimed.....	36
Chapter 4: Reflection.....	46
Bibliography	

Preface

“On a bitter cold night in the city of Mezritch, in White Russia, the rebbetzin, wife of the renowned Magid, made her way to the *mikveh*.ⁱ Reb Dov Ber the Magid was known far and wide for his scholarship, piety, and above all else, his supernatural vision. Unfortunately, the great Magid’s fame was matched only by his poverty. The couple lived as humbly as the poorest peasants. The rebbetzin had no money with her that evening, not even the nominal fee necessary to pay for entrance to the *mikvah*, nor did she want to worry her husband, since he had no money either. She hoped that the *mikvah* attendant would permit her entry without the requisite payment.

Alas, upon her arrival, the woman on duty proved to be a jaded and heartless type. She cruelly forbade the rebbetzin entry to the *mikvah*.

Her heart heavy with disappointment, the rebbetzin retraced her steps along the dark, icy road to her home.

Suddenly, to her great surprise, a carriage drew up alongside her. Within it she saw four women, obviously wealthy and of extraordinary regal bearing. They asked her what she was doing on the road alone at that hour. Weeping, she related how she had been turned away from the *mikvah*.

“How lucky!” they exclaimed. “We are on the way to the *mikvah* ourselves. Come along with us, and we’ll be happy to pay for you as well.” Trembling with

gratitude at this unexpected reversal, the rebbetzin accepted their kind offer and climbed in the carriage.

The women did indeed pay for her entry. The rebbetzin thanked them profusely, and with an uplifted spirit she used the *mikvah*, then made her own way home.

There, her saintly husband detected something about his wife, for there was almost an aura about her. When he questioned her about her evening, she recounted her initial heartbreak at the *mikvah* and then the elation brought on by the kindness of the total strangers.

“Ah,” said the Magid, smiling. “Your benefactors are *not* unknown to you after all. They were our Matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. You brought them down to earth through your tears. They heard your plea and came to take you to the *mikvah*.” ii

Chapter 1: *Mikveh* within the History of the Reform Movement

“The old becomes new, and the new becomes holy.” - Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook

For thousands of years, the *mikveh* has held a vital place in Jewish life and law. The traditions surrounding the *mikveh* date back to the Torah and later rabbinic commentaries [chapter 2], and continue to be examined and re-interpreted throughout each successive generation of Jewish men and women. For many Reform Jews living in America today, the term *mikveh* seems remote and out of the place; and the concept of family purity, *Taharat Hamishpacha*, was something left behind in the European *shtetl*. “Even among generally religious Jews, it is only in recent years that the *mikvah* has enjoyed an upsurge in popularity.” ⁱⁱⁱ A look at the formation of the Reform Movement in Germany and later in the United States helps explain why a new attitude towards the *mikveh* emerged in the late twentieth century.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Reform Judaism was born. The French Revolution was underway, and as Napoleon fought his way through the Rhineland, Jews were finally recognized as citizens of the country in which they resided. Ghettos were abolished, restrictive badges disappeared, and the Jews gained the freedom to live anywhere they wanted. In those areas that now had emancipated Jews, liberal groups and synagogues emerged. One such group is the *Felix Libertate*, blessed liberty, which decided to have its own religious services, and founded a congregation in Amsterdam in 1797 called *Adat Yeshurun*. ^{iv} Many reforms were instituted in this synagogue, ranging from a delayed burial to a

sermon every Friday night delivered by the rabbi. Another phenomenon that occurred was the Westphalian Consistory, a central authority which regulated religious life in Westphalia. In 1809, this commission issued a series of edicts regarding synagogue ritual and rabbinic duties. Even though these institutions impacting the communities in which they were formed, unfortunately they were short lived.

In 1815, after Napoleon's regime was defeated, the Jews lost their independence and equality, and the "liberal" institutions which had been created were disbanded. As a result, many Jews converted to Christianity, leaving Judaism behind for assimilation and state rights. The rabbis understood these conversions happened not out of dissatisfaction with Judaism but rather out of a need for acceptance, and encouraged Jews to steer away from Christians, as well as public schools and universities. Their response was unsuccessful. ^v

Another avenue was proposed by Rabbi Abraham Geiger, later known as the founder of the Reform Movement, who was interested in issues of the spirit. He moved his focus from philology to history and studied the intellectual and spiritual history of the Jews. In his studies, Geiger discovered that Jewish life had continually changed over the past six thousand years; that every now and then old practices were altered and new ones introduced. This resulted in Judaism as a movement changing; Jewish life was different three thousand years ago than it was from two thousand years ago. He noted that these changes seemed to make it easier for the Jews to live alongside with Judaism, and also made it more appealing to all Jews. ^{vi}

Between the years 1810 and 1820, reformed congregations emerged in Germany in the cities of Seesen, Berlin, and Hamburg. Each of these congregations instituted fundamental changes to the doctrines and beliefs of Judaism: mixed seating where previously there had been a *mechitsa*; adding an organ to the synagogue and playing it on Shabbat; a mixed gender choir; and single day observance of the Festival holidays. Along with these changes also came a number of discarded traditions and practices: *Av Harachamim* was eliminated from the prayer service; ^{vii} in many places Shabbat was observed on Sunday; and the laws of *Kashrut* and family purity were viewed as impertinent and therefore went unobserved. ^{viii} As the reformers changed Judaism, they realized that while additions were necessary, current practices were no longer meaningful to many of their congregants.

This new reformed Judaism was brought to the United States as German reformers began to immigrate in the mid-nineteenth century. “Jews had lived in North America for at least 170 years, from 1654 to 1824, before we hear of the first organized effort at religious reform.” ^{ix} The first “Reform” group, called the Reformed Society of Israelites, formed in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1825. It was created by a group of young men who wanted religious change and were seeking a Judaism not based on Talmudic law but rather on religious experience. Although this specific group didn’t last very long, other congregations and groups were created, and Reform Judaism rapidly became the foremost belief system of American Jews of the time.

One distinguishing feature of Reform Judaism in the United States is that from its onset there was no central rabbinic authority. However, one rabbi in particular was extremely influential. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise played a prominent role in molding its principles, ideals, and future institutions. After moving to North America from Bohemia, he spent 8 years in Albany, NY. During his tenure at Congregation Beth-El, Wise instituted reforms such as a mixed choir, confirmation, and women counting in a *minyan*. Towards the end of his tenure in Albany Wise had a falling out with Congregation Beth-El; one of the charges his congregation brought against him was that he ridiculed the women's ritual bath. ^x Soon after Rabbi Wise established his own congregation in Albany; then made his way to Cincinnati, OH, where he founded *Kehillah Kedoshah B'nai Jeshurun* [currently Wise Temple] and three crucial organizations: the Union of American Hebrew Congregations [1873]; Hebrew Union College [1875], and the Central Conference of American Rabbis [1889]. Rabbi Wise also presided over the meeting in which the writing and adoption of the Pittsburgh Platform occurred. From these institutions, as well as the subsequent platforms, emerged modern religious practices and interpretations of Jewish law.

The first platform put forth by the Reform Movement in America was written in Pittsburgh, PA, from November 16th through November 19th, 1885. The rabbis in attendance, including Rabbi Wise and another prominent and influential Reform rabbi, Kaufman Kohler, adopted a text which characterized American Reform Judaism at its onset. The Pittsburgh Platform is divided into eight points and covers

Reform views on God, Torah, and religious practice. The fourth point of the platform reads:

“We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, ^{xi} and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.” ^{xii}

Almost from its genesis, the Reform movement in America believed rituals derived from the Torah were suspect and conflicted with modern Jewish life in America. These customs, such as *Kashrut* and *mikveh*, were viewed as “Orthodox,” rather than “Jewish;” and the founders of the Reform movement needed to distinguish this newer form of Judaism from other more observant streams. Section eight of the Pittsburgh Platform reads: “...We deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.” ^{xiii} The reformers thought it was their duty to harmonize Judaism with modernity. They believed modern Jews did not have the time or the motivation to engage in rituals which altered their daily lives and made them appear different and separate from their Christian neighbors. ^{xiv} Many American Jews wanted to assimilate and be accepted as equals into American culture.

At the 1892 convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis [CCAR], a special committee was formed to study the subject of *milat gerim*, the circumcision of adult Jews-by-choice. This committee, chaired by Rabbi Isaac Mayer

Wise, submitted its report to the conference the following year. In 1893 the CCAR went on record saying that conversions should be accepted “without any initiatory rites (*milah* or *tevillah*), ceremony, or observance whatever.” For them, it was sufficient that the Jew-by-choice merely declare his or her acceptance of the essential doctrines of Judaism.^{xv} This conclusion was adopted by vote at the conference, and is representative of Reform Jewish thought and belief at this time, as evidenced in the Pittsburgh Platform. The Reformers didn’t just do away with ritual in daily life; they also did away with observances that regulated the entry of non-Jews into the Jewish people. Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof [1892-1990], a past president of the CCAR and head of the Reform responsa committee, devoted a responsum of his own to the analysis of the 1893 decision.^{xvi} He writes that the committee based its argument on three main points:

1. The Torah contains no requirement of an initiatory rite [*milah* or *tevillah*] for the Jew-by-choice.
2. The initiatory rites [*milah* and *tevilah*] were never regarded as law by the ancient rabbis. They were instead a *minhag* established during the post-*Mishnaic* period by the *Amoraim*, who had no authority to do so. Therefore they are not a requirement of rabbinic law.
3. The less-than-definite status of these rites can be seen in the fact that some medieval rabbinic authorities do not regard them as indispensable for conversion.^{xvii}

Although these assertions would later be disputed by the CCAR Responsa Committee, they speak to the nature of Reform Judaism in the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century.

In the early 1900's, thousands of Jews began emigrating from Eastern Europe to the United States. As more and more Jews arrived in America, family purity laws, the observances known as *Taharat Hamishpacha*, became a thing of the past. With newfound religious freedom came the possibility of re-envisioning ritual observance, which many times included leaving certain rituals behind in Europe. "By 1920, observance (of *mikveh*) had fallen to an alarmingly low level. Some of the reasons for this development...are: [the] influence of Reform Judaism, the lack of proper rabbinic leadership, the acculturation of the younger generation...[and] the unclean state in which the *mikvehs* were maintained." ^{xviii} As previously noted, the Pittsburgh Platform had already made a blatant statement devaluing ritual. However, the last reason mentioned above, the unclean state of the *mikveh*, speaks to more personal reasons why women no longer wanted to immerse. They thought the *miqvaot* in America were unattractive and no longer wanted to immerse in the same water other women had used. The notions of "dirty" and "filthy" are twentieth century concerns, and led to new issues with hygiene and the *mikveh*. ^{xix} Furthermore, many Jewish women at this time believed that menstruation was a private matter and by immersing in the *mikveh* once a month they were making their menstrual cycle public. ^{xx} "...The *mikveh* was a symbol of religious coercion and the intrusion of the religious establishment into the private domain." ^{xxi} *Mikveh* was largely not spoken about even within a family. At this time many women were

uncomfortable talking about their bodies and their menstrual cycles.^{xxii} Even though many men and women were uncomfortable with the notion of *taharat hamishpacha* and immersion in the *mikveh*, others fought for its continued existence in America.

In the 1930's, Rabbi Eliezer Silver, then an Orthodox rabbi in Cincinnati, OH, and president of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the U.S. and Canada, began a campaign to replace the city's rundown *mikveh*.^{xxiii} At this time, though, Cincinnati was the hub of the Reform Movement, and as such, this campaign drew much opposition from Rabbi David Phillipson, a member of the first graduating class of HUC and rabbi of Rockdale Temple, among others. Rabbi Phillipson was appalled that people in Cincinnati wanted a *mikveh* given "this age of bathrooms public and private."^{xxiv} On May 6th, 1932, Phillipson wrote to the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, stating that "the institution of the *mikveh*...is entirely foreign to our modern interpretation of Jewish faith and practice."^{xxv} Phillipson was a staunch advocate of the Reform movement, and focused on defending it. He believed the Reform Movement provided harmonization of modernity and Judaism, and obsolete rituals and beliefs had no place in this innovation.

This mode of thought regarding *mikveh* continued into the 1960's and 1970's. These years can partly be defined by the Women's Liberation Movement; a movement which began in the sixties and continued into the seventies. This wave of feminism addressed a wide range of issues, such as gender inequality, sexuality, family, the workplace, and reproductive rights.^{xxvi} As American's moved towards

acceptance of women in broader areas of life, many women in the Reform movement moved further away from those rituals which distinguished them from men. In 1972, Rabbi Sally Priesand was ordained by HUC, and wrote her senior thesis titled *Judaism and the New Woman*. Within this work, she stated that family purity laws are “senseless and irrelevant to modern society.”^{xxvii} Even though classical Reform Judaism was coming to an end, the rise of feminism continued to push some Reform Jewish women towards egalitarianism in all facets of religious life, while others embraced their feminism and began to search for new meanings in Judaism through ritual.

The San Francisco Platform of 1976 captures the beginning of the Reform Movement’s shift towards reclaiming traditions and rituals. Part four, titled “*Our Religious Obligations: Religious Practice*,” states: “Within each area of Jewish observance Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.”^{xxviii} Whereas previously the movement cast off many of these burdensome and secluding rituals, now it was promoting something that today we call “informed consent.” We are supposed to learn about all Jewish rituals and traditions, and then decide which of these speaks to us and is meaningful to our own Jewish practice. At this time there were also other phenomena occurring which spurred a revival of ritual in general, *mikveh* in specific.

The late 1970's and early 1980's saw a reaction of Generation X to the Baby Boom Generation. "...A new generation had arisen in America, sixty percent of which had parents who were not observant. While the children of Eastern European immigrants could recall Jewish observance in their parents' homes, much of the new generation could not." ^{xxix} As a result, they began to probe deeper into Judaism searching for meaning. This new understanding and reclaiming manifested itself in many different areas of Judaism: Israel, Education, Ritual, Gay Rights, and Social Justice. Beginning in the 1980's and continuing in the years to follow, Reform Judaism continued to move away from its classical past.

In 1982, Rabbi Gunther Plaut published an article in the winter edition of the Reform Jewish magazine encouraging Reform Jews to recapture Saturday morning for celebrating Shabbat, whereas previously in some congregation Shabbat was celebrated with a Sunday service. ^{xxx} With regards to education, in 1970 the first Reform Jewish day schools were established in Miami and New York, and in 1985 the UAHC at its biennial convention resolved to create a curriculum specifically designed for Reform Jewish day schools. In 1987 PaRDes, the Progressive Association of Reform Day Schools, was established. Also beginning in the 1980's and continuing to present times we also witness the integration of Jewish concerns with universal concerns. Through sermons, prayer, and statements of principle, Jews became concerned with matters such as the anguish of animals (*Tza'ar ba'alei chayim*) and poverty. Reform Jews were quickly becoming more educated in all facets of Jewish life, and this led to another phenomena beginning in the 1980's.

At this time there was also a revival of mysticism within Judaism, which led women to begin looking at feminist traditions in order to enhance their own spirituality. ^{xxxix} This revival coincided with the rise of Evangelicalism; a religion which had its own water based rituals such as baptism and immersion in Israel in the Jordan River. ^{xxxix} As a result, one ritual Jews began to reclaim was *mikveh*; for now they weren't quite so different from their Christian neighbors. The Christians engaged in baptism while Jews celebrated *mikveh*. The reclamation of *mikveh* began with conversion. ^{xxxix} Jews-by-choice wanted to celebrate their new faith with a meaningful ceremony that included ancient Jewish traditions, and for women this custom traditionally was *mikveh*. However, many of the *miqvaot* at this time were controlled by the Orthodox movement, and as a result were unavailable to Jews-by-choice who converted into other streams of Judaism. ^{xxxix} The Reform movement therefore needed a *mikveh* under its control.

In 2001, Anita Diamant and other women presented the idea of a pluralistic *mikveh* at the CCAR Biennial in Boston. Their idea was to create a *mikveh* which could be utilized by all streams of Judaism, not controlled by the Orthodox movement, and would rid Jewish men and women of past *mikveh* stereotypes and fears. She wanted liberal Jews to reclaim *mikveh* not only for conversion but also for other life transitions. Diamant says she was unsure how the participants of the conference would respond to this idea, and that her heart sank when Rabbi Gunther Plaut stood to make a comment in the middle of the presentation. He made his way to the microphone, and said: "This is something we need to do." ^{xxxix} This same sentiment was echoed in the reply section of a CCAR responsum titled "Circumcision

for an Eight-Year-Old Convert” released in 1996, although the discussion began years before this responsum was published. This responsum was particularly important as it attacked the reasoning of the 1892 committee which proposed to do away with initiatory rites for conversion. The original justification for doing away with these rites has now been cast into serious doubt, and as such Reform Jews are looking for ways to reclaim *mikveh*.

Even though in 1893 the early reformers dispensed with the initiatory rites of conversion, it is now believed these “do not necessarily serve as an ideal or a standard for our contemporary practice.”^{xxxvi} In this responsum, the committee notes that in modern times, many reform rabbis *do* insist their students partake in *milah* or *tevillah* as they enter into the Jewish faith. Even though these are not mandatory, *milah* and *tevillah* appear in the current Reform Rabbi’s Manual as part of the ceremony for conversion. The Responsa Committee also concluded that:

“... in a number of *teshuvot* that *milah* and *tevilah* are relevant and positive options for conversion under Reform auspices. We have noted that, ‘in practice, circumcision has been a virtually universal requirement.’ And we have argued that the practice of *tevilah* for converts allows us to preserve a sense of continuity with Jewish religious history and to express our solidarity with *kelal yisrael*, with Jewish religious practice everywhere, including the practice of the progressive Jewish communities outside the United States which insist upon the rite.”^{xxxvii}

The reply in this responsum clearly indicates a shift in position regarding *mikveh* from the beginning of the Reform movement to modern times. Even though the 1893 resolution still remains the official position of the Reform movement, as a new

stance could potentially jeopardize previous conversions and dishonor our founding fathers, the sentiment within the movement has shifted towards a reclaiming of these rituals.

This shift is verbalized in the New Pittsburgh Platform of 1999. This platform confirms that the Reform movement is moving towards more tradition, and recognizes the importance of *mitzvot*:

“We are committed to the ongoing study of the whole array of *mitzvot* and to the fulfillment of those that address us as individuals and as a community. Some of these *mitzvot*, sacred obligations, have long been observed by Reform Jews; others, both ancient and modern, demand renewed attention as the result of the unique context of our own times.” xxxviii

Even though the reform attitude had changed, it was not until the late 1990’s with the opening of Reform *miqvaot* that reclaiming became a reality. As of 1998, the third Reform *mikveh* was opening at Congregation Shir Ami in Newton, PA; the two previous Reform *miqvaot* are located at Temple Israel in suburban Detroit and a synagogue in Toronto. During an interview with Rabbi Elliot Strom, the senior rabbi at Congregation Shir Ami, he noted “there has been a transition in the movement during the past 25 years. At one time, Reform congregations had confirmations instead of *B’nai Mitzvah*. Now, however, such ceremonies and other ‘old traditions’ are no longer being discarded but are being performed in ‘new ways.’” xxxix Along with these egalitarian *miqvaot*, another *mikveh* opened in Boston a few years later which has majorly impacted the return of *mikveh* to liberal Judaism.

In 2004, *Mayyim Hayyim*, meaning “waters of life,” opened just outside of Temple Reyim in Boston, MA. *Mayyim Hayyim* is a resource not only for the Boston community but for all liberal Jewish communities searching for a way to re-create this piece of ancient tradition. At the *Mayyim Hayyim* International Conference held in 2010, Aliza Kline, the founding Executive Director of *Mayyim Hayyim*, posed these questions: Why now? What is it about this ritual that makes it appealing now? She answered her own inquiry by noting that Jewish women have a new-found hunger for rituals that are meaningful and accessible and a curiosity to understand what is Jewish. Today, in modern times, Jewish women have the freedom to reinterpret ritual to meet their own needs.^{xi} Since *Mayyim Hayyim*’s inception, it has provided around 1400 immersions every year for men and women, helping them mark milestones such as weddings, *B’nai Mitzvah*, conversions, surviving trauma or illness, and coming out ceremonies to name a few.^{xii} *Mayyim Hayyim* has written numerous ceremonies for occasions such as these, some of which can be found on their website while others can be purchased. “*Mayyim Hayyim* is a fountain of creativity that has, in its first five years, inspired new liturgies and curricula, publications, music, artwork, and plays.”^{xiii} This *mikveh* is truly a gift to liberal Judaism, and serves as a major asset in helping the Reform movement reclaim this ancient tradition. As the trend shows, in future years more and more liberal women and men will continue to recover rituals and add new meaning in order to incorporate them into their lives.

The following chapter in this thesis will discuss the *mikveh* in light of Torah and Jewish law; what these ancient sources teach about the requirements of *mikveh*.

The third chapter will discuss the importance of ritual and provide specific examples of how the *mikveh* is being reclaimed by the Reform movement. Finally, in its last chapter, this thesis will include personal observations and an evaluation of current *mikveh* ceremonies.

Chapter 2: Ritual Immersion – Laws and Practices

“Water purifies and regenerates because it nullifies the past, and restores – even if only for a moment – the integrity of the dawn of things.” - Mircea Eliade

The laws we follow today for the requirements of *mikveh* all stem from Rabbinic Sources. Although their basis is in the Torah, as you will see the Torah does not give specific requirements as to what constitutes a *mikveh*: how much water is needed, where it should be built, from where the water should be drawn, and how much of the water can be contaminated, to name a few. All of these conditions as well as more specifications are found in rabbinic sources. The Torah on the other hand provides examples of water being used for purification of people and objects [Leviticus and Numbers] in the form of washing one’s clothes and bathing one’s body. Water in its various forms is under God’s control from creation and the Garden of Eden, and as such all water in the Torah is viewed as divine and pure and can therefore be utilized in purification rituals. ^{xliii}

The beginning of this chapter seeks to discuss the ways in which water is utilized for purification in the Torah. The Torah contains vital information in determining how someone is made impure and the ritual used to reverse that status, as well as an important verse which serves as the basis for post biblical *mikveh* requirements. Within these books is a discussion of the *Kohanim* and their specific customs regarding purification, and also the basis for the continuing practice of purification for a woman after the state of *niddah*.

In Exodus, just before the giving of the Ten Commandments, God instructs Moses on how to prepare the Israelites to be a “*kingdom of priests and a holy nation*.”

^{xliv} God tells Moses: “*Go to the people and warn them to stay pure today and tomorrow. Let them wash their clothes* – וְכַבְּסוּ שְׂמֹלֵתָם.” ^{xlv} Although the terms *t’vilah* and *mikveh* aren’t explicitly used, the Talmud further discusses what this verse instructs in *Yevamot* 46b:

If it be suggested, 'From that which is written, Go unto the people, and sanctify them to-day and to-morrow, and let them wash their garments, if where washing of the garments is not required ablution is required, how much more should ablution be required where washing of the garments is required', [it may be retorted that] that might have been a mere matter of cleanliness. — It is rather from here: And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and we have a tradition that there must be no sprinkling without ritual ablution.^{xlvi}

Here we can see that *Chazal* presumes there was *t’vilah* along with the laundering of clothes, although the Talmud rejects this presumption. The fact that this issue is raised leads us to believe that *t’vilah* was a well-known practice. A few verses later, the Torah reiterates washing garments, and further adds how the Israelites are to remain pure after washing themselves: “*the men among you should not go near a woman*.” ^{xlvii} Therefore, the notion of purity as we understand it from these verses in Exodus has two requirements: washing of clothes and refraining from sexual relations. The element of *mikveh* found in this verse is so important that the *Mishnah* states in *Keritot* 9a: “The covenant was made before the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. It consisted basically of three things: circumcision, immersion in the *mikveh*, and a sacrifice.” ^{xlviii} Even though the Torah never explicitly states that anyone actually went to the *mikveh* prior to the giving of the

The Torah also tells us that the first step in the consecration of Aaron and his sons as *Kohanim* involved washing in water. This can be seen in three different verses from Torah:

- 1) *“Lead Aaron and his sons up to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and wash them with water - וַיִּרְחֹץ אֹתָם בַּמַּיִם.”* [Exodus 29:4]
- 2) *“You shall bring Aaron and his sons forward to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and wash them with the water - וַיִּרְחֹץ אֹתָם בַּמַּיִם.”* [Exodus 40:12]
- 3) *“Then Moses brought Aaron and his sons forward and washed them with water - וַיִּרְחֹץ אֹתָם בַּמַּיִם.”* [Leviticus 8:6]

Before Aaron and his sons could dress in their priestly vestments and be anointed with oil, they first had to be washed in water. “Ablutions are a universal feature of religious ritual. Beyond the obvious hygienic advances of water, its utilization in ritual also serves to purify symbolically.”^{xlix} In these verses water not only serves purification purposes but also marks a transition. “Here [washing]^l did not involve purification, but rather a change in status – an elevation from one state to another.”

^{li} These verses portray the evolution of using water as a purifying component in the

Torah. Although previously *mikveh* was used solely for purification, now another important element has been added: change of status. One can be considered impure before the use of water and emerge in a completely different state after washing with water.

Another place in the Torah where ritual washing symbolizes transition involves the *Kohen Gadol*. On Yom Kippur, the *Kohen Gadol* would enter the Holy of Holies two times. This required that he change his vestments five times, beginning as well as ending in his golden garments. Each time he changed his clothing, the *Kohen Gadol* bathed with water, as seen in Leviticus 16:4, 24:

- 1) *"He shall be dressed in a sacral linen tunic, with linen breeches next to his flesh, and be girt with a linen sash, and he shall wear a linen turban. They are sacral vestments; he shall bathe his body in water - וְרָחַץ בַּמִּים אֶת-בְּשָׁרוֹ - and then put them on."* [Leviticus 16:4]
- 2) *"He shall bathe his body in water - וְרָחַץ אֶת-בְּשָׁרוֹ בַּמִּים - in the holy precinct and put on his vestments; then he shall come out and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people, making expiation for himself and for the people."* [Leviticus 16:24]

Both of these verses represent a change in status for the *Kohen Gadol*, symbolized by the changing of vestments. Also, entering the Holy of Holies changed his spiritual status; his movement from a less holy state to a holier state was achieved through bathing with water. Although once again neither of these verses specifically mention *mikveh* or *t'vilah*, they do highlight two purposes of water with regards to washing in the Torah that will later apply to *mikveh*: purification and altering status.

A third example of status transition marked by washing concerns discharge: *“When the one with a discharge becomes purified of his discharge, he shall count off seven days for his purification, wash those clothes - וְכִבֵּס בְּגָדָיו, and bathe his body in fresh water - וְרָחַץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם הַחַיִּים; then he shall be pure.”* [Leviticus 15:13] Once the person with the discharge bathes his body in fresh water, s/he is able to re-enter the community and move into pure status.

Furthermore, there are also a few verses that mark status transition and involve various mixtures with water used for purification^{lii}:

- 1) *“The Eternal One spoke to Moses, saying: This shall be the ritual for a leper at the time of being purified...The priest shall order one of the birds slaughtered over fresh water in an earthen vessel; and he shall take the live bird, along with the cedar wood, the crimson stuff, and the hyssop, and dip them together - וְטָבַל אוֹתָם - with the live bird in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the fresh water. He shall then sprinkle it seven times on the one to be purified...The one to be purified shall wash those clothes, shave off all hair, and bathe in water – and then shall be pure. After that, the camp may be entered by one must remain outside one’s tent seven days. On the seventh day all hair shall be shaved off...having shaved off all hair, the person shall wash those clothes and bathe the body in water - וְכִבֵּס אֶת-בְּגָדָיו, וְרָחַץ אֶת בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם - and then shall be pure.”* [Leviticus 14:1, 5-9]

In these verses, we learn about the ritual for a leper who wants to rejoin the community. In order for the afflicted to be cleansed, fresh water must be mixed with the blood of a slaughtered bird; a crucial part of the ritual for purification. Then the priest takes a live bird along with the cedar wood, crimson stuff, and hyssop, and dips them together - וְטָבַל אוֹתָם – in the mixture of blood and fresh water. Even

though the word “טָבַל” in this verse doesn’t refer to a person immersing in water, it is the first time a connection can be made between *t’vilah* and purification; an association that will be used with *mikveh*. After the mixture has been properly administered, the leper must remain outside of the camp for seven days, shave off all their hair and wash their clothes in water, a purifying act already which has already been discussed. Then s/he can move from impure status to pure status and be readmitted to the community.

- 2) *“This is the ritual law that the Eternal has commanded: Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish...you shall give it to Eleazar the priest. It shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence...The priest shall wash his garments and bathe his body in water; after that the priest may reenter the camp, but he shall be impure until evening. He who performed the burning shall also wash his garments in water - וְכִבֶּס בְּגָדָיו הַכֹּהֵן - bathe his body in water - וְרָחַץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם - and be impure until evening. A man who is pure shall gather up the ashes of the cow and deposit them outside the camp in a pure place, to be kept for water of lustration for the Israelite community. It is for purgation. He who gathers up the ashes of the cow shall also wash his clothes - אֶת-בְּגָדָיו - and be impure until evening.”*
[Numbers 19:2-3, 7-10]

Even though the ritual described above is mandated by God, the person/people who complete it are rendered impure, and must take the prescribed steps to move to a pure status. One of these steps is washing their clothes; the JPS Torah Commentary states that “it is understood that he will also bathe his body.”^{liii} It is a necessary ritual though since it must be used as part of the water of lustration, water utilized for purification rituals, which will be used to purge the Israelite community.

3) *“This is the ritual: When a person dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be impure seven days...Some of the ashes from the fire of purgation shall be taken for the impure person, and fresh water shall be added to them in a vessel. A person who is pure shall take hyssop, dip it in the water - וְלָקַח אִזּוֹב וְטָבַל בַּמַּיִם, and sprinkle on the tent and on all the vessels and people who were there, or on the one who touched the bones or the person who was killed or died naturally or the grave. The pure person shall sprinkle it upon the impure person on the third day and on the seventh day, thus purifying that person by the seventh day. [The one being purified] shall then wash those clothes and bathe in water - וְכַבֵּשׁ בְּגָדָיו וְרֹחֶץ בַּמַּיִם – and at nightfall shall be pure.”* [Numbers 19:14, 16-19]

This final ritual describes the process one has to go through who has become impure by coming into contact with the deceased, their bones, or their grave. This custom requires mixing some of the ashes from the fire of purgation with fresh water, and then a pure person must sprinkle this upon the impure person on the designated days. Numbers 19:18 uses the term “טָבַל” in a similar mode as Leviticus 14:6; neither refers to a person immersing but rather to dipping items as part of the purification rite. The ritual ends with the impure person washing his/her clothing and bathing in water. Only then can the impure person move to a pure status.

All three of these examples provide situations where water is mixed with another substance to aid in regaining pure status. However, we have no way of knowing in what ratio these substances are to be mixed or how much water is required. The priestly legislators had no interest in answers to these questions; they were merely concerned that there be a prescribed way for impure people to regain pure status. Also in two of the examples we actually come across the word “טָבַל”

which will later be associated with immersion in the *mikveh*. No one knows exactly how often these rituals were performed or needed to be utilized, but having them ensures the entire community could remain pure.

The verses previously discussed shed little light on the details of *mikveh*, as they mainly tell about washing clothing, bathing one's body, or dipping a mixture to be used in a purification ritual. These examples all tell of scenarios in which water is imperative, and they highlight the change of status from unclean to purified, but little else can be gleaned. However, "given the significance attached to each of these occasions, the Talmudic sages took this to mean something other than an ordinary bath, and understood it in terms of Leviticus 11:36, which states that both property and people 'shall be *tahor* only [by means of] a spring, a pit, and a gathering of water.'" ^{liv} It is from this verse that the rabbis developed some of the *halachic* requirements for *mikveh* which we follow today, which are further elaborated in Rashi's explanations. In Rashi's comments on this verse, he too connects it to *t'vilah*: "Only a spring or a pit of gathering water, which are connected to the ground, cannot receive impurity. Furthermore, you can learn [from this verse that] he who immerses in them 'shall be pure.'" ^{lv} Rashi highlights the importance of having the spring or pit connected to the ground, an element of the *mikveh* requirements which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Finally, of all the laws that have previously been discussed, only the laws governing *Taharat HaMishpacha*, family purity, are still relevant today.^{lvi} These

laws, which will be discussed later in this chapter in the section on rabbinic sources, have their basis in Torah:

- 1) *"Do not come near a woman during her menstrual period of impurity to uncover her nakedness."* [Leviticus 18:19]
- 2) *"If a man lies with a woman during her menstrual condition and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow and she has exposed her blood flow; both of them shall be cut off from among their people."* [Leviticus 20:18]
- 3) *"When a woman has a discharge, her discharge being blood from her body, she shall remain in her menstrual separation seven days; whoever touches her shall be impure until evening...All those who touch them^{lvii} shall be impure – and shall wash their clothes, bathe in water - וְכִבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְרָחַץ בַּמַּיִם, and remain impure until evening. When she becomes purified of her discharge, she shall count off seven days, and after that she shall be pure."* [Leviticus 15:19, 27-28]

These laws, known as the laws of *niddah*, are based on the above verses.

Interestingly, the text does not explicitly mention immersion here. "We assume that since the other categories all require it, so does the woman who is a *niddah*, and that the Torah simply wanted to use words sparingly. Indeed, the Sages and later scholars all agreed that immersion for a woman who is a *niddah* was a commandment of Biblical status..."^{lviii} Furthermore, these laws appear under two aspects: first, they are part of the code dealing with ritual defilement, and second, they fall under moral purity.^{lix} While ritual defilement is no longer applicable today (with the exception of *niddah*) since it faded with the destruction of the Second Temple, the laws which stress moral purity are. Those which relate to moral purity "do not fade with time or become irrelevant. They form the core of the Torah's moral code, which transcends historical realities or sociological trends."^{lx} In post

biblical times, when the state of *niddah* is over, the woman is required to immerse herself in a *mikveh* in order to move back into *tahor* status. These requirements will be discussed later in this chapter with rabbinic sources.

Even though the basis for *mikveh* is evident in the Torah, our modern practices and understandings stem from rabbinic sources. As with many laws, the words of Torah were interpreted by the Sages and Rabbis of subsequent generations in an attempt to further expand and clarify additional details about the laws. Today we specifically look at those laws which pertain to the construction of a valid *mikveh* and how one should prepare one's body before immersion. Generally there are two reasons for immersion: converting to Judaism and ending the state of *niddah*. However recently people have been creating ceremonies to mark life transitions that fall outside of these two categories (to be discussed in chapter 3).

The regulations we follow for a *mikveh* that is deemed appropriate for immersions come from *Yoreh De'ah*, a section of Rabbi Jacob ben Asher's compilation of *halakhah* known as the *Shulchan Aruch*. Rabbi Asher, also known as Ba'al ha-Turim, was an influential medieval rabbinic authority who wanted to write a set of laws that would make decisions for us which were difficult to understand without further explanation. In *Yoreh De'ah*, R. Asher writes that in order for a *mikveh* to be suitable for immersions, it must satisfy the following requirements:

- 1) It must contain at least forty *se'ah* of water (*Yoreh De'ah* 201:1).
- 2) It must be constructed in such a manner as to permit complete immersion in one act (*Yoreh De'ah* 201:1).

- 3) The container (i.e. the hollow that contains the water) may not be a portable receptacle; rather, it must be built permanently into the ground, making it an integral part of the earth (*Yoreh De'ah* 201:10).
- 4) The minimum forty *se'ah* of the *mikveh* must be “natural” water, i.e., it’s source must be natural (*Yoreh De'ah* 201:3). ^{lxi}

Each of these requirements needs further explanation:

- 1) One *se'ah* is equal to about 5 gallons of water; therefore forty *se'ah* is equivalent to about 200 gallons of water, the amount deemed necessary for a person to fully immerse in the water. ^{lxii}
- 2) In order for the person to fully immerse without touching either the sides or the bottom of the container, the dimensions of the *mikveh* must be equivalent to one cubit by one cubit to the height of three cubits (*Yoreh De'ah* 201:1). This would be equivalent to 24.5 inches by 24.5 inches to a height of 77.5 inches. ^{lxiii} However, for a person to make a complete immersion in one act possible as well as comfortable, the level of the water should be about 10 to 12 inches above the navel of the person immersing, which is generally about 3.5 feet deep. ^{lxiv}
- 3) A portable receptacle may not be used for a *mikveh* because any object that is capable of contracting impurity may not be used in connection with the *mikveh* (*Yoreh De'ah* 201:6). This requirement stems from Torah, Leviticus 11:36, and was previously discussed in this chapter. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan expands this requirement and allows a *mikveh* that is considered an integral part of a building which is attached to the ground. ^{lxv}
- 4) The term “natural water” excludes any water that is deemed “drawn water;” it cannot be brought to the *mikveh* by human intervention or channeled to the *mikveh* by anything that can become unclean, i.e. a pipe or vessel made of metal, clay, or wood. ^{lxvi} This only applies to the first forty *se'ah*. Therefore, if a *mikveh* is filled with a little less than forty *se'ah* of natural water and three *log* of drawn water are added intentionally or unintentionally either at the

^{lxvii} the *mikveh* becomes disqualified (*Yoreh De'ah* 201:15). If the *mikveh* already contains the required forty *se'ah* of natural water, the addition of any amount of drawn water does not make the *mikveh* invalid (*Yoreh De'ah* 201:15). This requirement only applies to water though. If a *mikveh* is filled with a little less than forty *se'ah* of natural water and another liquid is added to complete the forty *se'ah*, such as milk, wine, or even snow, it does not become an invalid *mikveh* (*Yoreh De'ah* 201:29, 30).

Another term that needs further definition when discussing *mikveh* is natural water; specifically what qualifies as natural water and can be used in the forty *se'ah*. In the Torah, water used for *mikveh* is referred to as *mayyim hayyim* – literally, living water: “that is, running water as opposed to stagnant water...this would include ponds, lakes, rivers, and seas.” ^{lxviii} In Klein’s definition of natural sources of water, he also includes rainwater, snow (the forty *se'ah* should be measured after the snow melts), and ice (both natural and artificial). With regards to ice and snow, though, it is understood that the immersion doesn’t actually take place in either. Rather, they are put into receptacles and moved to the *mikveh*. In this case, the receptacles must have holes in them in order to prevent any additional water from the melting snow or ice, because this water would be considered drawn and would therefore contaminate the *mikveh*. (*Yoreh De'ah* 207:1). ^{lxix} Furthermore, there is a difference of opinion when it comes to using artificial ice in the *mikveh*. While most authorities allow this water as natural, those that oppose its use claim it was drawn water before it was frozen and freezing water does not change its status. ^{lxx}

Since the rules of *mikveh* have been thoroughly discussed, we must now move onto another category of requirements – those used in the construction of a

modern *mikveh*. As Klein points out, the requirements we use today take into account both Jewish law and what is feasible in American communities. Generally the water used for a *mikveh* today is rainwater which is permitted to fall into a huge container in the ground known as a *bor* or pit. The *bor* must contain at least forty *se'ah* of natural water, and it must be covered in a way that the water does not become drawn water in the process (*Yoreh De'ah* 201: 26, 44, 46, 48, 49). The natural water must enter the *bor* in such a way that it does not become drawn water; i.e. by means of a continuous length of plastic, rubber, or concrete piping without fittings. "Many authorities permit the use of metal pipes, even with fittings and bends of 90 degrees, since these are not intended to gather water but rather to transfer it, and as such are not in the category of objects that can contract ritual impurity." ^{lxxi} Then a building is constructed around the *bor* which contains small, sunken pools each sharing a wall with the *bor*. Each of these shared walls has a hole cut into it which can either be plugged or left open. "In order to make the adjoining pools into legally valid *mikvaot*, they are 'seeded' with *bor* water and then filled with regular tap water. When the hole between the pool and *bor* is unplugged so that the waters are touching...the pool becomes a valid *mikveh*." ^{lxxii} The hole must be at least 1.5 inches wide in order for the water from the *bor* to mix and make valid the water from the pools. ^{lxxiii} This method allows buildings to have multiple valid *mikvaot* that aren't easily contaminated by drawn water and can be cleaned when needed.

The question has been raised as to whether or not a swimming pool satisfies the requirement of *mikveh*. It seems logical that in cases where ritual immersion is desired or required and there is either no *mikveh* or no pluralistic *mikveh* one would

turn to a swimming pool. Most pools are built into the ground and it would be easy to channel forty *se'ah* of natural water (rainwater) into the pool and then fill the rest with tap water. However, the main problem in building a *mikveh* is the piping, in other words the vessels through which the waters must pass to circulate throughout the pool. In CCAR Responsa number 45 it is written that "the problem of recirculated water which causes a flow and drainage holes in the bottom of the pool are among the chief obstacles for traditional Jews in using a swimming pool as a *miqveh*." In a later CCAR responsa, 5756.6, these issues are further discussed and clarified:

- 1) Ritual Impurity of the Water. This water does not become impure despite being brought to the swimming pool in pipes. The pipes are not kelim (vessels) because they cannot fulfill their function before they are put in place (kev'ao ve'achar kakh chakeko). Nor does the municipal filtering system or swimming pool filtering system defile the water. It, too, is not considered to have attained its function until after it is fixed in place; it is not a keli. Furthermore, since it is not designed to hold water but to pass water through, it is not a true vessel. Finally, water which remains below ground while being conveyed through pipes is not considered "drawn", even though it is actually brought to the pool by machines (motors, taps, etc.) operated by human agency.
- 2) Ritual Impurity of the Mikveh. This depends in part on where the drain pipe is located. If it is in the center, then it is a keli; otherwise, it is not. Most swimming pools have the drain pipe in the side. And even if it is in the center, it comes under the category of kevi'ah vechakikah ba'im ke'echad, which is to say it does not fulfill its function as a keli until it is put in place in the earth.

The conclusion of the responsa committee then is that in a place that either lacks a *mikveh* or a pluralistic *mikveh*, an in-ground swimming pool may be used as a substitute. Even though the language above is technical and some have suggested the Reform movement need not be as *halakhic* in its requirement of *mikveh*, it is important that as we reclaim this ritual we preserve our continuity with the Jewish people and with Israel. Even though a swimming pool might not hold the same sacredness as using a construction built solely for the purpose of *mikveh*, there is still spiritual value in adopting a “creative” version of this traditional observance.

^{lxxiv} The *mikveh* in no way compromises the liberal principles of the Reform Movement and serves as “one of the most powerful Jewish symbols.” ^{lxxv}

Before one can immerse in the *mikveh* they must prep their body so that nothing is “between you and the natural waters.” ^{lxxvi} Most people shower before going into the *mikveh*, washing all the unnatural soaps off their body and hair. Then they are instructed to remove any foreign substance which is on the body, i.e. band-aids, nail polish, make-up, and jewelry. Recently, there has been discussion as to whether or not women with braces can immerse in the *mikveh*. Even though braces stand between one’s body and the water, they are permanent and cannot be removed. In a major decision of Jewish law, Rabbi Yosef Elyashiv, a *haredi* Rabbi in Israel, has ruled that women with braces on their teeth may not immerse in the *mikveh*. While this decision has raised some questions as to what is more important – the woman who is immersing or the actual immersion itself, this situation does highlight the ongoing discussions about what constitutes a valid *mikveh* immersion.

^{lxxvii} Most *mikvaot* have a prep room where one can wash and prepare their body,

but it is also acceptable to prepare in the comfort of one's home. After preparations generally the *mikveh* attendant checks to ensure all barriers have been removed.

If a woman is immersing after being a *niddah*, then she is responsible for *bedikah* or checking, a concept established in the *Mishnah*. After finishing her period, the woman is to check herself internally with a white cloth (called an *ed* or witness) both morning and evening of her seven clean days. If no blood found on the *ed*, then she can proceed to the *mikveh* and afterwards resume relations with her husband.

lxxviii

Furthermore, the time of day when one should immerse is discussed in the Talmud in Tractate *Niddah*. "Although the Torah does not specify explicitly that a woman must immerse after being a *niddah*...the rabbis assumed that immersion was necessary." ^{lxxix} Even though the Torah is ambiguous about when a *niddah* (a term applied to a menstruating woman) should immerse, the *amoraim* instituted the requirement to immerse at night in *Niddah* 67b:

Said Rav: A *niddah* who immerses herself on time [at the earliest possible time, at the end of the seventh day], only immerses herself at night. But one who immerses not on time, may immerse either in the daytime or at night.

Rabbi Yohanan said: Whether she immerses on time or not, she only immerses at night, because of the possibility of misleading her daughter (who may mistakenly think her mother immersed before nightfall on the seventh day, and come to learn faulty practices).

Even though the Talmudic rabbis were able to identify several circumstances that would be exceptions to this rule, women today generally immerse at night, echoing

the Jewish day beginning and ending at sunset, and Leviticus 15:28: "...she will count for herself seven days and afterward become purified."

After childbirth, however, the time span of impurity is longer than menstruation, as seen in Leviticus 12 and *Yoreh De'ah* 194:1. After bearing a male child, one is to count a minimum of seven days for bleeding followed by seven clean or blood-free days. After bearing a female child, one is to count fourteen days for bleeding followed by seven clean or blood-free days. A miscarriage only counts as a birth if it occurs more than forty days after conception, otherwise it is deemed blood under normal circumstances (*Yoreh De'ah* 194:14).^{lxxx} Following counting the appropriate number of days and immersing in the *mikveh*, couples may resume sexual relations.

After taking into account these laws, the woman enters the water and generally submerges her body three times (the number of times *mikveh* is mentioned in Torah) with a witness watching to ensure that each submersion is declared *kosher*. During the immersions, the woman has to be careful not to touch the sides or bottom of the *mikveh*, and that her body is slightly bent to allow water to touch as much as possible of her body. After the first submersion, she recites the blessing: **ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו על הטבילה**

"Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has made us holy through Your mitzvot and commanded us concerning immersion."

In addition to this blessing, some women say a *kavannah* prayer which focuses their mind and captures their intention of the *mitzvah* they are about to perform.

For observant women, these laws dictate when they should go to the *mikveh* and how the ritual should be observed. On the other hand, liberal circles and movements reclaiming the *mikveh* use these traditions as guidelines from which creativity can emerge. Chapter three will discuss how liberal groups have reclaimed the *mikveh* and re-envisioned this ancient ritual to be more relevant and meaningful to the person immersing and to a variety of life's natural transitions.

Chater 3: How *Mikveh* is being Reclaimed

“Turn it over and over again, for everything is in it.” - Pirkei Avot 5:25

After the effects of the 1970's feminism and the women's liberation movement (chapter 1), rituals which were previously understood as unimportant began to be reclaimed as the Reform movement continued to move away from its classical past. Overall, liberal Judaism began to re-embrace various traditions that had been cast aside and declared sexist. “The whole move towards ritualization and spirituality in the late twentieth century has led women, and men, to try to create new ceremonies, and when they looked for what they could use as women went through transitions, the mikveh seemed a natural place to turn.”^{lxxxix} However, this re-interpretation raised some questions regarding altering traditions: Are Jews allowed to change aspects of Jewish law? If so, who has the authority to make these changes, and under what circumstances should they be introduced? Does it matter that some communities will embrace these changes while others will continue along the same path? Will this ultimately create a division amongst Jews?^{lxxxix}

Even though the Reform movement is not considered a *halakhic* movement, change is often viewed as threatening in any capacity, and the Reform movement had its own ideals and traditions to uphold. Another component of ‘reclaiming ritual’ involved a move towards more traditional interpretation by some Reform thinkers, which could potentially cause conflict among leaders of the movement. With regard to the subject of *mikveh*, Professor Judith Hauptman, a faculty member

at the Jewish Theological Seminary, points out that “this renewed interest offers an excellent opportunity to explain and reinterpret the *mitzvah* in terms that will be meaningful to a contemporary audience, with the goal of encouraging greater observance and respect for the tradition.” ^{lxxxiii} Even though issues may have arisen, the notion that ‘reclaiming’ could bring people closer to *mikveh* and Jewish ritual is most important. In order to do this, however, a few specific aspects of immersion and *mikveh* had to be re-envisioned and re-defined.

Traditionally, the words associated with *mikveh* as well as *niddah* are ‘purity’ and ‘impurity.’ Many liberal Jewish women have problems with this terminology: “One of the reasons women in America ceased to observe Family Purity was their belief that these laws, at their core, represented a negative view of women and female biology – that essentially these laws were about women's impurity, and that being ritually impure (*tameh*) was personally degrading and insulting.” ^{lxxxiv} As this ritual is being reclaimed, Elicia Brown suggests using language such as ‘permitted’ and ‘not permitted’ since the prior language is no longer relevant in the absence of the Temple. Jay Michaelson suggests another alternative, noting that *tameh* is associated with ending (shedding the lining of the uterus and ending the monthly cycle) while *tahor* is associated with a new beginning. “*Tahorah* is the process by which what is red becomes white, *gevurah* becomes *hesed*, constriction and cramping gives way to opening.” ^{lxxxv} Making the language more accessible causes the ritual of *mikveh* to be more inviting to liberal women. It also removes any preconceived notions about what it means to be pure versus impure, and pushes the ritual into a modern context. Women should go to the *mikveh* not because they are

commanded to go or because they are deemed impure; they should go because it is meaningful to them. ^{lxxxvi}

A major component of *mikveh* is the water in which one immerses. In this context, water plays three roles: substance, usage, and symbol. As a substance, water is known as the universal solvent since numerous materials can be dissolved in it. Water is also the physical base for sustaining existence and makes up 60% of the human body. ^{lxxxvii} It is therefore commonly used as a cleansing agent, not just for materials but also for the human body – physically and spiritually. Water symbolizes life and death, creation, and destruction. Just as the flood destroyed the earth in Genesis and led to a new beginning for creation, water can symbolically remove the past and lead to a new existence. “The *mikveh* has all these special qualities: it erases the past, regenerates, renews, and sustains our connection to the primordial forces of creation. It symbolizes rebirth...it is the spiritual equivalent of the womb.” ^{lxxxviii} When one immerses in the waters of the *mikveh*, they enter with one definition of self, move through transformation and renewal, and emerge with a newer, higher identity. In this respect, immersion can be used to mark and add meaning to a variety of life’s transitions; it can help us stop, slow down, and realize the changes that are occurring in our lives.

A third aspect of *mikveh* which needed to be re-envisioned was the actual *mikveh* itself. “By 1920, observance had fallen to an alarmingly low level. [One of] the reasons for this development [was]...the unclean state in which the *mikvehs* were maintained.” ^{lxxxix} Women in America believed the *miqvaot* were unattractive and dirty; they didn’t want to immerse in the same water other women had

previously used. Even women who didn't have this experience were influenced by this image, and this caused *mikveh* to become even more a ritual of the past. Furthermore, talking about our bodies and being comfortable with these conversations is a fairly recent phenomenon. *Mikveh* was generally not spoken about within a family, and since immersion occurred at night it was viewed as a secret ritual. In writing about a personal *mikveh* experience, author Blu Greenberg says: "It was not that I was ashamed to talk about mikveh...But because the subject is so fraught with modesty and taboo, I would have preferred to avoid it." ^{xc} In order to reclaim *mikveh*, it was crucial that past images and encounters which kept women from immersing were erased and in their place new rituals and actual *miqvaot* were created which made the experience meaningful and accessible.

In response to the change of attitude towards this ritual (Chapter 1), Reform and pluralistic *miqvaot* were built around the country beginning in the 1990's. In order to re-envision *mikveh*, liberal communities needed *miqvaot* they could control and use for their own needs. These new *miqvaot* were beautiful and clean; so attractive that some people even referred to them as a spa. Women and men in America once again began to feel more comfortable using the *mikveh*. While there was still an element of privacy for those who sought it – multiple *mikveh* attendants versus one or two who knew everyone, the option of making appointments online, and the possibility of using a pseudonym – the veil of secrecy was slowly being lifted. However, creating beautiful *miqvaot* was only the first step; the ritual itself also had to be re-envisioned and re-created to add meaning and relevance.

In 1929, Arnold Van Gennep, a noted French ethnographer and folklorist, coined the term “rite of passage” to describe the universal practice of ceremonializing life’s major events. Today, we call these moments rituals; psychologists Evan Imber-Black and Janine Roberts specifically name five purposes of rituals: (1) To shape, express, and maintain relationships, (2) to make and mark transitions, (3) to heal from betrayal, trauma, or loss, (4) to voice beliefs and create meaning, and (5) to honor and celebrate individuals and life.^{xc} When creating a ritual that embodies one or many of these purposes, the most important aspect is noting the change or transition that is occurring, the ‘before’ and the ‘after.’ Along the way, between the ‘before’ and the ‘after,’ is a transitional, liminal state. Victor Turner, a British cultural anthropologist, used the term ‘liminality’ in this context to refer to a state of being between passages, when one belongs to neither status.^{xcii} An example of this is teenagers, who are no longer children and not yet adults. More often than not, these transitional times produce anxieties, and rituals have the ability to serve as a cushion to these anxieties; rituals give us the action that encapsulates what we are feeling.

The state of liminality, also referred to as the threshold stage, is especially important for women, who are constantly at “the doorways of life.”^{xciii} Whereas past generations of traditional Jewish women were tied to existing rituals within *halachah*, modern (feminist) Jews have begun to expand the definition of lifecycle to acknowledge, celebrate, and provide ownership over passages the rabbis never imagined.^{xciv} “In recent years a new kind of mikveh bath has surfaced...these women, and a few men, mark life’s transitions by submerging into the womb-like comfort of

the mikveh.”^{xcv} Ceremonies have been developed for immersion in *mikveh* to recognize a challenging life transition, mourning a miscarriage, celebrating a 40th birthday, marking the end of a relationship, and honoring the process of coming out, to name a few. These rites of passage are “specifically tailored to the individual women’s age and life situation, to the nature of the ‘transition,’ [and] to the purpose of the celebration.”^{xcvi} Whereas previously *mikveh* was only associated with *niddah*, conversion, and marriage, now it has been completely re-envisioned as a shrine to transition, marking the liminal state on one’s journey from the ‘before’ to the ‘after.’ Vanessa Ochs, a professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia and the author of *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, writes that “*mikveh* is the new, exciting spiritual kid on the block.”^{xcvii}

Mayyim Hayyim, meaning “waters of life,” is a pluralistic *mikveh* as well as a resource for learning outside of Temple Reyim in Boston. Women and men of all ages who come from a variety of Jewish backgrounds seek out this *mikveh* to help mark personal and communal milestones. In serving this role, *Mayyim Hayyim* has created an entire book of ceremonies that add meaning to many of these modern rituals. Please see the appendix for the ceremony discussed below as well as other ceremonies created by *Mayyim Hayyim*.

The immersion ceremony for “Honoring Gratitude” was developed for either a man or woman who is grateful for all they have in their life and for all the people who blessed and supported them along their journey. It is a perfect example of a modern *mikveh* ritual that was created solely for a specific need outside of *hakakhah*. At the *Mayyim Hayyim* ‘Gathering the Waters’ International Mikveh

Conference, Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael discussed the main components of the contemporary *mikveh* ceremony: (1) Music [English, Hebrew, or a *niggun*], (2) Orientation or *kavanah*, (3) At least three immersions, and (4) A *bracha*. She also taught that any good ritual contains an opening, middle, and closing.^{xcviii} In other words, the opening relates to your status before the ritual, the middle is parallel to the state of liminality, and the end represents the transition and rebirth which has occurred.

The “Honoring Gratitude” ceremony contains all of these components. It opens with a *kavanah*, read prior to the immersion, which states the reason and sets the tone for the *mikveh* experience. It is followed by the first immersion, which contains a blessing invented for contemporary *mikveh* rituals. Instead of the traditional blessing which ends with ‘*al ha’tevilah*,’ ‘regarding immersion;’ the modern blessing ends with ‘*bi-t’vilah b’mayyim hayyim*,’ ‘embracing us in living waters.’ This blessing was created by *Mayyim Hayyim* to encompass the meaning behind the immersion while acknowledging that this immersion is outside of *halakhah*. The second and third immersions also contain *kavanah* and allow the immersee some time for reflection while in the *mikveh* waters. The third immersion ends with the *Shehechyanu*, a blessing which further emphasizes the *mikveh* experience and reminds the immersee to appreciate all the good in life. Finally, to end the ritual, there is a statement which brings the person closure and completes the ceremonial circle. This ceremony represents the general structure of all those created by *Mayyim Hayyim*. Each ritual is specific to the needs of the individual and

contains language and blessings which help the immersee reflect and capture the *mikveh* experience and transformation.

Some liberal women have also reclaimed the practice of *niddah* and enter the *mikveh* monthly following menstruation. Instead of adhering to the traditional *halakhah* surrounding being in *niddah*, they have instead reinterpreted all aspects of the ritual to meet their own needs. For starters, liberal couples have changed the language from a woman being *niddah* to a woman being *in niddah*. “The status does not define her very being – or, better, to the couple as being ‘in their time of separation’ or ‘in their time of togetherness’ so that the focus is not on the woman and her physiology, but rather on the relationship and its ebb and flow.”^{xcix} This change places emphasis on both members of the couple instead of singling out the woman. Another divergence from traditional practice is the way in which wives and husbands relate to each other while being in *niddah*. Some couples still will not pass items from husband to wife; while other couples allow hugging and kissing, drawing the line at not kissing on the lips. Some couples separate their beds while others sleep on opposite sides of a joined bed. The options are endless and left up to the couple to decide what works best for their relationship and where their boundaries should be drawn. The re-interpretation of being in *niddah* also extends to *mikveh* rituals.

At the *Mayyim Hayyim mikveh* conference, a session was held titled “Exploring Contemporary Understandings of Niddah – Sanctifying Sex: Personal Perspectives on Niddah.” This session consisted of a panel of six people, two individuals [both spouses in a married couple] and two couples all discussing their

own, personal *niddah* observances and how this impacts upon their relationship. One of the couples, a Conservative rabbi and his wife, have been practicing *niddah* for five years. While being in *niddah* they sleep in the same bed, and wait seven days before going to the *mikveh*. In order to make this ritual meaningful for them, they have chosen to create an egalitarian *mikveh* experience. They make the *mikveh* appointment together for the daytime, both immersing following seven days after menstruation. This couple also brings their children to the *mikveh*, both boys, who immerse alongside their father. ^c In re-interpreting the ritual this way, they have lifted the veil of secrecy and truly created a practice that is meaningful to them.

Another exciting modern development around *mikveh* is Janice Rubin's *The Mikveh Project*. *The Mikveh Project* is a touring exhibition of photographs and first-hand accounts documenting the resurgence of *mikveh* in Jewish communities. It aims to tell the journey of this long-hidden ritual and the experiences women have had as they rediscover this ancient tradition. ^{ci} "The pictures-- some clothed and some nude, all anonymous-- show the incredible diversity of Jewish women as well as the diversity of their ideas about purity, sexuality, spirituality, and tradition." ^{cii} *The Mikveh Project's* photos and interviews speak to the central role the *mikveh* plays in transitional moments in each of these women's lives.

The reclamation of *mikveh* both as a traditional and contemporary ritual has greatly impacted the Jewish community. Liberal Jews who would otherwise never have encountered a *mikveh* are finding new meaning in this ritual, whether it is through innovative ceremonies, creative practices, or artistic means. The *mikveh*

renaissance is truly a gift to modern Judaism, and serves as a major asset in helping the Reform movement reclaim and re-envision ancient Jewish customs.

Chapter 4: Reflection

“Wash, wash me clean – mend my wounded seams. Cleanse my tarnished dreams.” - k.d. lang

The impetus behind my thesis began the evening of December 17th, 2008. It was three days before my wedding, and I had made my first ever *mikveh* appointment. To be honest, I was not entirely sure what I was getting myself into. I had read about *mikveh* and the powerful experiences that accompanied this ritual, but no one in my family (at least not to my knowledge) had ever immersed before. This was not surprising though; I grew up in a Classical Reform family that attended services, lit Shabbat candles every Friday evening, and observed the holidays, but did not yearn to practice or learn about those Jewish rituals that had previously been deemed as “Orthodox.”

When I told my mother that I had made an appointment at the local *mikveh* and wanted her to go with me, she seemed a bit uncomfortable with the idea and asked why I wanted to immerse. I remember telling her that I had read in some of the Jewish wedding books that in traditional Jewish practice all brides went to the *mikveh* before their wedding, and that I personally wanted to mark the transition from being single to being a wife. Even though I could tell that my mom was still a bit uneasy, she must have deemed my answer sufficient enough and agreed to go with me.

When I made my appointment, the *mikveh* attendant reviewed the process of preparing for the *mikveh*, and asked if I wanted to bathe at home or at the *mikveh* itself. I chose to bathe in my own tub, and told her I would meet her at the *mikveh* ready to immerse. I remember watching the clock all day, eagerly anticipating the moment when I could start preparing for my first immersion. As soon as the clock read six o'clock that evening, I went to my room and started cleansing my body.

I began by taking off my nail polish and removing all jewelry from my body. Then I grabbed a towel and headed for the bathtub, washing myself head to toe. I shampooed my hair and made sure to wash all the soap out; then I carefully soaped the rest of my body. For the first time ever I paid careful attention to the spaces between my fingers and toes, as well as my belly button. After soaking in the bathtub for about an hour, I got out and headed for the bathroom sink where I brushed and flossed my teeth. I was finally ready to get dressed and leave for the *mikveh*.

The car ride to the local *mikveh* was silent; I was excited for what was about to happen and tried to gather my thoughts. The *mikveh* attendant was already there when we arrived, and she ushered us inside out of the cold evening. She quickly reviewed the process with me, and sent me to the changing room so I could undress. After wrapping myself in a sheet I walked through the door connecting the dressing room to the *mikveh*. I only had a split second to take in my surroundings before the attendant entered the *mikveh*, but I vividly remember the smells and the sound of the water in the pool next to where I was standing.

The attendant entered and checked my body, telling me that everything looked fine and I could go ahead and enter the water. Surprisingly, the water was warm and quickly enveloped my small stature. After I was completely in the *mikveh*, the attendant asked if I was ready to immerse. I told her yes, and dipped my head under the water. After surfacing I heard the attendant yell “*Kasher!*” and then I said the traditional *mikveh* blessing: *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha’Olam, asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu al ha’tevilah*. I immersed twice more, both were declared *kasher*, and I exited from the *mikveh*.

The experience was over, but I was forever changed. I felt like a new person; like I had experienced a rebirth and was now ready to enter into married life. All of my apprehensions and stresses from the previous months of preparation melted away, and I knew that I was ready to walk down the aisle in three days.

On the ride home, my mom asked how it felt to immerse. I told her it was a powerful experience; not only did I feel connected to all the millions of Jewish women who had immersed before their respective weddings, but that I also felt renewed and was ready to begin a new chapter in my life. She smiled and we drove home.

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I have truly loved writing this thesis and learning about traditional and contemporary *mikveh* practices. I have found this ritual to be extremely moving and now fully realize the potential it can hold for numerous life transitions and experiences. Immersing in the waters of the *mikveh* is the perfect way to symbolize

rebirth, renewal, and a new chapter in someone's life. The actual ceremony that is used at someone's immersion has the power to encapsulate the moment and situation, and should be tailored to meet the needs of the individual and his or her intention. Sometimes ritual provides us with the words we cannot quite find for ourselves.

Studying how an ancient ritual has been reclaimed has led me to explore, 'try on,' and re-invent other Jewish customs for myself, such as keeping *kosher*, blessing my food, and observing *Shabbat*. Through education and experimentation I have found my own way to reclaim not only the *mikveh* but numerous other Jewish rituals. When I talk with congregants, family, and friends about my own, personal Jewish practices, sometimes they ask if I am still a Reform Jew. I love this question, because I then have the opportunity to teach them that as Reform Jews, we have the unique gift of being able to approach ritual from our own perspective, and engage in those rituals which we find meaningful. It is this space we are granted that allows for customs to be re-invented, re-created, and reclaimed.

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## **Preface:**

<sup>i</sup> Changed spelling from *mikvah* to *mikveh*

<sup>ii</sup> Slonim, Rivka, trans. "The Magid's Wife." *Total Immersion: a Mikvah Anthology*. Northvale: Jason Aronson, 2006. 173-74. Print.

## **Chapter 1:**

<sup>iii</sup> Hoffman, Joshua, and Rivka Slonim. "The Institution of the Mikvah in America." *Total Immersion: a Mikvah Anthology*. Newark: Jason Aronson, 1995. 76-92. Print.

<sup>iv</sup> Meyer, Michael A. *Response to Modernity: a History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. 24.

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<sup>v</sup> Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 44

<sup>vi</sup> Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>vii</sup> Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>viii</sup> Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

<sup>ix</sup> Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

<sup>x</sup> Hoffman and Slonim, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>xi</sup> This is the point: *mikveh* has to do with the realm of *tumah* and *toharah*, which the Pittsburgh Platform renounces as meaningless to the modern Jew.

<sup>xii</sup> "CCAR - Declaration of Principles." *CCAR - Home*. 27 Oct. 2004. Web. 14 Mar. 2011.  
<[http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=39&pge\\_id=1606](http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=39&pge_id=1606)>.

<sup>xiii</sup> Heller, James G. *Isaac M. Wise: His Life, Work and Thought*. New York: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1965. 464-465. Print.

<sup>xiv</sup> Sarna, Professor Jonathan. "Why Now? Understanding the Resurgence of Mikveh in the Context of Contemporary American Jewish History." *Mayyim Hayyim: Gathering the Waters International Conference*, Temple Reyim, Boston. October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

<sup>xv</sup> American Reform Responsa, no. 68, at 237; CCAR Yearbook 3, 1893.95.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Reform Responsa for Our Time*, no. 15.

<sup>xvii</sup> American Reform Responsa, no. 68, at 237; CCAR Yearbook 3, 1893.

<sup>xviii</sup> Hoffman and Slonim, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>xix</sup> Sarna, *op.cit.*

<sup>xx</sup> Hoffman and Slonim, *op. cit.*, p. 76-92.

<sup>xxi</sup> Polak-Sahm, Varda. *The House of Secrets: The Hidden World of the Mikveh*. Trans. Anne H. Pace. Boston: Beacon, 2009. Print.

<sup>xxii</sup> Diamant, Anita. "Why Now? Understanding the Resurgence of Mikveh in the Context of Contemporary American Jewish History." *Mayyim Hayyim: Gathering the Waters International Conference*, Temple Reyim, Boston. October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Hoffman and Slonim, *op. cit.*, 76-92.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

<sup>xxv</sup> Rakeffet-Rothkoff, Aaron. *The Silver Era in American Jewish Orthodoxy: Rabbi Eliezer Silver and His Generation*. New York: Yeshiva UP, 1981. 82-86. Print.

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<sup>xxvi</sup> Harman, Elizabeth. "Topics in Feminism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 17 Feb. 2003. Web. 10 Oct. 2010. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-topics/>>.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Priesand, Sally. *Judaism and the New Woman*. Thesis. Hebrew Union College, 1975. New York: Behrman House, 1975. Print.

<sup>xxviii</sup> "CCAR - Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective." *CCAR - Home*. 27 Oct. 2004. Web. 12 Oct. 2010. <[http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=41&pge\\_id=1606](http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=41&pge_id=1606)>.

<sup>xxix</sup> Hoffman and Slonim, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>xxx</sup> W. Gunther Plaut, "The Sabbath in the Reform Movement," in *Reform Judaism: A Historical Perspective*, ed. Joseph I. Blau (New York: KTAV, 1973), 246-49.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Sarna, *op. cit.*

<sup>xxxii</sup> Sarna, *op. cit.*

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Diamant, *op. cit.*

<sup>xxxv</sup> Diamant, Anita. "Mayyim Hayyim: Gathering the Waters International Conference, Temple Reyim, Boston. October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> "Circumcision for an Eight-Year-Old Convert." Central Conference of American Rabbis, 5756.13. Web. 4 Oct. 2010. <<http://data.ccarnet.org/cgi-bin/respdisp.pl?file=13&year=5756>>.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Central Conference of American Rabbis, responsum no. 69, and no. 57; Contemporary American Reform Responsa, nos. 44, 45, 47, and 49; Responsa Committee 5756.6 and 5752.2.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> *Judaism & Jewish Life - My Jewish Learning*. Web. 16 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.myjewishlearning.com>>.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Peskin, Ruth. "Third Reform Mikvah in North America Will Open." *Jweekly.com*. 9 Oct. 1998. Web. 16 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/9251/third-reform-mikvah-in-north-america-will-open/>>.

<sup>xl</sup> Kline, Aliza. "Why Now? Understanding the Resurgence of Mikveh in the Context of Contemporary American Jewish History." *Mayyim Hayyim: Gathering the Waters*, Temple Reyim, Boston. October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

<sup>xli</sup> *Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh and Paula Brody & Family Education Center*. Web. 16 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.mayyimhayyim.org>>.

<sup>xlii</sup> *Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh and Paula Brody & Family Education Center*. Web. 16 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.mayyimhayyim.org>>.

## **Chapter 2:**



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<sup>xliii</sup> Kaplan, Aryeh. *Waters of Eden: The Mystery of the Mikvah*. New York: Jewish Pride and Identity, 1984. 35. Print.

<sup>xliv</sup> Exodus 19:6

<sup>xlv</sup> Exodus 19:10

<sup>xlvi</sup> "Babylonian Talmud: Yebamoth 46." *Come and Hear ...* Ed. Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein. Trans. Rev. Dr. Israel W. Slotki. Web. 11 Feb. 2011. <[http://come-and-hear.com/yebamoth/yebamoth\\_46.html#PARTb](http://come-and-hear.com/yebamoth/yebamoth_46.html#PARTb)>.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Exodus 19:15

<sup>xlviii</sup> Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 20

<sup>xlix</sup> Potok, Chaim, Nahum M. Sarna, Jacob Milgrom, and Jeffrey H. Tigary. "Leviticus 8:6." *The JPS Torah Commentary: the Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989. 50. Print.

<sup>l</sup> Substituted "washing" for "immersion" since we are unsure these verses are actually referring to *t'vilah*

<sup>li</sup> Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 11

<sup>lii</sup> Neusner, Jacob. *The Judaic Law of Baptism From Analysis and Exegesis*. Atlanta: Scholars, 1995.

<sup>liii</sup> JPS Torah Commentary on Numbers 19:10, p. 160

<sup>liv</sup> Michaelson, Jay. "Chapter 12: The Mikva." *God in Your Body: Kabbalah, Mindfulness and Embodied Spiritual Practice*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2007. 53. Print.

<sup>lv</sup> Herczeg, Rabbi Yisrael I. Z. "Leviticus 11:36." *The Saperstein Edition: Rashi, Parshah Leviticus*. Ed. Rabbi Avie Gold. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1999. 128. Print.

<sup>lvi</sup> Klein, Isaac, and Joel Roth. *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992. 510. Print.

<sup>lvii</sup> "them" refers to objects the menstruating woman may have touched and made impure

<sup>lviii</sup> Berkowitz, Miriam C., and David Golinkin. "Development of the Laws." *Taking the Plunge: A Practical and Spiritual Guide to the Mikveh*. Re-printed in *Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters: Guide my Steps*. Jerusalem: Center for Women in Jewish Law at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2007. 27. Print.

<sup>lix</sup> Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 512

<sup>lx</sup> Berkowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 30

<sup>lxi</sup> Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 518

<sup>lxii</sup> Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 51

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<sup>lxiii</sup> Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 518; originally printed in Telushkin's *Tohorat Hamayim*, p. 142

<sup>lxiv</sup> Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 519; originally printed in Miller's *Secret of the Jews*, p. 345

<sup>lxv</sup> Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 51

<sup>lxvi</sup> Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 51

<sup>lxvii</sup> Neusner, *op. cit.*, p. 67

<sup>lxviii</sup> Adler, Rachel. "Tumah and Taharah – Mikveh." From *The first Jewish Catalogue*, e.d. Siegel, Strassfeld, and Strassfeld. Philadelphia: JPS, 1973. Reprinted in *Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters: Guide my Steps*. 45. Print.

<sup>lxix</sup> Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 519

<sup>lxx</sup> Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 520

<sup>lxxi</sup> Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 520; originally printed in Telushkin's *Tohorat Hamayim*, p. 142, 204 ff.

<sup>lxxii</sup> Adler, *op. cit.*, p. 45

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 521

<sup>lxxiv</sup> CCAR Responsa 5756.6

<sup>lxxv</sup> Adler, *op. cit.*, p. 46

<sup>lxxvi</sup> Michaelson, *op. cit.*, p. 51

<sup>lxxvii</sup> Cohen, Debra Nussbaum. "Women With Braces Told To Stay Out of the Mikveh – The Sisterhood – Forward.com." *Blogs – Forward.com*. Web. 14 Feb. 2011. <<http://blogs.forward.com/sisterhood-blog/126136/>>.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> Berkowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 32

<sup>lxxix</sup> Berkowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 36

<sup>lxxx</sup> Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 514

### **Chapter 3:**

<sup>lxxxi</sup> Paulson, Michael. "Jewish Women Reclaim, Reinvent New Ritual." The Boston Globe, 8 May 2000. Print.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> Berkowitz, Rabbi Miriam C., and David Golinkin. "Development of the Laws." *Taking the Plunge: Contemporary Issues and Responses*. Re-printed in *Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters: Guide my Steps*. Jerusalem: Center for Women in Jewish Law at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2007. 72-87. Print.

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Berkowitz quoting Rabbi Judith Hauptman, p. 147-176.

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- <sup>lxxxiv</sup> Berkowitz, Rabbi Miriam. "Reshaping the Laws of Family Purity for the Modern World." 5. Print.
- <sup>lxxxv</sup> Michaelson, Jay. "Chapter 12: The Mikva." *God in Your Body: Kabbalah, Mindfulness and Embodied Spiritual Practice*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2007. 51-61. Print.
- <sup>lxxxvi</sup> Kline, Aliza. "Why Now? Understanding the Resurgence of Mikveh in the Context of Contemporary American Jewish History." *Mayyim Hayyim: Gathering the Waters International Conference*, Temple Reyim, Boston. October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010.
- <sup>lxxxvii</sup> "The Water in You." *Water Science for Schools*. Howard Perlman. Web. 11 Mar. 2011. <<http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/propertyyou.html>>.
- <sup>lxxxviii</sup> Frankiel, Tamar. "To Number Our Days." *Total Immersion: a Mikvah Anthology*. Ed. Rivkah Slonim. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1996. Print.
- <sup>lxxxix</sup> Hoffman, Joshua, and Rivka Slonim. "The Institution of the Mikvah in America." *Total Immersion: a Mikvah Anthology*. Newark: Jason Aronson, 1995. 85. Print.
- <sup>xc</sup> Greenberg, Blu. "In Defense of the "Daughters of Israel": Observations on Niddah and Mikveh." *On Women and Judaism: a View from Tradition*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publ. Soc. of America, 1981. 105-23. Print.
- <sup>xci</sup> Orenstein, Debra. "Afterword: How to Create a Ritual." *Lifecycles. Volume 1: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 1994. 359-76. Print.
- <sup>xcii</sup> Turner, Victor Witter. *The Forest of Symbols; Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1967. Print.
- <sup>xciii</sup> Piercy, Marge. "The Sabbath of Mutual Respect." *Soulrebels.com*. Web. 11 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.soulrebels.com/beth/bos/sabbath.html>>.
- <sup>xciv</sup> Orenstein, p. 362.
- <sup>xcv</sup> Brown, Elicia. "Taking the Plunge." *Jewish Living*. Re-printed in *Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters: Guide my Steps*. 12-14. Print.
- <sup>xcvi</sup> Polak-Sahm, Varda. *The House of Secrets: The Hidden World of the Mikveh*. Trans. Anne H. Pace. Boston: Beacon, 2009. 213. Print.
- <sup>xcvii</sup> Brown, p. 14.
- <sup>xcviii</sup> Raphael, Rabbi Geela Rayzel. "Marking Life Transitions with Ritual Immersion." *Mayyim Hayyim: Gathering the Waters International Conference*, Temple Sholom, Boston. October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2010.
- <sup>xcix</sup> Berkowitz, p. 74.
- <sup>c</sup> "Exploring Contemporary Understandings of Niddah – Sanctifying Sex: Personal Perspectives on Niddah." *Mayyim Hayyim: Gathering the Waters International Conference*, Temple Sholom, Boston. October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010.
- <sup>ci</sup> Rubin, Janice. "Mikvah Project." *The Mikvah Project - Home*. 2001. Web. 12 Mar. 2011. <<http://mikvahproject.com/infoabout2.html>>.

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<sup>cii</sup> Hammer, Rabbi Jill. "Ritualwell.org - Rising from the Ritual Bath." *Ritualwell.org - Welcome to Ritualwell.org*. Web. 12 Mar. 2011.  
<<http://www.ritualwell.org/lifecycles/intimacypartnering/mikveh/MikvehArticle.xml>>.

# IMMERSION CEREMONY HONORING GRATITUDE

CREATED BY  
MATIA RANIA ANGELOU, DEBORAH ISSOKSON, AND JUDITH D. KUMMER FOR  
MAYYIM HAYYIM LIVING WATERS

## Honoring Gratitude

### While Preparing

*Kavanah (Intention) to be read while preparing for immersion:*

In gratitude I come today to celebrate the blessings in my life. I honor those who have helped me along the way and give thanks for their supportive presence. As I prepare to immerse in the waters of the mikveh, I appreciate the journey that has brought me to this moment.

### First Immersion

*Take a moment to reflect on what has brought you here today.*

*Slowly descend the steps into the mikveh waters and immerse completely,  
so that every part of your body is covered in the warm water of the mikveh.*

*Following the first immersion, recite:*

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam,  
אשר קדשנו בטבלה במים חיים. asher kidshanu bi-t'vilah b'mayyim hayyim.

Blessed are You, God, Majestic Spirit of the Universe, who makes us holy by embracing us in living waters.

(Created by Mayyim Hayyim Ritual Creation Team, 2004.)

### Second Immersion

*To be read prior to second immersion:*

מודים אנחנו לך Modim anachnu lach

I am grateful for the good I know, for the life that I have been given  
and for the gifts that are my daily portion.

(Healing Service, Temple Israel Boston, 2000, adapted.)

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*Take a moment for a personal expression of gratitude.  
Take a deep breath and exhale completely,  
while gently and completely immersing for the second time.*

## *Third Immersion*

*To be read prior to third immersion:*

O Source of Life,  
Keep me in awe of sunrise and sunset.  
Keep me in wonder of things grand as mountains and oceans.  
Let me find joy in ordinary days.  
Let me embrace happiness, celebrate life, praise You.

(Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley, Healing Service, adapted.)

*Relax, and let your body soften,  
as you slowly and completely immerse for a third time.*

*Following the third immersion, recite:*

|                   |                              |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| ברוך אתה יי       | Baruch atah adonai           |
| אלהינו מלך העולם, | eloheinu melech ha'olam,     |
| שהחינו וקימנו     | she-he-che-ya-nu v'kiy-ma-nu |
| והגיענו לזמן הזה. | v'hi-gi-a-nu laz'man ha-zeh. |

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, for giving me life, sustaining me,  
and through one miracle after another, bringing me to this moment.

## *After Immersing*

*To be read following immersion:*

May the blessings of joy, love, kindness, and compassion be with me always.  
May I find peace and wholeness as I continue my journey in gratitude.



Mayyim Hayyim  
Living Waters  
Community Mikveh  
and Education Center

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