

Demystifying the Mikveh; *Personal Reflections and Experiences with Judaism's Ritual Bath*

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Rosh Hodesh Heshvan 5775; October 25, 2014

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Many of us have been following the horrifying news of the voyeurism scandal that has unfolded at the National Capital Mikveh, associated with Keshet Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C.. When I was in graduate school at the University of Maryland, I occasionally went to services at Keshet Israel—I heard the rabbi speak, and like many in the community, was impressed by his knowledge and charisma. Like so many others, I have been shocked that a rabbi of his stature, or any rabbi for that matter, could be involved in such a terrible crime. I have been so saddened by the news that a sacred, private space was desecrated, and that women who thought they were performing an act of holiness between themselves and G-d were being watched and recorded. In the meantime, on Facebook, as well as in print and television media, the ritual of using the mikveh has come under tremendous scrutiny. Many people have, in reaction to these terrible events, sworn that they could never enter a mikveh again; that the holiness of that ritual has been permanently defiled. As someone who has used the mikveh regularly throughout my 17 years of marriage, and as someone who feels connected to this ritual and mitzvah, I feel that it is important to share with you some of my experiences with the mikveh, and why I will continue to utilize it and encourage others to, as an expression of spirituality and a personal relationship with G-d.

To tell you the truth my first experience with the mikveh was not entirely positive. In the days leading up to our wedding, I made an appointment with the local mikveh. Because I was not living in the community where I was getting married and did not know the mikveh attendant, prior to accepting my appointment, the attendant asked me a series of personal questions to make sure that I was quote “qualified” to enter her mikveh. Although disappointed that instead of being congratulated and encouraged for taking on this mitzvah, I was committed to making it happen. I promised myself, that in the future, I would make it easy for any new bride to go to the mikveh if they expressed an interest and make sure that it was a positive experience for any woman who wanted to take on this ritual. Since then, I have had the honor of bringing young women to the mikveh prior to their weddings and have taught about and given tours of mikva'ot. It is a powerful moment when a new bride passes through the waters of the mikvah as a symbol of the transition from being a single woman to a married woman. The Jewish people passed through water after leaving Egypt, prior to truly becoming free; and the Jewish people passed through water as they left the wilderness and entered *Eretz Yisrael*, the Promised Land. Each one of us passes through the waters when entering this world, and Judaism harnesses this passage as a powerful rite of transformation in our personal lives as well.

Prior to my pre-wedding experience, I had seen mikvehs before; in fact the first mikveh I probably saw was on Masada, which demonstrates just how old this ritual truly is. It is also an example of the differences among mikvehs...Suffice it to say that the mikveh on Masada looks nothing like the mikveh I used to go to in Dallas, for example, which looked more like a spa than anything else. The trend, in fact, nowadays is to build mikvehs with spa-like atmospheres; places where women can come and relax and feel comfortable. My cousin, Miriam Berkowitz, a Conservative rabbi who lives in Israel, wrote a book about mikveh called *Taking the Plunge*. In

it she describes the mikveh as a “metaphorical return to” the Garden of Eden, where people were unashamed, and before people became obsessed with external, material trappings. In the Garden of Eden, people felt close to G-d’s presence because of the innocence and unpretentiousness of the environment.¹ It is refreshing and invigorating to enter a space once a month where I can feel that closeness with G-d, and escape from the pressures of the world for some precious, private time. These newer mikvehs, like the one in Dallas, make the experience a true pleasure. They are beautifully designed, with comfortable rooms to change and prepare. The mikvehs themselves are bright and clean, and well maintained. Adas Israel’s mikveh is an example of a welcoming, beautiful mikveh. A couple of years ago, I had the privilege of joining Rabbi Cohen and a group of Har Shalom religious school students at Adas Israel where we participated in a program called “Bodies of Water.” During the program, our group toured the mikvah and learned about its history, customs, rituals and modern uses.

After Adam and I got married, we lived in New York while he completed rabbinical school. It was there that I started to use the Upper West Side Mikveh, which was not such a glamorous place, but was made very comfortable by a delightful older mikveh lady named Mrs. Lobel. Interestingly, a female Conservative rabbinical student introduced me to this mikveh lady. Mrs. Lobel couldn’t have been more than 5 feet tall; she had a thick Hungarian accent; and though she was a Satmar Hasid, she had profound respect for anyone who came to the mikveh, regardless of denomination, or whether they entered the building in jeans, or skirts down to their ankles. She never acted like a judge or a critic; rather she was always kind and patient in her guidance. It was truly Mrs. Lobel who taught me the mechanics of how to use the mikveh. Her kindness and calmness were always encouraging and made me want to keep coming back.

When a woman comes to the mikveh, it is typically at night. This ritual is meant to be extremely private; no one is supposed to know when you go or who you run into there. It’s like a special sorority, complete with its own highly guarded details and traditions. Though the mikveh is not for physical hygiene, it is important to keep the water clean and shower before you enter. There is always a whole array of personal hygiene products: nail polish removers, buckets of cotton balls, tweezers, nail clippers, you name it. A female attendant guides you through each of the immersions and assures you that the dunk was kosher. Often the mikveh room has placards with various meditations and other devotional texts to help you focus on the special mitzvah you are performing. Some modern mikva’ot also feature important information specifically relating to women’s health, whether it be breast cancer awareness, pregnancy and motherhood information, osteoporosis or even domestic violence resources. Linking women’s health and safety to mikveh use is yet another way to make the mikveh a distinctly women’s sacred space.²

While I am in the mikveh, I feel grateful that I have been given this special mitzvah, specifically for women, to connect with G-d. The immersion involves no one else, and the only sound in the room is the movement of the water caused by my own immersion and return to the surface. The sound of my voice, when saying the beracha, echoes in the room and I try and take a few moments to add my own personal meditation. It is truly a holy moment. The truth is there are few moments in my busy, hectic life where I have a quiet moment to myself to focus on me and say a few personal brachot. I have been in mikvehs in New York, Cleveland, Dallas, Jerusalem,

¹ Berkowitz, Miriam. *Taking the Plunge, A Practical and Spiritual Guide to the Mikveh*, Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2007. p. 43

² Ibid, p. 164

Potomac...and while each is different; some are fancier, some are much more simple; some are in beautiful buildings and others in more inconspicuous places; some have warmer water, others are a little chillier...what is consistent is that these are special spiritual zones that are only for women. While men can use the mikveh, it is usually a separate mikveh pool with a separate entrance, and during the day, rather than at night. One of the many appalling things about the intrusion in the mikveh here in Washington is that it robbed women of the sense of privacy and seclusion that makes the mikveh so special. I am reminded of today's Torah reading where Noah's son Ham not only intrudes on his father and sees him naked, but further embarrasses him by telling others about it--This in contrast to Shem and Yafet who move immediately to preserve Noah's dignity, covering him with a robe and averting their gaze.³

Over the centuries, many commentators have written about the benefits of monthly use of the mikveh. Even modern thinkers have linked mikveh use with healthy, vibrant marriages. For me, it is as much, if not more about my own sense of commandedness—this is, after all, a mitzvah understood to be derived directly from the Torah—and the uniquely personal, private part of my religious life that it occupies. The Rambam, in his treatment of the subject, concludes 11 chapters of the Mishneh Torah about Mikveh by saying these “are not matters about which human understanding is capable of forming a judgment. *Mi'klal ha'chukkim hi*, they are the kind of laws—*chukkim*—that defy rational explanation. So I can't tell you exactly how the medium of the mikveh works; but I can tell you that mysteriously and inexplicably it does.

It would be tragic if the terrible crime that was committed against women who used to the National Capital Mikveh discouraged women from exploring the mikveh or feeling that the mikveh is no longer a safe space. The Washington Jewish Week reported this week that many area mikva'ot have scheduled security sweeps of the entire premises. I not only hope that no other misconduct is found, but also that these precautions reassure people about using the mikveh again. The word *mikveh* shares the same root with *tikvah*, which means hope. I hope that the mikveh continues to be a place where women find spiritual renewal, personal inspiration, and of course hope in their lives and relationships.

³ Genesis 10:22-23