

IN SEARCH OF MIKVAH

by Lisa Faye Kaplan

The best thing about being a journalist is that I can search for answers to just about any question I have and get paid for it.

Since September, when I started attending the Lincoln Square Synagogue Beginners Service, I've had many questions: Why is the room so small? What's the latest I can arrive and still get a seat? Who's that guy in the corner and why is he still single?

I've also wondered about the whys and wherefores of Jewish observance. And the ritual that seemed most perplexing and mysterious was the ritual of mikvah -- the pool of purifying water used mainly to consecrate married women each month before husband and wife resume sexual contact.

The Torah commands Jews to build a mikvah before they build a synagogue. There are mikvahs wherever there are Jews. There's even one in Moscow.

I'm a feature writer for a chain of daily newspapers in Westchester County, where there are about 6,000 religious Jews and only two mikvahs -- one in Scarsdale, the other in Mount Kisco. The story I wanted to write would explain the ritual of mikvah and describe an actual mikvah, providing a peek into a sacred place that single women and non-Jews never see.

My editor, a Protestant man, was delighted with the idea. I, a single woman raised in a Reform Jewish home, was scared.

How could I present mikvah without making it sound like a bizarre pagan ritual? How could I explain Jewish law after only six months study and five crash classes in Hebrew? How could I write a delicate story without incurring the wrath of 6,000 religious Jews in Westchester?

The rabbi at the Young Israel of Scarsdale, a modern Orthodox synagogue that maintains a mikvah, had the same concerns when I called requesting an interview.

"Are you religious?" he asked, a question I had been asking myself for the past six months.

"I daven at Lincoln Square," I said, telling the truth, but not the whole story.

During our interview, the rabbi weighed and measured each word. Clearly, he was uneasy talking about the rules of "niddah" with a woman and a reporter. He also didn't want to say anything that would cast mikvah and Jewish custom in an unfavorable light.

However, the rabbi cooperated and even relaxed toward the end when he took me on a tour of the sparkling, modern mikvah that was attached to the synagogue.

Later, the mikvah matron there described the ritual, step by step. One of the women I spoke to while working on the mikvah story even suggested I immerse in the mikvah as part of my research. For reasons I still don't understand, I declined.

PROFOUND QUESTIONS ABOUT JUDIASM:

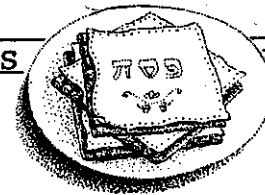


The other mikvah in Westchester is located at the Yeshiva Farm Settlement, a Hassidic community built around a yeshiva in Mount Kisco. The mikvah matron there is married, covers her hair and has eight children.

"Why mikvah?" she asked, then directed me to the community's rabbi. If it was OK with him, it was OK with her.

After reciting the magic words, "Lincoln Square Synagogue," the rabbi granted me permission to visit the mikvah and interview the matron.

(cont. on back page)



SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

Shabbat, April 1st (SHEMINI)
 Shabbat morning services.....8:45 a.m.
 Talmud and Bible Classes5:15 p.m.
 Mincha6:00 p.m.
 Turn the clock ahead one hour for
 Daylight Savings Time
 Daily Mincha Maariv.....7:15 p.m.
 D.S.T.

Thursday, April 6th
 Rosh Chodesh Nisan
 Morning Services.....7 & 7:40 a.m.

Friday, April 7th
 Kindle Shabbat Candles.....7:09 p.m.
 Mincha and Kabbalat Shabbat7:20 p.m.

Shabbat April 8th (TAZRIA)
 Shabbat morning services.....8:45 a.m.
 Talmud and Bible Classes5:40 p.m.
 Mincha6:40 p.m.
 Speaker Dr Avi Ravitsky.....7:00 p.m.
 Maariv.....8:10 p.m.
 Daily Mincha Maariv.....7:20 p.m.

Friday, April 14th
 Kindle Shabbat Candles.....7:16 p.m.
 Mincha and Kabbalat Shabbat.....7:25 p.m.

Shabbat, April 15th
 Shabbat morning services8:45 a.m.
 Mincha followed by Shabbat
 Hagadol Discourse.....6:20 p.m.
 Daily Mincha Maariv.....7:25 p.m.

Tuesday, April 18th
 Search for Chometz.....7:10 p.m.

Wednesday, April 19th
 morning services.....6:45 & 7:45 a.m.
 The first born are invited to complete a
 Talmudic tractate after each service so that
 they may be able to eat on what would normally
 be a fast day for them.

The latest time to eat Chametz.....10:17 a.m.
 The latest time to burn Chametz.....11:36 a.m.
 Eruv Tavshilin
 Kindle Yom Tov Candles.....7:21 p.m.
 Mincha and Kabbalat Yom Tov.....7:30 p.m.
 Followed by the First Community Seder...8:15 p.m.

Thursday, April 20th
 Yom Tov Morning Services.....8:45 a.m.
 Daf Yomi.....6:30 p.m.
 Mincha.....7:30 p.m.
 Kindle Yom Tov candles not Before.....8:22 p.m.
 Followed by the Second Community Seder..8:30 p.m.

Friday, April 21
 Yom Tov Morning Services8:45 a.m.
 Daf Yomi.....6:35 p.m.
 Kindle Shabbat candles.....7:23 p.m.
 Mincha and Kabbalat shabbat.....7:35 p.m.

Shabbat, April 22nd
 Shabbat Chol Hamoed Pesach
 Shabbat Morning services.....8:45 a.m.
 Daf Yomi.....6:25 p.m.
 Mincha.....7:25 p.m.
 followed by Seudah Shleesheet
 Daily Mincha Maariv.....7:35 p.m.

Sunday, April 23rd
 Chol Hamoed Pesach
 Morning Services.....7 & 8:30 a.m.

Monday, April 24th
 Chol Hamoed Pesach
 Morning Services.....7 & 7:40 a.m.

Tuesday, April 25th
 Chol Hamoed Pesach
 Morning services.....7 & 7:40 a.m.
 Kindle Yom Tov Candles7:28 p.m.
 Mincha and Kabbalat Yom Tov.....7:40 p.m.

Wednesday, April 26th
 Morning services.....8 & 8:45 a.m.
 Daf Yomi.....6:40 p.m.
 Mincha.....7:40 p.m.
 Kindle Yom Tov Candles not before8:30 p.m.

Thursday, April 27th
 Yom Tov Morning services including Yizkor
8 & 8:45 a.m.
 Daf Yomi.....6:15 p.m.
 Mincha followed
 by Seudah Shlisheet Neilat Hachag.....7:15 p.m.

Friday April 28th
 Kindle Shabbat Candles.....7:31 p.m.
 Mincha and Kabbalat Shabbat.....7:40 p.m.

Shabbat April 29th (AHARE)
 Shabbat morning services.....8:45 a.m.
 Talmud and Bible Classes.....6:30 p.m.
 Mincha.....7:30 p.m.
 Daily Mincha Maariv.....7:45 p.m.

Monday evening, May 1st and
 Tuesday, May 2nd Yom Hashoa

Friday, May 5th
 Rosh Chodesh Iyar
 Morning Services.....7 & 7:40 a.m.
 Kindle Shabbat Candles7:38 p.m.
 Mincha and Kabbalat Shabbat.....7:50 p.m.

Shabbat, May 6 (KEDOSHIM)
 Rosh Chodesh Iyar
 Shabbat Morning Services.....8:45 a.m.
 Talmud & Bible Classes.....6:40 p.m.
 Mincha.....7:40 p.m.
 Daily Mincha Maariv.....7:50 p.m.

Tuesday evening, May 9th and Wednesday, May 10
 Yom Haatzmaut (Israel Independence Day)

Friday, May 12th
 Kindle Shabbat Candles.....7:45 p.m.
 Mincha and Kabbalat Shabbat.....6:30 & 7:55 p.m.

Shabbat, May 13 (EMOR)
 Shabbat morning services.....8:45 a.m.
 Talmud & Bible Classes.....6:45 p.m.
 Mincha.....7:45 p.m.
 Daily Mincha & Maariv.....7:55 p.m.

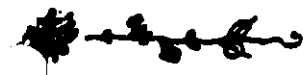
Friday, May 19th
 Kindle Shabbat Candles.....7:52 p.m.
 Mincha and Kabbalat Shabbat.....6:30 & 8:00 p.m.

Shabbat, May 20th (BEHAR)
 Shabbat morning services.....8:45 a.m.
 Talmud & Bible Classes.....6:50 p.m.
 Mincha.....7:50 p.m.
 Daily Mincha & Maariv.....8:05 p.m.

Monday evening May 22nd and
 Tuesday, May 23rd Lag B'omer

Friday, May 26th
 Kindle Shabbat candles.....7:58 p.m.
 Mincha and Kabbalat Shabbat.....6:35 & 8:10 p.m.

Shabbat May 27th (BECHUKOTAI)
 Shabbat morning Services.....8:45 a.m.
 Talmud and Bible classes.....7:00 p.m.
 Mincha.....8:00 p.m.
 Daily Mincha and Maariv.....8:10 p.m.



CONGRATULATIONS AND MAZEL TOV

ENGAGEMENTS

Ellen Levine and Jonathan Seigman
 Michelle Arbesfeld and Eli Salig
 Elisheva Loeb and Yaakov Potesky
 Heftziba Mandel and Mark Chase

MARRIAGES

Karen Bader and Alain Ickovics
 Arielle Bensimon and Jacob Feit
 Norma Birnbaum and Dr. Jerome Ehrlich
 Janice Demartinis and Dr. Mitchell Posner
 Debbie Fishman and Jimmy Frankel
 Abby Freiman and Jody Dole
 Karen Friedman and Stuart Adler
 Lynn Glickman and Eli Moore
 Eve Goldberg and Natan Volkmar
 Hadassa Danielle Hartweg and Joshua Joseph Strahl
 Janet Posner and Sam Horwitz
 Susan Schneider and Dr. Chaim Banner
 Miriam Torkan and Tod Jacobs
 Carol Weisz and Michael Putter
 Melody Jiovenetta and Dr. Earl Sandor



BIRTHS

Robin and Steven Apple on the birth of a girl, Jennifer
 Sara Youner and Howard Apson on the birth of a girl, Deborah Ann
 Hannah Lee and Dr. Eyal Barzel on the birth of a girl, Talia
 Sheryl and Mark Beck on the birth of a boy, Lewis Steven
 Yaffa and Nochum Cohen on the birth of a boy, Netanel
 Tom and Meira Fleisch on the birth of a boy, David
 Sharon and Steve Goodman on the birth of a boy, Akiva Moshe
 Batya and Eddie Jacobs on the birth of a girl, Mevaseret Tova
 Rivka and Shlomo Malchi on the birth of a girl, Atara Bruria
 Michele and David Morse on the birth of a girl, Leah Emily
 Jeanette and Ross Pinsky on the birth of a girl, Leana Adi
 Nancy and Richard Schneyer on the birth of a boy, David Eric
 Sari and Greg Sholom on the birth of a boy, Avraham Zev

BAR MITZVAH

Uri Goffin, son of Cantor Sherwood and Batya Goffin
 Jonatan Kaye, son of Agneta and Allen Kaye

CONDOLENCES

Rivka and Shlomo Malchi on the loss of their son, Hananel Aron
 Neil Roland and Paula Marcus on the loss of their father,
 Leonard Roland
 Jack and Sara Schechtman on the loss of their father, David
 Schechtman
 Jennifer Silver on the loss of her father, Joe Silver

CONGRATULATIONS

Michaela Harel for her piano debut at Carnegie Hall
 Profound thanks to Stuart Hample who has retired after three
 years as cartoonist of Berearith.
 Special wishes to Janet Posner on her marriage to Sam Horwitz.
 Janet has been a special friend to the Beginners Service
 throughout the years, and without her help many wonderful
 activities would not have taken place.

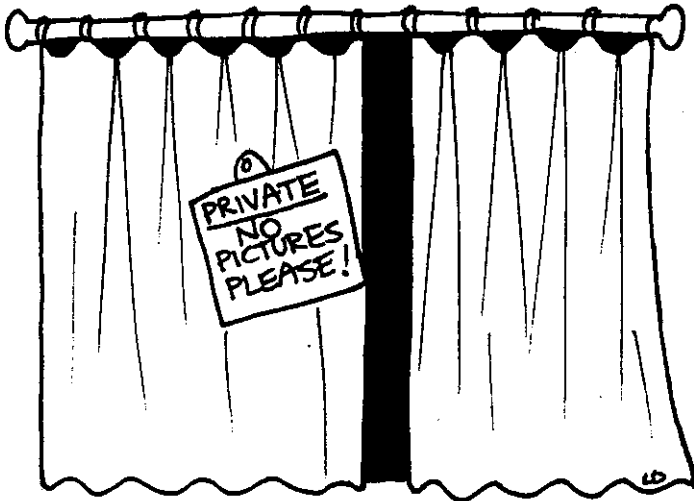
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 * Beginners Shabbaton *
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 * April 14th -15th *
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 * Beginners Luncheon *
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 * May 6th, June 3rd *
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 * Beginners Schmooze *
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 * Mon, June 5th, 8:15 pm *
 *
 * Reserve the dates *
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 * Details to follow *
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(cont. from front page) MIKVAH

The yeshiva's mikvah is located in a small building set away from the mainstream of community traffic. The matron showed me three changing areas, and the actual mikvah. We talked while looking at the water.

Mikvah is a very private ritual, the matron said. Mothers never talk about the ritual with their children until they are engaged. The matron, in fact, was shocked when I mentioned the invitation I declined in Scarsdale.

"Mikvah is only for married women," she said, providing a glimpse of the different ways religious communities observe different rituals.



Conducting the research on mikvah turned out to be the easiest part of doing the story. Writing it was excruciating. And editing it was no day at the beach either.

"Who are you writing this for?" my editor wanted to know.

"Anyone who doesn't know about mikvah," I said, feeling in my heart that the story was really for Reform Jews who hadn't heard of the ritual.

"What's the difference between 'religious Jews' and Jews?" he asked.

"That's the eternal question," I answered, then replaced in my lead "religious Jews" with "Jews who strictly observe the laws of Torah."

The last hurdle to clear was arranging for the art work that would accompany the story on the front page of the Lifestyl section of the newspaper.

"You can't show a naked woman in a story about mikvah!" I shrieked as the art director described the drawing she had in mind: A woman soaking in a mikvah.

"This is not a Jacuzzi," I added, as the art director thought for a moment and then sketched a pool filled with pristine water that reflected beatific rays from heaven.

"It's representational," she said.

"It's good enough," I said.

The mikvah story and picture ran in March. Because no angry letters to the editor poured in, I presume no one was terribly offended.

I'm proud that I didn't shrink from the challenge of writing about Judaism, and I'm glad I had the opportunity to answer questions about mikvah.

Now, all I want to know is, who's that guy in the corner, and why is he still single?

Lisa Faye Kaplan is a feature writer for Gannett Westchester Rockland newspapers in Harrison, N.Y.

