

Mikve: The New Frontier

Schulamith C. Halevy

Introduction

To many Jewish feminists, the mikve (ritual bath) has come to represent much that is wrong with Judaism's attitude towards women.¹ It is associated with restrictions on female sexuality and with a negative view of woman's body, role and function. But it was not always that way; over its long history, the mikve ritual has been transformed both in substance and form. During the Second Temple period the mikve served as a central component of Temple service and worship, for women and, even more so, for men. Only after the fall of Jerusalem, when its use declined, did it gradually become a place primarily for women, who were sent there to rid themselves of their monthly "uncleanliness."

Rachel Adler argued eloquently for seeing immersion in a mikve as a re-birth, in the context of the universal symbolism of water.² While Adler believed the Torah ritualized symptoms of mortality to make them less threatening, and to distinguish the spiritual from the physical, she admitted that current practice makes it difficult to feel the symbolic life-death issues that were originally connected with the ritual.³ Adler advocated revitalizing mikve use today, so that one may reap the intended psychological benefits.

Beyond recovering the original concept, and restoring its obscured spirituality, I propose the mikve as a new frontier for feminist Jews. Its symbolism encompasses the universal, Jewish and feminine psyches; its experiential qualities can step in where the progressive abstraction of worship leaves one yearning for more, where neglect or misunderstanding of woman's needs leave her dissatisfied and frustrated. Women are still excluded from active

¹For one condemnation, see Evelyn Kaye, *Hole in the Sheet*, Lyle Stuart, Secaucus, NJ, 1987, p. 157.

²"Tumah and tahara—Mikveh," in *The Jewish Catalog*, R. Siegel, M. Strassfeld, S. Strassfeld, eds., Jewish Publ. Soc., Phila., 1973, pp. 167–171.

³Rachel Adler, "Tumah and tahara: Ends and beginnings," in E. Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, Schocken, New York, 1976, p. 70.

participation in traditional public worship, and avenues for tangible religious experience are lacking. Immersion can be viewed as wordless prayer, and, as such, holds a promise of filling this void.

In these modern times of spiritual need, the mikve, so often the object of finger pointing as an arch example of sexual oppression, may in fact be the ideal forum for innovative forms of feminine expression.⁴

Symbolism

Water represents primordial substance. First and formless, it is the spring and source from which the tangible emerged, like continents from the ocean, like a baby from the amniotic fluids of its mother's womb. Immersion in water thus symbolizes the dissolution of form, a temporary death and re-absorption into the primordial, while emergence from the water represents rebirth, regeneration, a cleansing or washing away of the past.⁵ Examples of water as primeval cross virtually all cultural and geographic boundaries in ancient mythology: creation myths in which islands and continents rise from the sea, theogonies in which gods are born of the sea. The symbolism of cleansing by submersion is evident in various flood traditions in which the world starts anew after being deluged. This sentiment towards water is as evocative today as ever: "I can never get over when you're on the beach how beautiful the sand looks and the water washes it away and straightens it up and the trees and the grass all look great," said Andy Warhol.⁶ Ritual interpretations of individual immersion include baptism—consecrational immersion—an extremely common rite of initiation into secret societies or of conversion to religious sects. Although women were by far on the short end of social recognition, a noteworthy example of initiation of women into adulthood is found among the coast tribes of northwest Australia. Young women of these tribes, upon onset of menses were separated from the community. Three days after the event they were taken by the tribe's women, richly painted with ochres, to be immersed in a fresh water stream or a lagoon.⁷ Immersion as part of initiation into adulthood for men

⁴Blu Greenberg (*On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*, Jewish Publ. Soc., Phila., 1981, p. 119) suggests that "mikveh well could be the prototype of a woman's mitzvah."

⁵Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, 1957, trans. 1959, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, p. 131.

⁶Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, New York, 1975, p. 71.

⁷Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, 1965, p. 43.

is much more prevalent.

Immersion as a purification rite was widespread as well.⁸ Ancient Greeks immersed all or parts of their body before entering a temple for prayer, after childbirth, following an emission of semen and other similar events—for ritual purity. Japanese people used and still use immersion in water for numerous purposes which run the gamut from initiation into some workplaces to the quest for spiritual cleansing following contact with death or other encounters regarded as threatening.

In Hebrew cosmogony, too, water precedes all; Genesis says nothing about its creation. Upon the waters, before there was even light, the “spirit of the Lord” moved to and fro. Eden was planted at the confluence of four great rivers which nurtured and nourished the garden and Adam and Eve in their pristine state. Later, the flood washes away the corruption in which the world of man wallowed. When the waters subside, life starts afresh, green and pure. The destruction by water was not complete, as was, say, that of Sodom and Gomorrah. Rather, the death wreaked by water brings rebirth in its wake, with a promise of a better and more secure future.

Heaven and Earth both originated from elemental water (*mayim*), which after separation became the skies (*shamayim*), and the seas (*yamim*), from which the rest of world arose.⁹ (Note the similarity of the Hebrew words for heaven and seas.) The heavenly waters are *mayim haelionim*—waters of the Above; terrestrial water bodies are *mayim hatachtonim*—waters of the Below. Only two or three fingers’ breadth separate them, declares Ben Zoma, a Mishnaic scholar and reputed initiate into the esoteric.¹⁰

Judaism long ago imbued the symbolism connected to water with a wealth of additional, uniquely Jewish elements. Isaiah compares Wisdom to water.¹¹ Accordingly, the rabbis take water as a symbol for Torah,¹² the “living waters” are the Torah that gives eternal life. Jewish symbolism takes this idea further: water reflects and symbolizes the Divine. Thus, in explaining why the color *techelet* (Tyrian blue) was used to dye a thread of the ritual fringes, Rabbi Meir said, “Why is blue specified of all colors? Because blue resembles the color of the sea, and the sea resembles the color

⁸See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*, Praeger, New York, 1966.

⁹Gen. 1:2–11.

¹⁰*Genesis Rabbah* 2:4, and parallels.

¹¹Isa. 11:9.

¹²E.g. *B. T. Avodah Zarah* 5b.

of the sky, and the sky resembles the color of the Throne of Glory.”¹³

Parallels between heaven and earth lie at the core of Jewish symbolism. Noah’s ark is viewed as representative of the created world (from which water was excluded!). There is a Jerusalem of the Above to complement Jerusalem of the Below. Jerusalem, the Temple, and, later, Man, all serve as symbols of counterparts in celestial realms and in our worldly existence. To relate the Above with what is Below one needs “mirrors.” Even Moses, with whom God spoke “even manifestly,” in riddle-free vision,¹⁴ the Sages take to have prophesied as one who sees via an “illuminating mirror.”

Zelda, the marvelous recent religious poetess, thoroughly internalized this Jewish symbolism: her poetic images are filled with allusions to the sea as the reflection of heaven, and with astonishing naturalness she sails on her “silver mirrors” between the worlds and the spaces, mundane and spiritual. About the seamen, she says:¹⁵

They behold eye-to-eye
God’s handiwork
And experience His presence
Without our fences
Without our distraction.

And of her childhood adventurousness:¹⁶

Is not the floor of the sea
Chariot of the Lord?

When ritual ablution is examined in this context, with water as mirror of the heavens, submerging the body in a mikve reflects spiritual ascent into heaven!

The universal identification of the moon with water and life, with women and tides, adds yet another constellation of symbols. The Jewish calendar is primarily lunar, and the mythical association between women’s cycles and the moon are no strangers to Judaism.¹⁷ Thus, a water ritual that is attuned

¹³ *B. T. Menahot* 43b.

¹⁴ Num. 12:8.

¹⁵ *Shirei Zelda*, HaKibbutz HaMeuhad, 1985, p. 15, my translation.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 68.

¹⁷ In a halachic context, the Talmud (*B. T. Niddah* 63a) also speaks of women whose cycles match the lunar calendar.

to woman's cycles, is, by its nature, of feminine orientation.¹⁸

One of the most moving prayers found in the Bible is Jonah's, spoken from within the depths of the sea. Indeed, the experience women can have immersing in water transcends words. Unadorned, in paradisaal nudity, we enter the atemporal, seeking to be touched by the water—the heaven—in every corner of our matter and dissolve, become one with our timeless creator, our eternal Mother in Heaven, the Mikve of Israel.¹⁹ “Paradise implies the absence of garments, that is, the absence of attrition, wear (archetypical image of time). All ritual nudity implies an atemporal model, a paradisaal image.”²⁰ The mikve, with its rich symbolism, provides a place wherein one can tangibly relate to the more “feminine” aspects of God, a divine womb.

Immersion as Prayer

Marriage is a mini-temple, in midrashic terms. The love of two human beings is repeatedly alluded to by the prophets, when they describe the relationship between God and His people. Hence, sanctification through physical union must be practiced in a ritually pure state. Woman and husband are enjoined to refrain from sexual contact for a period of time beginning with her menstruation, and ending with immersion. Only then are they ready for procreation, perpetuation, the fulfillment of His design.

The Temple, representing the reciprocal interaction between Heaven and Earth, stood as a radical departure from what contemporaneous religions would have led one to expect. It housed no image of a deity. Instead, the Jewish house of worship provided, as pointed out by the Midrash, an “image” of our *world*. The Jew coming to his temple and taking part in its services learned not to attempt to bring God down to man, but, rather, to strive for self-improvement, to elevate him- or herself, as much as humanly possible, towards his incomprehensible, infinite Maker.²¹ Unlike in

¹⁸Again Zelda (p. 157): There she contemplated/ The changing of the tide/ And the secrets of the growing of leaves/ And when evening approached/ She held to her roaring heart/ Most ancient verses/ Whose origin is celestial.

¹⁹The concept of avoiding jewelry and makeup on Yom Kippur (the day when the High Priest immersed five times!) is as far as one can go in *public* ritual, but in the privacy of a mikve, modesty does not preclude the *total* ban of adornment. Nudity regains its paradisaal meaning and the sense of personal self revelation. One need not feel exhibitionistic, need not be narcissistic, to feel more comfortable alone, without clothing, without pretences.

²⁰Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1959, p. 135.

²¹Already in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the First Temple (I Kings 8 and I

pagan cults, where priest and layman re-enacted mythical scenes, in Judaism, *Imitatio Dei* took on a new and thoroughly refined meaning. Not self-immolation, but continuous contemplation of His ways. Not orgiastic dances, but careful everyday following in God's moral path. The Talmud teaches that the forms of work proscribed on the Sabbath are exactly those involved in constructing the Tabernacle, the first version of the Temple.²² Building the micro-universe embodied by the Tabernacle was *Imitatio Dei*, and—in imitation of Him—one is bidden to rest on the Sabbath, and to give respite to one's servants and animals.

In preparation for a meeting with the Eternal, the Hebrews separated themselves from all that represented death. Contact with the dead, as well as the loss of potential life in the form of semen or menstrual blood, are among the reminders of mortality that were to be ritually put behind the worshipper. A prescribed period of time and appropriate accompanying ritual were followed by immersion in living water, in symbolic rebirth into a temporary ritual "deathlessness." As Rachel Adler so aptly put it, "Who but the deathless can stand before the undying King?"²³ Immersion, however, was not only preparatory, the culmination of deliberate separation from things "unclean"; it was itself a descent into the womb—an ascent into heaven—with innate value as an intense, intimate encounter with God.

The Temple of old served as a place of private prayer.²⁴ Today, in the absence of the symbolic world which the Temple offered the people in its day, immersion in ritual water is one remaining venue for personal contact with the divine. Synagogue worship, which came to fill the void left by the cessation of Temple service, has, over the centuries, edged out personal prayer. The idea of inserting individual supplications in the *Amidah* is too intimidating for most worshipers: the prayer book is so fixed and formalized. Communal moments of meditation—under the public eye—set up as part of some services, also offer no room for real expression. Few people feel free to walk into the sanctuary of their local synagogue or temple at some unlikely hour for private prayer. Even the Western Wall, traditionally a place of personal prayer, has been converted into an arena of competing organized services, discriminating against women, and discouraging individual expression.

Chron. 6).

²²*B. T. Shabbath* 49b.

²³"Tumah and tahara—Mikveh," p. 169.

²⁴Hannah prayed at Shiloh; Solomon dedicated his Temple with a prayer that each individual's prayers be heard there.

The mikve, better understood and thoroughly revamped, might offer an appropriate alternative to impersonal synagogue prayer for those seeking a private setting for communicating with their Maker. It could become the perfectly personal and universally available mode of communication with the deity. More importantly for many Jews uninitiated in the intricacies of prayer, the eloquence of this experience does not depend on the one's knowledge of texts nor on her or his ability to perform in communal services. The mikve can substitute for prayer at the Temple, just as synagogal prayer replaced Temple sacrifices.

Whence the Mikve?

Use of the mikve has undergone monumental changes in its long course through Jewish history, before reaching the sorry state it is in today.

The word *mikve* first appears in the story of Creation. The terrestrial waters are ordered to gather, so that the land can emerge. The resultant bodies of water, lakes and seas, are called *mikve hamayim*. The Torah speaks of "living water," in which a person must immerse in order to emerge from the state of impurity associated with *zivut*, abnormal male or female flows. Living water means a spring-fed stream, or other natural source of moving water. Other impurities require washing of body and/or clothing, which the rabbis take to mean washing in a mikve. Reasons for such immersion include contact with a dead person, direct or indirect; contact with certain dead animals; *tzaraat* (commonly translated "leprosy"); menstruation; birthing; and emission of semen. While in an impure status, a person was banned from the Temple and could not partake of sanctified foods.²⁵

The scarcity of natural bodies of water in the Land of Israel, brought about the "domesticated" mikve, the prototype of which we know about from the early days of the monarchy. In the early Iron age, around the second millenium B.C.E., when the Children of Israel came to settle in their Promised Land, the coastal plains were occupied by the dreaded Canaanites, Philistines and others. As a result, for several centuries the Israelites were confined to the Judean mountains with limited access to the sea, and little by way of alternate water resources. To help alleviate the problem, they learned to harness rainwater. They built terraces to prevent the loss of precious water down hillsides; they built elaborate networks of cisterns, in which they gathered rainwater for irrigation and domestic use—in cellars, on

²⁵See Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Pollution, Purification, and Purgation in Biblical Israel," in: *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth*, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, IN, 1985.

the ground and on rooftops.²⁶ It is in this setting that we encounter the first man-made mikve: King David, gazing upon his city from his high-perched palace happens to see Bathsheba, on her rooftop, “becoming sanctified from her impurity.” This detail is given apparently to let us know that he first saw her in the nude; it is taken for granted that her rooftop cistern doubled as a private mikve.

The first century mikvaot (plural of mikve) found in Massada show the next stage in the domestication of mikve. Here, reservoirs of rainwater are connected with baths. Contact with naturally gathered water in the reservoir allowed the whole combination to be regarded as a mikve. The Massada mikvaot were communal, as were other sources of water. On the other hand, Second Temple period mikvaot found in the Upper City of Jerusalem were located in the basements of private villas belonging to the priestly aristocracy. The state-of-the-art mikvaot unearthed in these magnificent homes were lavishly decorated with mosaics, and contained a reservoir connected to a large step-in mikve, as well as bathtubs and hot water facilities. A single home might have several such mikvaot!

By the Middle Ages, however, such extravagances were bygone. The private mikve was replaced with community mikvaot. In Sepharadi communities, it became part of the bathhouse establishment (the place for social gathering among Middle-Eastern people). In Ashkenazi communities, the mikve was sometimes associated with a bathhouse (since Jews were often prohibited from using public baths), but, in Europe, in general, these were not as socially important as in Oriental society. More often, they were housed in a separate attachment to the synagogue or as a stand-alone building, used specifically and only for immersion. In any case, amenities were rare and immersion often involved great inconvenience and occasionally, danger.²⁷

The mikve today is typically modeled after this latter blueprint. It is most commonly a separate establishment designed entirely for the ritual. Though many mikvaot are modern and well equipped, they serve no purpose other than prescribed immersion. It offers neither a social setting where one goes to relax, get a sauna or massage treatment,²⁸ nor a private setting

²⁶See Carol L. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988.

²⁷As we will see, this cultural difference left its mark on the evolution of attitudes towards the ritual.

²⁸Until but a few years ago a Turkish bathhouse existed in Jerusalem with all the fittings, including a mikve. It closed after numerous attacks by ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi vandals who viewed the establishment as profane.

conducive to expressing or enacting personal religious feelings.²⁹

Mikve Use

The Jewish people made great efforts to keep up many laws and practises pertaining to Temple times only. *Hallah* is taken from dough and burnt in loving memory of the priestly gift, though there are no priests to give it to. Outside Israel, two-day holidays are mandated by halacha, to preserve the custom dating back to Sanhedrin days, when the new month was declared following visual testimony, and those living at a distance from Jerusalem did not always find out in time when the holiday should be celebrated. The fixed calendar, instituted in the fourth century, eliminated any uncertainty; nevertheless, the practice is adhered to more than a millenium after the need was obviated.

Such was not to be the fortune of the mikve. The destruction of the Second Temple completely changed its role. In the absence of the Temple facilities, it no longer was possible to undo what were deemed the gravest impurities—*tumat met* and *tzaraat*; parts of the ceremony had to be performed at the Temple, which was no longer existent. Thus, for the most part, the practical relevance of all impurities, except those pertaining to the feminine cycle, became obsolete.³⁰ This radical turn of events left the whole system exposed to imbalance.

Although most states of ritual impurity were of practical relevance only when one visited the Temple or wished to partake of sanctified food offerings, it appears that many people kept themselves always in a pure state for the spiritual uplift it offered them. From the story of David and Bathsheba, we know that she immersed after her menstrual flow, though there was no apparent need for her to do this, since the Holy Ark was in Shiloh and her Hittite husband was out of town.³¹ Still she chose to perform the ritual.

In Temple times, female members of priestly families immersed regularly; in Mishnaic times, there were groups that immersed daily.³² There was an elite group, *haverim*, who chose to be extra careful in many observances. In particular, they would eat only ritually pure foods, and, therefore, would

²⁹It should be noted that the *Havura* movement has composed mikve liturgies.

³⁰Males of the priestly family also continue to be prohibited from immediate contact with the dead.

³¹Some rabbis of the Talmud try to exonerate David from the charge of adultery by claiming that Uriah had temporarily divorced his wife; Maimonides surmises that Uriah had never become Jewish.

³²See *El Am Talmud* on *T. B. Berakoth*, 2a.

have to immerse in a mikve almost daily. This surprising notion, that all food should to be treated like sacrificial meat, reflects the importance accorded the purification rituals in these circles. Likewise, the Essenes were ardent users of the mikve, though they were mostly celibate, usually lived far from the Temple (in the Dead Sea communities), and distanced themselves from many of its practices.

According to the Mishna, immersion was required of men who had engaged in intercourse or had a nocturnal emission, before they could say the Shema or pray. In Talmudic times, this practice—asccribed to Ezra—was already not commonly adhered to.³³ Even much later, particularly in Sepharadi communities, many pious men continued to immerse themselves regularly in the mikve, or at least to shower instead.³⁴ In Europe the practice declined much faster, as bathing was altogether less common and at times even shunned. Those men who did frequent the mikve went in advance of holidays, the Sabbath and other events of the calendar, rather than in conjunction with events befalling their flesh. In kabbalistic and hasidic practices, the mikve was endowed with mystical properties enabling it to undo the effects of *evil* supernatural powers.³⁵ These changes constitute a 180 degree turn from the original concept, linking physical events to the spiritual ritual.

A Woman's Ritual?

Women, on the other hand, continued to observe the mikve ritual. They acknowledged the coming of womanhood in ceremony, by beginning to immerse following their first menstruation. Through the regular practice of the mikve ritual, they continued to confirm their womanhood, and the cyclical events taking place within them. Its observance could be seen as an ongoing covenant with God, practiced by women from religious adulthood (at puberty), conscious and continuous, in contrast to the covenant of circumcision performed on infant males.

Two events contributed to divorce the ritual from womanhood. First, the rabbis of the Talmud considered it too difficult for women to differentiate between *nida*, a normal menstrual flow, and *ziva*, a pathological flow, for which a longer waiting period was mandated before purification was possible.

³³ *T. B. Berakoth*, 22a.

³⁴ Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, *Tefillah* 4:6.

³⁵ See, for example, Jerome R. Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1968, p. 51.

To stay on the safe side, the rabbis ruled that all feminine blood flow be regarded as *dam ziva*—the flow of illness. This same attitude of “covering all bases,” has continued to color many of the laws and customs now associated with *nida*, mikve construction, and mikve use.³⁶ It has made it harder and harder to construct a satisfactory private mikve or to use an existing one without submitting to inspections for conformance.

The second event took place much later. Isaac ben Sheshet Perfel (14th century), in a responsum³⁷, explained why women in his time were being discouraged from observing the mikve ritual, except upon, and subsequent to, marriage. This was an attempt to discourage promiscuity among unmarried adults. The rationale was that intercourse with a *nida* is considered a grave transgression, while premarital sex between a man and a ritually pure woman is a relatively minor one, hence, people would be more reluctant to engage in premarital sex were young women in a perpetual *nida* state. This lifting of the original requirement to immerse regularly for unmarried women was accepted wholeheartedly, particularly in Ashkenazi communities, thereby disrupting feminine ritual life, presumably without reducing the prevalence of sex *sans* marriage. Indeed, Nahmanides (13th century) counselled against publicising his lenient view regarding mistresses, since their paramours would likely transgress the laws of *nida*, implying that men could not be expected to be deterred by a woman’s *nida* state.³⁸ Ironically, nowadays, there is an old rabbi in Jerusalem who follows prostitutes, trying to get them yes to go to a mikve, in a misguided attempt to reduce the gravity of the sin committed by the men who frequent them.

These changes served to deprive Jewish women of ritual recognition of their normal cyclical events, and denying them an affirming experience, acknowledging onset of womanhood. Instead, going to the mikve was turned into license for sex, something between a woman and her husband, rather than acknowledgement of her womanhood, of new life within herself. As a consequence of its sexual implications, girls did not go with their mothers (as they still do in some Sephardic families), and women became secretive about the whole issue. Thus, going to the mikve became something a woman typically never heard about until becoming a bride. It became an experience that undermines her sense of feminine confidence, rather than reaffirms it. Today, virtually no Orthodox-run mikve would knowingly allow an un-

³⁶E.g. the Hassidic responsum, *Divrei Chaim Y. D.* 2:99.

³⁷No. 425; see Joseph Karo, *Beit Yosef, Y. D.* 183:1.

³⁸Responsa.

married woman in,³⁹ nor would a religious high school consider teaching the rules and background of feminine ritual cleanliness. As a result, even among Orthodox women, few observe the laws of *nida* and mikve.

Jewish men, having neglected the mikve practise, regressed to regard women as less pure than they. Over the years, they forgot the origin of the ritual, forgot the many sources of impurity that affect both men and women, and concentrated on the bleeding of women. In some communities, menstruant women are not to touch men's things, sit on their seat, and so on. In many communities, even today, women are barred from the synagogue during menstruation, or are forbidden contact even with the cloth used to wrap the Torah scroll, as if the Torah could be defiled by a woman's touching it or looking at it.⁴⁰ It is sad to see a ritual, with the potential of making the feminine cycle less frightening and repulsive to men, contribute, instead, to the entrenchment of such distorted attitudes.

Men and women inquiring nowadays about the mikve are almost invariably presented with a guide to current practises, rather than their historical context; with lectures on "family purity," forgetting the individual's *mitzva*; with the products of fear of menstruation and antiquated notions of woman's uncleanness which supplant the spiritual origin of *tahara*; and with imported superstitions and accreted stringencies, rather than with an opportunity for heightened spiritual awareness.

The Present

Mikve establishments today are virtually always run by local rabbinic organizations and controlled entirely by male-dominated boards, though used predominantly by women. Matronly attendants, hired by these boards, ensure that all users of the facility comply with the "house rules," typically printed and displayed in every shower room, demanding that the patron trim her nails all the way down, comb all hair on her body, and so on. Men who use the same mikve are not subjected to such scrutiny.

The mikve is the *only* aspect of private religious observance from which whole segments of the community are barred. Women are frequently denied

³⁹Some have signs from prominent rabbis to that effect.

⁴⁰See Solomon Gantzfried, *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh (Code of Jewish Law)*, 153:16., or *Maayan Tahor*, in Siddur with Yiddish trans., Raum, Wilna, 1910, p. 616. Note that this superstition bears no relation to the woman's ritual status, since once the flow has stopped—regardless of whether she has gone to a mikve—this restriction is lifted. This, of course, is exactly the opposite of what the Torah and Talmud strove to teach.

access to the mikve for reasons such as refusing, or being unable, to remove rings from their fingers or clipping their nails. Many women, attempting to visit the mikve for the first time, come away feeling that by not following these rules, they would harm the purifying powers of the mikve—a halachic impossibility. Or, they are told that they are “living in sin,” if they don’t comply with the whims of the attendant. No one would dream of denying a person who does not keep two sets of dishes the right to purchase kosher meat!

To make matters worse, the mikve is typically open only at specific times during which, of necessity, traffic is high. The pressure, the regulations, the overseeing guardian, combine to make it virtually impossible for anyone to have a meaningful personal experience.

The cumulative effect of these adverse developments, coupled with the impact of modern society on religious observances in general, has been the loss of the mikve’s appeal to Jews all across the religious spectrum. Reform Judaism discourages mikve use, Conservative Judaism does not encourage it, and, in the Orthodox community, very large numbers of women “vote with their feet” and do not return after their wedding. Orthodox authorities respond with publications promising more children, less cancer, and better sex to women who go to the mikve, but to no avail.⁴¹

The Possibilities

The indignities implied by mikve use, under policing eyes, solely to make marital relations permissible are not, however, inherent to the precept. We have seen how to understand immersion as a personal prayer, a symbolic meeting with God.

There are many other positive aspects to this mitzvah. Women might have a healthier perception of self, if, from the onset of their first menstrual flow, they would be ritually acknowledging the event, counting the days, anticipating the arrival, then departure, of the phases of their feminine bodies and celebrating them in private. In our uniquely personal cycles, acknowledged through mikve ritual, we could have a “prior” existence, established at adolescence, into which man would be incorporated only as he comes to share more of our life in our mature years.

⁴¹ For example, Menachem M. Brayer (*The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature*, Ktav, Hoboken, NJ, 1986) writes: “The number of stillborn births, children born blind, and those who die from childbirth diseases is far less among women who have observed these family laws.”

For other reasons, too, the mikve is an excellent choice for Jewish feminists' attention. The role of the mikve can be expanded to include a variety of new rituals; new, but well anchored in the very roots of Judaism; innovative and, at the same time, returning to the sources. We are, for example, in need of a means of combat against the confused roles women are assigned in Western culture. On the one hand, we are encouraged to act and look like sex objects, while, on the other, menstruation is tabu (absorbency of "hygienic pads" is invariably advertised using *blue* liquid; tampon ads promise that we can make it all go away, no one will know, we can act like it is not there, etc.), feminine odors are treated with disgust (feminine douche and deodorant ads), aging is so unfeminine that we must combat it with everything from cosmetic wizardry, to hormone therapies, to major surgery. Instead, every woman in the Western world could benefit from allowing herself to acknowledge the cycles of her body. The mikve, used regularly from puberty to menopause, could, in my opinion, accomplish just that. In other words, the mikve could play a role in our moving away from a male-designed feminine role to female self-actualization.

Perhaps the stress brought on by P.M.S. could be ameliorated to some extent if the anxiety and disgust often attached to the coming of feminine flow were replaced with the satisfaction that comes with affirmation of our female self; if, rather than viewing it as the arrival of this uncontrollable mess one must hide from the world and from one's self, women would learn to view the coming of their flow as confirmation of their womanhood, a promise of new beginnings. Acceptance and control are important components of pain management. Were women not to suffer from the added psychological stress society makes us attach to our feminine cycles, the physiological discomfort would not be further exacerbated, and would thus be easier to manage.

One might also consider establishing immersion as a possible therapy for victims of sexual abuse or violence. More generally, it can be used by anyone who has suffered the loss of a dear one's life, emerged unscathed from accident or illness, or, for any reason, felt the divine core of her/his existence profaned.

In a different direction, the mikve is a tempting venue for celebrating the birth of a girl or her bat-mitzvah. Whereas public ceremony in Judaism has moved away from physiological events (bar- and bat-mitzvah are celebrated according to one's years, not in connection with an individual's signs of puberty), the mikve is both more private and better attuned to the less physically evident aspect of growth, mental, intellectual and emotional maturity. Recognizing these changes in *private* ritual would not undermine

the progress this move towards a more modest regard of one's physical self represents.⁴² On the other hand, consecrational uses of a mikve may carry undesirable baptismal overtones, which are atypical of Judaism, though not altogether absent.

There is nothing wrong with experimenting with a new ritual, and in time discarding it, if one is careful not to overcreate, not to cause the whole treasure to be thrown out with the proverbial bath water. The underlying concepts of the mikve must always be borne in mind; the delicate boundary between spiritually motivated behavior and the revival of primitive and justly discarded rituals should not be overstepped. Reclaiming the mikve in this way, we will in the long run find it cleansed and improved for women of all walks of the Jewish faith.

A Strategy

The mikve must literally be resurrected. Necessity, planning and education will combine with time to determine its future. My personal vision of the perfect future has women going to the mikve from menarch, immersing after seven days from the beginning of each period (*nida*) and seven days after bleeding ceases (*zava*).⁴³ The "family" aspect would play a secondary role to that of our intertwining spiritual and physical cycles. In women's education, an emphasis would be placed on the continuous covenant between woman and her maker, observed by her. The mikve would be available to all.

In the meantime, one can still try to go to an established mikve without being intimidated, bearing in mind that the matron is there only to make sure the bathtub is clean and towels, fresh. If necessary, a threat to "skip the mikve this month and just go home" will usually scare her into accommodation.

The "guerrilla mikve goer" who does not wish to fight with the establishment, or who is not within accessible distance of a mikve, can avail herself of the original mikve, by herself. Natural mikvaot are all around us. The oceans, natural lakes and ground-fed springs are all natural bodies of living water. In warm climates, or in summer, at least, this is feasible. Although it is customary to immerse in the nude, loose fitting swimming clothes pose no problem.

⁴²I have heard similar suggestions that a mikve ritual be established to help women deal with the changes of menopause.

⁴³See *Tosaphoth* on *B. T. Shabbath* 13b.

Confronting the mikve establishment is important. The mikve must become as available as any other religious object and facility. With enough objections, the restrictive practises will have to go. Only with the cooperation of part of the community and the disinterest and silence of the rest, did the current situation establish itself; it will disappear when this tacit cooperation is withdrawn.

There is grassroots interest in mikve.⁴⁴ We need mikvaot that are available to all, no questions asked, not controlled by some organization. Hillel houses, for instance, and other Jewish student organizations on university campuses, are flexible, multi-denominational institutions, where religious experimentation is taking place. Mikvaot at such locations would attract the group of people most likely to be creative in its approach to the mikve.

A mikve in each home may be a far-fetched dream, but, technically, private mikvaot are not impossible.⁴⁵ There are, even today, a fair number of private and do-it-yourself synagogue mikvaot, particularly in small towns in Europe and the United States. To these, wife and husband can often go together, if they so desire.

In my personal vision, I imagine myself, sitting on the steps of my own mikve—my private sanctuary—in Jerusalem, feet in the living waters, as I bring my inner core back in touch with the Divine, immersing totally to emerge strengthened and renewed.

⁴⁴Michael Gold, "Family Purity," *Moment*, March 1989, p. 32; "Taking stock," *The Jewish Week*, Jan. 12, 1990, p. 4.

⁴⁵David Miller, *The Secret of the Jew: His Life—His Family*, self-published, Oakland, CA, 1930, rev. 1938.