

## **On Family and Purity**

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### Introduction

The term, "family purity," has become a euphemism for women's mikve ritual, undermining, thereby, the individual nature of this mitzvah. To many it has come to represent all that is wrong with the attitude to women in Judaism.

In truth, the mikve's 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 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.

### The Past

Historically, the mikve was an integral part of Temple worship; the last step taken by the individual in preparation for their meeting with the Eternal. 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 in the presence of the undying King?" [1] Immersion, however, was not only preparatory, the culmination of deliberate separation from things "unclean."

In Temple times, male and female members of priestly families immersed regularly. 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 continuously in a pure state for the spiritual uplift

it offered them. 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. Likewise, in Mishnaic times, an elite group, called haverim, was careful to partake only of food that was ritually pure, and, so as not to defile food they touched, immersed almost daily in a mikve.

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., it no longer was possible to undo what were deemed among the gravest impurities--coming in contact with a dead person and leprosy; 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. Males of the priestly family continued to be prohibited from immediate contact with the dead.) This radical turn of events left the whole system exposed to imbalance.

For a while, some families continued to eat in ritual purity, but this did not last. According to the Mishna, immersion was also 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--ascribed to Ezra--was already seldom adhered to. Women, on the other hand, continued to observe the mikve ritual after the destruction of the Temple. 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. As Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor wrote in the twelfth century: [2] "The blood of nida that women observe... is for them the blood of the Covenant." Its observance was 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. To stay on the safe side, they 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. 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 Perfet (14th century), in a responsum [3], explained that women in his time were being discouraged from observing the mikve ritual, except upon and subsequent to marriage, in 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, most likely without reducing the prevalence of sex sans marriage. Indeed, Nahmanides (13th century) counselled against publicizing 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.

These changes served to deprive Jewish women of ritual recognition of their potential for giving new life rising and ebbing within them, and denying them an affirming experience, acknowledging onset of womanhood. Instead, going to the mikve was turned into license for sex, something a woman had to endure in order to become acceptable to her husband. As a consequence of its sexual implications, girls did not go with their mothers, 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 unmarried woman in; some have signs from prominent rabbis to that effect.

Jewish men, having neglected the mikve practise, regressed to regard women as less pure than they, forgetting the many sources of impurity that affect both men and women, and concentrating instead on feminine blood. This, of course, is exactly the opposite of what the Torah and Talmud strove to teach. It is sad to see a ritual, with the potential of making the feminine cycle less frightening and repulsive to men, contribute to the entrenchment of such distorted attitudes.

### 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 are not subjected to such scrutiny.

Mikve is the only aspect of private religious observance from which whole segments of the community are barred. Women are frequently denied access to the mikve for reasons such as refusing, or being unable, to remove rings from their fingers or clipping their nails. Women are misled to believe that should they not comply with these rules, they would harm the purifying powers of the mikve--a halachic impossibility. No one would dream of denying a person who does not keep two sets of dishes the right to purchase kosher meat!

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. Mikve proponents respond with publications promising more children, less cancer, and better sex to women who go to the mikve, rather than invest it with

meaning. [4]

## The Future

The indignities of mikve use, under policing eyes, solely to make marital relations permissible are not, however, inherent to the precept.

Immersion is a symbolic descent into the Divine womb--an ascent into heaven, mirrored in the waters--with innate value as an intense, intimate encounter with God. Unadorned, in paradisaal nudity, we enter the atemporal, seeking to be touched by the water in every corner of our matter and dissolve, become one with our timeless creator, our eternal Mother in Heaven, the Mikve of Israel. In the Jewish world of symbols, the "waters of the Above" are reflected in the "waters of the seas," and derived from the same source, just as earthly Jerusalem lies below "Jerusalem of the Above." It is indeed especially appropriate for woman, bearer of life, to enter the symbolic womb of the Creator who entrusted her with the power to give life.

Zelda, the late Israeli religious poetess, thoroughly internalized this Jewish symbolism: her poetic images are filled with allusions to the sea as the reflection of heaven. With astonishing ease she sails on her "silver mirrors" between the worlds and the spaces, mundane and spiritual. About the seamen, she says: [5]

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

And of her childhood adventurousness: [6]

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

The Jewish calendar is primarily lunar, and the mythical association between women's cycles, the moon and water are no strangers to Judaism. The mikve, a water ritual attuned to woman's cycles, is invested thereby with yet another constellation of meanings.

We can reclaim the spiritual value of this mitzvah. From the onset of a woman's first

menstrual flow, she would be ritually acknowledging the event, counting the days, anticipating the arrival, then departure, of the phases of her feminine body, celebrating them in private. Through observance, we could have a "prior" feminine awareness, established at adolescence, into which man would be incorporated only as he comes to share more of a woman's life.

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. The mikve, used regularly from puberty to menopause, could play a role in our moving away from a male-designed feminine role to female self-actualization.

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 shaken or profaned.

In suggesting new rituals, 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. In

women's education, an emphasis should be placed on the continuous covenant between woman and her Maker. Necessity, planning and education will combine with time to determine the future role of the mikve in Jewish society.

The mikve must become as available as any other religious object and facility to all who wish to avail themselves of it. Confronting the mikve establishment is important. 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 are alternatives to community mikvaot. The oceans, natural lakes and ground-fed springs are all natural bodies of living water. In warm climates, or in summer, at least, they can make for a wonderful ritual experience. (Although it is customary to immerse in the nude, loose-fitting swimming clothes pose no halachic problem, and no one else need be present if sufficient care is taken.)

A mikve in each home may be a far-fetched dream, but, technically, private mikvaot are not impossible. 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.

My personal vision of the ideal future has women going to the mikve from menarche, immersing after seven days from the beginning of each period (nida) and seven days after bleeding ceases (zava). The first immersion is in recognition of the normal womanly cycle and reaffirms one's personal covenant with the divine, while immersing after seven "clean" days is in conformity with rabbinic law and sanctifies the carnal act of reproduction. The intermediate days between immersions can be satisfying, happy and spiritual. Having gone once already could help reduce tension over any unnecessary complications the second time around and the "family" aspect would play a secondary role to that of intertwining spiritual and physical cycles.

The Temple of old served as a place of private

prayer (as Hannah prayed at Shiloh). Today, in the absence of the symbolic world which the Temple offered people in its day, immersion in ritual water is one remaining venue for personal contact with the Omnipresent. Let us work together and reinvest it--and ourselves--with its holiness.

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1. Rachel Adler, "Tumah and tahara: Ends and beginnings," in E. Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, Schocken, New York, 1976, p. 67.

2. Commentary to Genesis 17, 11.

3. No. 425.

4. For example, Menachem M. Brayer (*The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature: A Psychosocial Perspective*, Ktav, Hoboken, NJ, 1986) writes (p. 94): "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."

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

6. P. 68.

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