

Living Waters, Moving Currents: Creating New Meaning in Mikveh Practice

Source Sheet by Talia Rasiel

Source 1: Anita Diamant "Why I Want a Mikvah" excerpt

"I want a mikveh that encourages the prayers of the heart in Jews of every denomination and description...I want a mikveh that respects the modesty of the people who visit...that is beautiful in design and decoration, welcoming and inviting from the minute you walk through the door."

Source 2: Lev. 15:13

(13) When the one with a discharge becomes purified of his discharge [meaning when the discharge ceases], he shall count off seven days for his purification, wash those clothes, and bathe his body in **living water**; then he shall be pure.

ויקרא ט"ו:י"ג
(יג) וְכִי־יִטְהַר הַזָּב מִזֹּבּוֹ וְסָפַר לוֹ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים
לְטַהֲרֹתוֹ וְכַבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְרָחַץ בְּשֵׁנָיו בַּמַּיִם חַיִּים וְטָהַר:

Source 3: Lev. 11:33-35

(33) And if any of those [carcasses of *sheretz*, unkosher "swarming" animals] falls into an earthen vessel, everything inside it shall be impure and [the vessel] itself you shall break. (34) As to any food that may be eaten, it shall become impure if it came in contact with water; as to any liquid that may be drunk, it shall become impure if it was inside any vessel. (35) Everything on which the carcass of any of them falls shall be impure: an oven or stove shall be smashed. They are impure—and impure they shall remain for you.

ויקרא י"א:ל"ג-ל"ה
(לג) וְכָל־כֵּל־חֶרֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר־יִפֹּל מֵהֶם אֶל־תּוֹכוֹ כָּל־אֲשֶׁר
בְּתוֹכוֹ יִטָּמָא וְאֹתוֹ תִשְׁבְּרוּ: (לד) מִכָּל־הָאֵלֶּךְ אֲשֶׁר יֵאָכֵל
אֲשֶׁר יָבֹא עָלָיו מַיִם יִטָּמָא וְכָל־מִשְׁקָהּ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁתֶּה
בְּכָל־כֵּלִי יִטָּמָא: (לה) וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־יִפֹּל מִנְּבֵלָתָם אֶל־עַלְיוֹ
יִטָּמָא תַנּוּר וְכִירִים יִתֵּץ טַמְאִים הֵם וְטַמְאִים יִהְיוּ לָכֶם:

Source 4: Lev. 11:36

(36) However, a spring or cistern in which water is **collected** shall be pure...

ויקרא י"א:ל"ו
(לו) אֵדָהּ מַעְיָן וְבוֹר מְקוּהַּ־מַּיִם יִהְיֶה טָהוֹר...

Source 5: Rashi on Lev. 11:36

...But you may also give it the meaning: יהיה טהור, he shall be clean i.e. he who immerses himself in them to free himself from his uncleanness.

רש"י על ויקרא י"א:ל"ו
(א) אך מעין ובור מקוה מים. ...ועוד יש לה ללמד,
יהיה טהור — הטובל בהם מטמאתו:

Source 6: What counts as “Av HaTumah”

- A human corpse: the most *tameh* kind of Av HaTumah, called "*avi avot hatumah*"
- The *zav*: a man who has experienced non-seminal discharge
- The *zavah*: a woman who has experienced non-menstrual bleeding
- *Shichvat zera*: semen
- *Yoledet*: a woman who has just given birth
- *Nevelah* and *Sheretz*: the corpse of any animal besides a kosher animal that has had proper *shechita*, and animals that are considered "swarming" animals
- *Mei hatat*: water involved in the ritual of the parah adumah, as well as people involved in the parah adumah ritual
- *Metzarah*: someone recovering from tzara'at
- *Niddah*: a menstruating woman

Source 7: Lev. 15:19-24

(19) 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. (20) Anything that she lies on during her menstrual separation shall be impure; and anything that she sits on shall be impure. (21) All those who touch her bedding shall wash their clothes, bathe in water, and remain impure until evening; (22) and all those who touch any object on which she has sat shall wash their clothes, bathe in water, and remain impure until evening. (23) Be it the bedding or be it the object on which she has sat, on touching it one shall be impure until evening. (24) And if a man lies with her, her menstrual separation applies to him; he shall be impure seven days, and any bedding on which he lies shall become impure.	ויקרא ט"ו:י"ט-כ"ד (יט) ואשה כי־תהינה זבה דם יהינה זבה בבשרה שבועת ימים תהינה בנדתה וכל־הנגע בה יטמא עד־הערב: (כ) וכל־אשר תשכב עליו בנדתה יטמא וכל־אשר־תישב עליו יטמא: (כא) וכל־הנגע במשכבה יכבס בגדיו ורחץ במים וטמא עד־הערב: (כב) וכל־הנגע בכל־כלי אשר־תישב עליו יכבס בגדיו ורחץ במים וטמא עד־הערב: (כג) ואם על־המשכב הוא או על־הכלי אשר־הוא ישבת־עליו בנגעו־בו יטמא עד־הערב: (כד) ואם שכב ישכב איש אתה ותהי נדתה עליו וטמא שבועת ימים וכל־המשכב אשר־ישכב עליו יטמא: {ס}
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Source 8: Lev. 18:19

(19) Do not come near a woman during her menstrual period of impurity to uncover her nakedness [i.e. have sex with her].	ויקרא י"ח:י"ט (יט) ואִל־אִשָּׁה בְּנִדְתָּהּ טִמְאָתָהּ לֹא תִקְרַב לְגִלּוֹת עֲרוּתָהּ:
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Source 9: Lev. 18:29

(29) All who do any of those abhorrent things—such persons shall be cut off from their people [they will be <i>nikhretu</i> - they will receive the punishment of <i>karet</i>].	ויקרא י"ח:כ"ט (כט) כִּי כָל־אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה מִכָּל הַתּוֹעֵבֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְנִכְרְתוּ הַנְּפֹשׁוֹת הָעֹשֹׂת מִקֶּרֶב עַמָּם:
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Source 10: Lev. 15:25-28

(25) When a woman has had a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her menstrual separation, or when she has a discharge beyond her period of menstrual separation, she shall be impure, as though at the time of her menstrual separation, as long as her discharge lasts...When she becomes purified of her discharge, she shall count off seven days, and after that she shall be pure.

ויקרא ט"ו:כ"ה-כ"ח
(כה) וְאִשָּׁה כִּי-יִזְוֹב זֹב דָּמָה יָמִים רַבִּים בְּלֹא עֵת-נִדְתָּהּ
אוּ כִי-תִזְוֹב עַל-נִדְתָּהּ כָּל-יָמֶי זֹב טְמֵאָתָה כִּימֵי נִדְתָּהּ
תִּהְיֶה טְמֵאָה הִוא...וְאִם-טָהְרָה מִזֹּבָהּ וְסָפְרָה לָּהּ
שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְאַחֵר תִּטְהָר:

Source 11: Gen. 31:35

(35) For [Rachel] said to her father, "Let not my lord take it amiss that I cannot rise before you, for I am in a womanly way..."

בראשית ל"א:ל"ה
(לה) וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל-אָבִיהָ אֶל-יְהוָה בְּעֵינַי אֲדֹנָי כִּי לֹא
אוּכַל לָקוּם מִפְּנֵיהָ כִּי-דְרוֹךְ נָשִׁים לִי...

Source 12: Rashi on Gen. 31:35

(1) I do not understand what kind of an apology this is. Do women in that condition not rise or stand?...The correct interpretation appears to me to be that in ancient days menstruant kept very isolated for they were ever referred to as *niddot* on account of their isolation since they did not approach people and did not speak with them. For the ancients in their wisdom knew that their breath is harmful, their gaze is detrimental and makes a bad impression...just as our Rabbis have mentioned in the *Beraitha* of Tractate Niddah: "A learned man is forbidden to greet a menstruant. Rabbi Nechemyah says, 'Even the utterance of her mouth is unclean.' Said Rabbi Yochanan: 'One is forbidden to walk after a menstruant and tread upon her footsteps, which are as unclean as a corpse; so is the dust upon which the menstruant stepped unclean, and it is forbidden to derive any benefit from her work.'..."And Laban kept silent and did not answer her, as it was customary not to converse with them at all because the speech of a menstruant was unclean.

רמב"ן על בראשית ל"א:ל"ה
(א) אֶל יְהוָה בְּעֵינַי אֲדֹנָי כִּי לֹא אוּכַל לָקוּם מִפְּנֵיהָ לֹא
הַבִּינוּתִי מֵהַ תְּנַצְלוֹת זֶה, וְכִי הַנָּשִׁים אֲשֶׁר לָהֶן הָאֶרֶץ
לֹא יָקוּמוּ וְלֹא יַעֲמֻ...וְהַנֶּכֶחַ בְּעֵינַי כִּי הֵיוּ הַנִּדּוֹת בִּימֵי
הַקִּדְמוֹנִים מִרְחֻקוֹת מְאֹד, כִּי כֵן שָׁמֶן מַעוֹלָם "נִדּוֹת"
לְרַחוּקָן, כִּי לֹא יִתְקַרְבוּ אֶל אָדָם וְלֹא יְדַבְּרוּ בוֹ, כִּי יִדְעוּ
הַקִּדְמוֹנִים בְּחֻכְמָתָם שֶׁהַבֶּלֶן מְזִיק, גַּם מִבֶּטֶן מוֹלִיד גִּנְאִי
וְעִשָּׂה רָשָׁם רַע...וּכְמוֹ שֶׁהִזְכִּירוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ בְּבִרְיָתָא שֶׁל
מִסְכַּת נִדָּה, תִּלְמִיד אֲסוּר לְשָׂאֵל בְּשִׁלּוּמָהּ שֶׁל נִדָּה, רַבִּי
נְחֻמִּיהָ אוֹמֵר, אֶפְלוּ הַדְּבוּר הֵיכָא מִפִּיהָ הִוא טְמֵא, אָמַר
רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן, אֲסוּר לְאָדָם לְהֵלֵךְ אַחֵר הַנִּדָּה וּלְדַרֵּס אֶת
עַפְרָהּ, שֶׁהִוא טְמֵא כִּמְת כֹּף עַפְרָה שֶׁל נִדָּה טְמֵא, וְאֲסוּר
לְהִנּוֹת מִמֶּעֶשֶׂה יָדֶיהָ...וְהִוא הִתְחַרֵּשׁ מִמֶּנָּה וְלֹא עָנָה
אוֹתָהּ, כִּי לֹא הָיוּ מְסַפְּרִים עִמָּהּ כָּלֵל מִפְּנֵי שֶׁדְּבוּרָהּ
טְמֵא:

Source 13: *New Waters in an Old Vessel: A History of Mikveh in Modern Judaism* by Michael A. Meyer, excerpt 1

“Especially in the United States, the Reform movement increasingly fostered a Judaism that sought to liberate itself from the physical aspects of religion and to focus its attention almost exclusively on worship in the synagogue. Classical Reform Judaism rejected body-related observances as distractions from the true purpose of religion, which was exaltation of the spirit through prayer and commitment to moral deeds...In 1892 the CCAR passed a resolution stating that conversion to Judaism could be effected “without any initiatory rite, ceremony or observance whatever.”...the majority now favored tenet over tradition: conversion was an act of mind and spirit alone, the verbal rejection of the old faith and the affirmation of the new. Purification of the heart no longer required purification of the body. The resolution of 1892 was incorporated into the manuals for Reform rabbis beginning in 1928 and continued in effect so that, at least in Reform circles, conversions done with neither milah nor tevilah could not be considered illegitimate. It remains the official position even down to the present when it no longer represents the standard practice.”

Source 14: *New Waters in an Old Vessel*, excerpt 2

“In the following years the increasing number of converts entering Reform Judaism forced greater attention to the subject. In a 1977 Reform responsum, Rabbi Walter Jacob remarked that tevilah was being encouraged or required for conversion by a number of Reform rabbis and suggested that if it possesses meaning for the community or the individual it should be encouraged, adding that it would make it a bit more difficult for traditionalists to challenge Reform conversions. In the spirit of now taking mikveh more seriously, the Reform rabbinate a year later officially changed its stand. While it did not, and has not since, required mikveh preceding conversion, the CCAR Committee on Conversion in 1978, after noting the 1893 decision, adopted the following statement that was subsequently printed both in its guide to the Jewish life cycle and its rabbi’s manual: “Nevertheless Reform Judaism recognizes that there are social, psychological, and religious values associated with the traditional initiatory rituals, and it is recommended that the rabbi acquaint prospective gerim with the halachic background and rationale for berit milah, hatafat dam berit [taking a drop of blood from an already circumcised male convert], and tevilah, and offer them the opportunity, if they so desire, to observe these additional rites.”...As this new Reform attention to mikveh focused especially upon conversions, its dominant motif came to be the change in status that immersion would bring about.”



Source 15: Three "De"s of open mikveh

1. Demystifying
2. Desexualizing
3. Degendering.

Demystifying

Demystifying mikveh means drawing it out of the maze of Talmudic law and scripture, putting it in plain view, and allowing for personal interpretation. Mikveh is not something that women need to whisper about when men cannot hear them, nor do communities need to tuck their mikva'ot away in inconspicuous areas so that no one sees others enter. Mikveh should not be a secret, but rather it should be *the* secret to finding personal connection to one's body and soul, and to the divine in whatever form is comfortable.

Desexualizing

Desexualizing means centering mikveh around something other than peoples' sex lives and intimate practices. It is not enough merely to find justifications for niddah and mikveh, but to see mikveh/niddah and halakha as two separate concepts that can have intersections. That does not mean that open mikveh also needs to be separated entirely from niddah. Some people outside the Orthodox community do still choose to have personal niddah practices, and they should be encouraged to continue if it is meaningful. However, niddah itself can also be desexualized. It does not need to be exclusively about sex and procreation, but rather about appreciation for one's body when it comes to menstruation. Across the spectrum of gender and religious observance, mikveh can be a place for people to take time with their own body in a non-sexual way.

Degendering

Degendering is the the most nuanced of the "de"s, as some feel that mikveh is fundamentally a women's ritual, but open mikva'ot allow people of any gender to immerse. However, degendering does not mean taking mikveh away from women, but rather welcoming others into a tradition that is rooted in femininity. Since Mayyim Hayyim opened, men interested in modern mikveh have immersed at open mikva'ot for a variety of reasons, many of which overlap with women's reasons. Allowing men to participate further contributes to demystifying, and especially aids in desexualizing. Men are not traditionally required to immerse in order to have sex, so placing men and women on equal footing ritually further removes the emphasis on sex associated with mikveh.

Source 16: Mayyim Hayyim gender transition ritual excerpt

"The Hebrews are called 'Ivrim,' the crossing-over people. As we left Mitzrayim, the narrow places of Egypt, we transformed ourselves— a painful, yet redemptive, spiritual transition. So, too, do I cross through a narrow place, letting go of my own bondage, and moving toward personal freedom."