

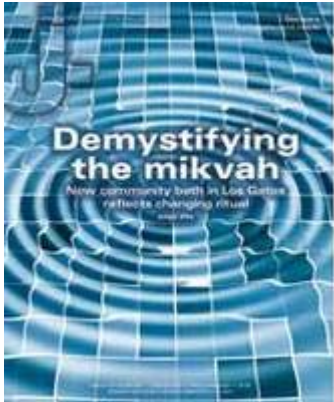
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Demystifying the mikvah

New community bath in Los Gatos reflects changing ritual

by stacey palevsky
staff writer



For many Jews, the closest they come to a bathing ritual is relaxing in a hot tub with a glass of Pinot.

The organizers behind the Bay Area's newest mikvah, or ritual bath, are hoping to change all that. They are part of a movement responsible for the renaissance of an ancient religious ritual commonly perceived as a practice for Orthodox women.

The people who use the new mikvah at the Addison-Penzak Jewish Community Center in Los Gatos are stirring the waters. Few are Orthodox. Many don't keep kosher or observe Shabbat. They are straight and gay, young and old, male and female, born Jewish and Jews-

by-choice.

For several generations, mikvahs were dismissed by most Reform and Conservative American Jews as a dated, unnecessary and misogynistic custom. Though the mitzvah of ritual bathing was intended to be empowering, over time many non-Orthodox women came to perceive it as demeaning.

But mikvahs, most commonly used to purify a woman after her menstrual cycle, have made a comeback in recent years as non-Orthodox women reinvent, beautify and demystify the practice.

Around the nation, the renewal of this ritual is happening at community mikvahs that are nondenominational and open to everyone.

The community mikvah at the JCC in Los Gatos opened in January. The only other similar Bay Area mikvah, Mikvah Israel B'nai David, is in San Francisco.

Meanwhile, Jewish Milestones in Berkeley has partnered with Project Welcome, a Reform interfaith initiative, to train individuals who want to lead men and women through the immersion ritual.

That project began in collaboration with Mayyim Hayyim, a community mikvah and education center near Boston that author Anita Diamant ("The Red Tent") helped found. The mikvah in Los Gatos was partially modeled after the pools at Mayyim Hayyim.

Since Mayyim Hayyim opened in 2004, it has been the most visible force shifting liberal Jews' perspective on the ritual. In 2006, 220 people gathered in Boston for a mikvah conference.

"A generation ago, the idea that someone like me, a Reform Jew and a feminist, would be talking about mikvah at all would cause heads to explode," Diamant said during a speech April 30 at Hebrew Union

College's graduation ceremony in New York.

Mayyim Hayyim "is not your grandmother's mikvah," she continued. "Or to be more accurate, it's not the mikvah your grandmother refused to step foot in.

"It is beautiful in every detail, and serves the needs of everyone in the community: men, women and children, gay and straight and transgendered, able-bodied and those who require physical assistance or an American Sign language translator. Everyone."

"Mikvah" means pool, or collection of water, in Hebrew.

In modern times, immersions take place in specially designed pools that catch a natural water source without human intervention (leaving the tap on doesn't cut it). Any natural body of water, such as a lake, river or the sea, also will suffice.

Historically, men would use the mikvah before Shabbat, Yom Kippur and their wedding. Women would use the mikvah before their wedding and, once married, each month at the end of niddah, the time during their menstrual cycle when they must abstain from sexual activity and, in some Orthodox communities, all physical contact with their husband.

Male and female converts use mikvahs to formalize their conversions. It's also customary to wash new cooking utensils and dishes in a mikvah to make them kosher for use.

At one point, mikvahs were so central to Jewish practice (indeed, they still are among Orthodox Jews) that the rabbis said a community should build a mikvah before establishing a synagogue or acquiring a Torah. Legend has it that women in Russia and Poland with no access to a mikvah took ice picks to frozen lakes so they could immerse after niddah.

Yet the ritual was mostly abandoned by immigrants to the United States, even among those who continued to observe Shabbat and keep kosher.

By the 1960s, there were fewer than 200 mikvahs in operation in the United States, according to Chabad. In contrast, women today can dip in 1,600 mikvahs worldwide, with about 360 in the United States. About 30 of those are non-Orthodox mikvahs.

"We're reclaiming something that has always been ours," said Rabbi Leslie Alexander, a Silicon Valley chaplain involved in the construction of the Los Gatos community mikvah.

The ritual has become a way of marking numerous transitional moments, further fueling the mikvah's popularity. It's used to soothe heartbreak after a divorce or miscarriage. It's also used to amplify joy: A bride might use a mikvah before her wedding, a cancer patient after completing the last round of chemotherapy.

"Water purifies, regenerates, restores," said Rachel Brodie, director of Jewish Milestones, a nonprofit aiming to make the ritual more accessible to women in the Bay Area. "It sets things right in a very profound way ... Anybody can be moved and touched and transformed by it. To me, very few things in Judaism have the potential to reach so many people."

Before this renaissance, it was not uncommon for mikvahs to be cold, with dingy tiles and dim lighting — not a place where one would want to go seeking purification.

Ava Brand recalled going to Mikvah Israel B'nai David in San Francisco in the '70s, when it was located on 19th Street between Guerrero and Valencia. At the time, it was not in the kind of neighborhood where a woman should be alone at night. Brand had to hire a babysitter every month so her husband could accompany her to the pool.

“I could not stand using the one in the Mission,” said Brand, who is now co-president of the S.F. mikvah. “It was really unpleasant, freezing and ugly.”

Historically, women have visited mikvahs at night, not only because that's what the Torah instructs, but also as a way to preserve the modesty of the ritual. After all, prior to the 1960s, sex was rarely an appropriate topic of conversation. Neither was the mikvah. Talking about it alluded to the sex a woman would soon be allowed to have with her husband.

“It was really in the closet for so many years,” Brand said. “We didn't talk about mikvah openly. We didn't have tours of it. When a woman went, her children didn't know. It was kept very much hush-hush.

“But San Francisco is a more open place to begin with, and women who came here were more open in general.”

In 1980, after years of fundraising and planning, Brand oversaw the opening of a new Mikvah Israel on Sacramento Street in Pacific Heights. Like many modern mikvahs, it is bright and warm, an inviting pool of water framed by marble tile and candles.

“In this day and age, why should a mikvah be a dungeon?” she said.

Mikvah Israel B'nai David was ahead of its time in creating a mikvah that would serve the entire community — no rules, no questions asked.

Although the mikvah organizers recommend women follow traditional guidelines, such as removing jewelry, bandages, nail polish, contact lenses and anything else that would act as a barrier between the person immersing and the water, they “don't make anybody do anything. We're very accommodating,” Brand said.

“And we don't question people's authenticity in terms of their Jewishness.”

Tamar Fendel of Berkeley would have liked to know about mikvah in 2001. That year, two weeks before she got married, she called a mikvah to schedule an appointment. A woman at the mikvah insisted Fendel take a bride preparation class with the rabbi, or else not use the mikvah.

“I felt like saying, ‘I'm just a Jew trying to do a mitzvah, why are you getting in my way?’”

Fendel rounded up two friends and drove to Oakland's Lake Temescal, where at 5:30 a.m. she immersed herself in the water and said the appropriate blessings. She described the experience as sweet and comfortable, but “felt I was missing something. I was annoyed that I couldn't do it in the setting I had imagined.

“To me, a nondenominational mikvah is a great idea,” she added. “I think it can be powerful and an important part of people’s lives if someone is there to teach you what you want to learn but not to judge.”

The inclusive ethos is making mikvahs more democratic nationwide. It’s a seismic shift that is engaging women and men outside the Orthodox community.

The Orthodox community for years has also encouraged more men and women to use the mikvah, but for traditional purposes, said Rabbi Yosef Levin.

The Dryer Family Mikvah, which Levin’s Chabad of the Greater South Bay operates in Palo Alto, opened in 2001 with strict policies regarding who could use it: married women at the end of niddah or before giving birth, and men before Yom Kippur or Shabbat.

About 90 women immerse monthly — three times the number who came when the mikvah opened. More than half are not Orthodox.

Conversions are not allowed at the Dryer mikvah, nor are unmarried women permitted to use it. That policy is not uncommon among mikvahs operated by Chabad, and it’s why many Reform and Conservative women are so eager to have another option.

Trish McCauley of San Jose converted to Judaism with her partner, Joan, in December 2001. There was not a mikvah in Santa Clara County that would allow them to dunk, so they drove to San Francisco, where they faced a *beit din* (Jewish court) and then immersed in the mikvah, separately, on the same day. They emerged as Jews.

“It was so exciting, but I was so nervous, I forgot all the prayers,” McCauley recalled.

In January, she had her last chemotherapy treatment for melanoma. She wanted to mark the occasion, to move on, by immersing in a mikvah.

This time she didn’t need to drive north. She immersed in the Los Gatos mikvah, which had opened its doors a month earlier.

“For me, it was very empowering,” she recalled. “It was a way for me to mark the end of a year of cancer treatments and hopefully leave it behind. It definitely helped me.”

The Los Gatos mikvah was designed by Alexander and a dozen lay leaders, including McCauley, who today serve as mikvah guides. They compiled a three-ring binder full of prayers to serve an entire spectrum of immersions: conversion, adoption, marriage, holidays, *b’nai mitzvah*, the end of an illness, death of a spouse ... even divorce.

“What do you do when you’re ready to take off that wedding ring? There’s no traditional ceremony for that, but everyone understands that’s a major transition,” said Eliza Klein, director of *Mayyim Hayyim*. “The mikvah comes in when you’re ready to move on with that next step.”

In Los Gatos, like at most mikvahs, immersions are scheduled in advance. A volunteer mikvah guide leads men and women through the ceremony, which if people choose, can be independently designed.

“You can’t change what’s written in the Torah, but you can change its interpretation,” said Jan Rose, a lay leader and trained mikvah guide who has been closely involved in developing the Los Gatos mikvah. “We’re bringing an ancient ritual into our time and making it relevant to our lives.”

Those involved in the new mikvah movement say many liberal Jews don’t visit mikvahs because they don’t know about them.

“What you don’t know, you fear,” said Liz Creditor, wife of Rabbi Menachem Creditor of Netivot Shalom, an egalitarian Conservative synagogue in Berkeley. “That’s the main problem with mikvah — it’s out there, but we don’t know what it’s all about, and we assume it’s an Orthodox thing. It comes down to educating congregants and our communities.”

Creditor wanted to expose what she says too many women consider mysterious — so she spent a year as a Mayyim Hayyim mikvah guide when she and her husband lived in Boston. She helped several women (and even a Chinese baby girl who had been adopted by a Jewish family) through the process, which is fairly simple.

An immersion usually costs between \$20 and \$40. After showering and removing any clothing, jewelry and even contact lenses, one is ready to go into the mikvah. After entering the water (usually via steps) and reaching the center of the pool, one fully immerses so that every strand of hair is underwater. “You duck under, looking and feeling as much like a fetus in the womb as possible,” Diamant wrote in her book “The New Jewish Wedding.”

Custom varies on the number of immersions. Two are common, but three are traditional since the word mikvah appears three times in the Torah.

After immersing, the person will stand in the mikvah and say the Hebrew blessing for immersion, which translates as “Praised are you, Adonai, God of all creation, who sanctifies us with your commandments and commanded us concerning immersion.” Other prayers may be added.

“We have mikvahs but no education,” Creditor said. “And I think there are a lot of people in the community who’d embrace this if they really understood the whole spiritual experience of mikvah. There are a lot more Jews than we realize in this community who’d like to get involved.”

Which is where Mayyim Hayyim, Project Welcome and Jewish Milestones converge. With a \$120,000 grant from the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund, the partner organizations intend to educate the Bay Area Jewish community about mikvahs.

Education is built into the foundation of community mikvahs via mikvah guides. Traditionally known as “mikvah ladies,” they were either a rebbetzin or an Orthodox woman affiliated with Chabad or the Orthodox synagogue overseeing the mikvah. Often they had a reputation for being strict.

Community mikvahs, in contrast, train a variety of people to serve as guides: Anyone wanting to immerse can be paired with an appropriate guide who can make them feel relaxed.

Brodie, of Jewish Milestones, hopes to extend the mikvah education initiative by training volunteers to lead mikvah immersions in a mikvah pool or in nature. The screening process for volunteers will be rigorous, she said.

“When you’re in a mikvah, you’re in an emotionally and physically vulnerable place,” Brodie said. “Trained guides have to be a particular kind of person.”

A person with grace, kindness and knowledge who can help you walk into the water, naked before God.

Mikvahs in the Bay Area

Use of many Bay Area mikvahs is by appointment only.

It’s best to call at least several days in advance.

Community pluralistic:

- Community Mikvah, Gloria and Ken Levy Family Campus at the Addison-Penzak JCC, 14855 Oka Road, Los Gatos, (408) 358-3033, mikvah@jvalley.org.
- Mikvah Israel B’nai David, 3355 Sacramento St., San Francisco, (415) 921-4070.

Community Orthodox:

- Mikvah Society of San Jose, 1670 Phantom Ave., San Jose, (408) 371-9548.

Chabad- or synagogue-affiliated:

- Beth Jacob Community Mikvah, 3778 Park Blvd., Oakland, (510) 482-1147.
- Dryan Family Mikvah, 3070 Louis Road, Palo Alto, (650) 493-5555.
- Mikvah Chaya Mushka, 1150 Idylberry Road, San Rafael, (415) 479-0287.
- Mikvah Taharas Israel, 2520 Warring St., Berkeley, (510) 848-7221.

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