



# BED, BATH AND THE BEYOND

A new generation of Jewish women is reclaiming the mikvah, a purification ritual with misogynistic undercurrents. JENNIFER GOLDBERG takes the plunge—and emerges refreshed

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**IT'S A SWELTERING SUMMER AFTERNOON**, three days before my wedding, and I'm deep in the bowels of a suburban Reform Jewish day school, standing naked in a small pool of lukewarm water. The room is dim save for the circle of candles that Sheila, a woman I've just met, has lit for ambiance. "Now, as I immerse myself, I begin a new cycle, one of rebirth and renewal," she recites, her voice reverberating off the room's pink-tiled walls as I dunk myself at the appropriate moments, three times in all. "I am now prepared to shed the impurities of my earlier life, to become one with a new life... to become a partner in sharing the joys of life, to teach and to learn the lessons of married life." >

After my husband proposed, I found myself, at age 33, partaking in all manner of bride-y customs that would have made the slightly punk and staunchly feminist 20-year-old me recoil in disgust: I said yes to a white dress, teetered down the aisle on sparkly, bow-adorned heels and held my husband's hand as we sliced through our four-tiered chocolate cake. But nothing would have stunned 20-something me more than the choice I made to take a pre-wedding trip to the mikvah, a Jewish ritual bath.

When asked about my spiritual leanings, I generally check the agnostic box. I like to identify as “TV Jewish”—I enjoy smoked-meat sandwiches and indulge in bouts of charming neurosis, but only attend synagogue twice a year, for high holidays. Yet I'm actually part of a growing number of young Jewish women who have embraced a ritual that my own mother—and many other Jewish women of her generation—deemed “unthinkable.”

According to Mikvah.org, an educational site run by the ultra-Orthodox Chabad-Lubavitch movement, the number of new mikva'ot (the plural of mikvah) in North America has grown steadily in the past 10 years. There are now about 368 Orthodox mikva'ot in the U.S. and 39 across Canada.

There also seems to be a growing demand for mikva'ot in non-Orthodox, more liberal communities. There are roughly 60 progressive mikva'ot in the U.S. and eight across Canada, with fundraising underway to build progressive baths in New York City and Israel, the world's largest Jewish centres.

Though the mikvah is also used for conversions and to prepare for the high holidays (men partake for these reasons as well), the practice is predominantly tied to rules for female purity. According to the Book of Leviticus, a menstruating woman is considered ritually impure (or *tumah*, in Hebrew). It's a sin to have sex during that time or in the seven days that follow. To confirm menstruation is complete, Orthodox women check their vaginal secretions for remnants of blood with a white cloth called a *bedikah*. Rabbinic



The mikvah at Mayyim Hayyim in Massachusetts, a pre-eminent progressive bath that offers both traditional and non-traditional immersion ceremonies

literature lays out rules for analyzing the colour, shape and size of marks: white or clear is fine, brown, black, pink and orange are “questionable.” If you're unsure about what you see, you should consult a rabbi for further analysis.

“*Bedikah* cloths are horrible, awful things,” my cousin Ya'ara Saks tells me. She used them while married to an Orthodox man in Israel, but wound up resenting the practice. Particularly degrading, says Saks—now divorced and living in Toronto—was the inference that a male rabbi would know her body better than she did.

“I feel like it's a control thing,” she says. “I did it because my husband wanted us to observe to the letter of the law, but... if I have body awareness of my cycle, why do I need this process to dictate it to me?”

The immersion ceremony for female purity occurs after seven blood-free days. Each of the mikva'ot—some of which are spa-like, while others, like the one I visited, more closely resemble a community pool—is built to biblical specifications and filled with water collected from a natural source, such as rain or a spring-fed lake (the idea being that

you're immersing yourself in water that has been on earth since Creation, albeit often with the addition of chlorine). After three ritual dunks, you're deemed “pure” and ready for sex. (This period typically coincides with peak fertility; in the Orthodox faith, sex is only ever for baby making.)

A common interpretation-slash-justification for these rules is the idea, derived from Jewish law, that having a period symbolizes the loss of potential life. “Menstruation signals the death, of sorts, for that month of possible conception,” says Rivkah Slonim, author of *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology* and educational director of the Rohr Chabad Center for Jewish Student Life at Binghamton University in upstate New York. “When a woman menstruates, she experiences a form of death in her own body.” (Jewish law also prohibits aimless ejaculation; any semen not torpedoing directly toward an egg is deemed “wasted seed.”)

It's easy to see why the traditional mikvah raised the ire of the women's rights movement. In an article entitled “Rising From the Ritual Bath,” Rabbi Jill Hammer, a prominent feminist author and co-founder of the Kohenet Institute, a Connecticut-based training program for female Jewish leaders, writes that some Jewish feminists “point >

## “The contemporary reimagining of the mikvah has shaped its uses so that it’s a tool of transformation marking moments of joy and loss”

to Talmudic [Jewish law] and medieval texts that describe women as disgusting because of their menses, and other [mystical Jewish] texts that speak of *tumah* as the result of spiritual decay or evil forces.”

One of the mikvah’s most notable critics is feminist theologian Rachel Adler. As a young Orthodox woman in the 1970s, she was among the first to reinterpret family purity laws as positive and empowering for women. Twenty years later she recanted, saying that she created a disingenuous theology that supported misogynistic and oppressive practices. However, in the last 10 years, a movement of progressive Jewish women has recast the mikvah not as a means of purifying their bodies, but as a way of celebrating them.

“Traditionally, men were the ones defining and shaping the uses of the mikvah,” says Rabbi Miriam Margles of the Egalitarian Danforth Jewish Circle in Toronto. “The contemporary feminist reimagining . . . puts it in the hands of women to find a wide range of ways of using it that are rooted in our experiences and own bodies, and shaping its uses so that it’s a tool of transformation marking moments of joy *and* loss.”

I can see both sides. The feminist in me recoils at the thought of participating in a ritual that, at its root, implies that menstruation is dirty. And the idea that my body itself is nothing more than a conduit for new human life is insulting. But I also kind of love the act of liberating an ancient ritual from its misogynistic roots and reappropriating it as something empowering. It feels spiritual *and* subversive all at once. That’s something I can get behind—and, apparently, so can a lot of Jewish women of my generation.

“Anecdotally, it does seem like more women are coming to the mikvah,” says Lisa Berman, director of education for Mayyim Hayyim, a preeminent progressive and egalitarian mikvah in the Boston area. “It’s a steady growth over the last four or five years.”

Devotees range from the very religious to the secular and casually observant. Emmy-nominated actress Mayim

Bialik of *The Big Bang Theory* recently wrote about longing for the mikvah on the Jewish parenting site Kveller, describing it as “an affirmation of spiritual purity and possibility.” (Bialik divorced earlier this year; in the Orthodox tradition the ritual is restricted to married women, though that’s starting to change. In Israel, where mikva’ot are public institutions funded by tax dollars, the chief rabbinate recently adopted a don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy to prevent attendants from barring single women from immersing.)

In an email, Bialik further explains that “the historical fact of fertility for women that was linked to mikvah should not negate its significance, and for me, it doesn’t. I find it empowering to make it my own, and to find mikvahs that support the gentle and profound aspects of it, rather than the stereotypes of brash mikvah attendants declaring you ‘unclean.’” While it may not seem particularly empowering to submit to being banned from a beloved and personally significant ritual on the basis of your marital status, Bialik is outspoken about her choice to adhere to the laws of the religion, even when they’re challenging.

Blogger and front-row fixture Leandra Medine—a.k.a. the Man Repeller, a woman who has made a career out of bucking male preferences—is another devotee. In her recent book of essays, *Man Repeller: Seeking Love. Finding Overalls*, the Orthodox Jew writes that visiting the mikvah was the “single most intense moment” of her wedding experience.

Closer to home, my friend Yael Manor-Selbo, a cool 29-year-old teacher and a free thinker when it comes to organized religion, tells me that she found her own pre-wedding immersion at a modern Orthodox bath “enlightening.” Like me, she’s a progressive Jew and not particularly religious, but she decided to visit the bath after having a conversation with her rebbitzin (her rabbi’s wife, who functions as a spiritual counsellor). “She explained it to me in such a positive way, it never sounded like it was misogynistic,” she says.

“There’s something really refreshing about it. It feels like a new start.”

That idea resonated with me. By the time my husband and I were ready to make it official, we had already been living (and sleeping) together for several years. We shared a townhouse, a cat and a food processor. What would a wedding really change? Sure, the pouffy dress, Pinterest-inspired décor and carefully chosen menu of “elegant comfort foods” were all good fun, but they were ultimately commercial gestures. What I wanted—what I craved—was a meaningful way to acknowledge that getting married was a milestone.

When I booked my appointment at the Reform Mikvah of Greater Toronto (the only liberal bath in the city), I was strung out on wedding stress. Party planning and negotiating family expectations had turned what was supposed to be a seminal moment in my life into a daunting rundown of to-dos.

I worried about the money we were spending and the time all of the planning was taking away from my work. I loved my fiancé and the life we had together, but I just wasn’t feeling all that jazzed about getting married—and that worried me. I wanted to feel a deeper connection to my new role as wife, and I hoped that performing an ancient bridal tradition would help.

Before my immersion, Sheila, my mikvah guide, sent me an email warning that I couldn’t wear anything unnatural that would come between my body and the water—including a bathing suit. (I’d also have to remove my brand new and super-cute set of gel nails.) Prior to entering the water, I’d need to shower and comb through the knots in my hair, but thankfully there would be no cloths—most progressive mikva’ot have dispensed with *bedikah*.

On dip day, I meet Sheila in the mikvah’s lounge. Some brides use the cheery, canary-yellow space as a kind of party suite, inviting family and friends to share the experience with them. I chose to go it alone, free from anything that would distract me from the mysterious revelation I hoped to have. >

I sank into a pleather couch as Sheila asked about my wedding and what I hoped to get out of the mikvah experience. I'd been nervous about meeting her due to the same stereotype that Bialik mentions, that of intimidating so-called "mikvah ladies" who shame you for not being properly clean. But Sheila was disarming. A widow and retired librarian, she says the bath's power was reinforced for her after she heard author Anita Diamant, founding president of Mayyim Hayyim, speak about it at a conference. I told her about my wedding planning, and she described a course she was taking on Proust. I liked her immediately.

Sheila led me into the shower room, equipped with giant, discount-brand

When it came time for my first dunk, I repeated a prayer in Hebrew, shut my eyes and slipped under the water. Everything was still. My mind, which is usually a cyclone of anxious thoughts, was quiet, if only for a moment. When I bobbed up again for a breath, I felt a distinct sense of calm. In the mikvah there was no planning to be done, no deadlines to meet—there was just me, the water and Sheila's words gently nudging me to think about what my life would look like as a wife.

As it turns out, I needn't have waited until my wedding to take the plunge. More liberal baths encourage using the water for unconventional rituals that acknowledge life events both happy (a milestone birthday, a graduation)

## "Mikvah use is on the rise because the need for meaningful ritual is on the rise. It makes a kind of sense"

bottles of shampoo and body wash that smelled like cheap air freshener, and a set of pitifully threadbare towels. I stripped and hopped in the shower, taking extra care to scrub down every inch of my body—if I was going to do this thing, I was going to do it right.

I was alone at the mikvah that day and felt strangely vulnerable as I shuffled out of the change room wearing only a shabby towel and flip-flops. I suddenly wished I'd brought my mother and sister along for support. Instead, the small bistro table and wrought-iron chairs set up for guests near the pool sat empty. The water, which is shipped in as chunks of ice from nearby Lake Scugog, smelled faintly of chlorine.

Sheila averted her eyes as I dropped my towel and descended the pool's tiled steps. I stared down at my unpainted toenails and listened as she read the immersion ceremony off of a set of laminated cards, speaking about the Jewish foremothers and of the centuries of women who also celebrated their marriages in this way. I felt like I was now part of a sisterhood. I've never been much of a joiner, but at that moment it was comforting.

and painful. "We use the mikvah for personal healing," says Rabbi Elyse Goldstein of Toronto, one of the first scholars to champion reinterpretations of the ritual. "We've taken women healing from rape [and] infidelity, after chemotherapy and surgery."

Mayyim Hayyim offers more than 30 ceremonies to recognize life events such as coming out and coping with infertility. Roughly 30 percent of their 1,400 annual immersions are for "non-traditional" ceremonies like these.

"Mikvah use is on the rise because need for meaningful ritual is on the rise," says Diamant. "There's something pleasing to the human spirit about ritual, not just because it's taken from the past, and not just because it's something your great-grandmother did, but because it speaks to your needs and it makes a kind of sense. And it may or may not be intellectual; it can be emotional."

Recent research backs the idea that rituals can be healing—a study published earlier this year in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* found that participants who were asked to reflect >

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# RELATING

on past rituals or perform new ones after suffering a loss experienced lower levels of grief and a greater sense of control than those who did not. (What's more, the rituals were just as beneficial to those who didn't believe they would work.)

"Ritual makes external what you've been processing internally," confirms Deborah Issokson, a Boston-based psychologist who participated in developing the non-traditional immersion ceremonies for Mayyim Hayyim. She tells me that people are ambivalent towards life changes because "we often prefer what is familiar to what is new." She counsels clients through such transitions by discussing rituals that will help integrate the change into their lives. Mikvah is one way of doing that. "When we literally embody something, it's another level of integration because we're taking part physically and it's not just a heady experience," she says.

Ironically, the mikvah—commonly associated with body shame—is also now being reimagined as a way to promote body acceptance. In March 2013, the Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C., launched the Bodies of Water program for preteen girls. The workshop includes segments on mindfulness and yoga and an introduction to the bath.

"When I was a teenager, I had my own struggles with body image and eating disorders, and when I look back on that time of my life, I realize how much mikvah would have meant to me," Malka says. "Mikvah helps me reinforce the idea of my body as holy—not perfect or pure, but connected to Creation, the water cycles and forces much bigger than I am."

Because immersing is so intrinsically tied to having sex, introducing girls to the mikvah is controversial in traditional Jewish circles—as are other non-conventional uses. "They're trends," says Slonim. "I'm not averse to it, but I don't see it as something that these women are going to impart to their daughters, granddaughters and great-granddaughters. In order for that to happen, [the ritual] has to be rooted in divine imperative."

Despite the mikvah's decade-long reframing, the essence of patriarchal control persists. My teacher friend Manor-Selbo says she has no intention of immersing on a monthly basis because she doesn't want to perpetuate the idea that women's bodies are unclean. "I understand the positive spin about it, but it doesn't mean that other people understand it."

Medine, who does post-menstrual immersions, has a different take.

"It's not something I do for anybody but myself," she says. "It gives me a sense of freshness, of new beginning. It's a monthly reminder and confirmation of my faith, and a really good reality check."

I get where she's coming from. Busyness is my drug of choice. I obsessively plan and overschedule to avoid what I'm really feeling. I had let the anxiety of wedding planning distract me from acknowledging that while many aspects of my life would remain the same after my walk down the aisle, one major thing would change—I'd be someone's wife. It would be an exciting new beginning, but it would also be scary and a lot of hard work. I could have gone to a spa or done yoga to relieve my premarital angst, but the structure and symbolism of the mikvah provided a better opportunity to stop and reflect on this weighty transition.

Did I experience spiritual enlightenment and an insta-connection to a higher power upon each dunk into the mystical waters of Lake Scugog? Not even close. But as I emerged from the change room, I did feel more at peace with my decision to walk down the aisle.

"You must be getting excited for your wedding," Sheila says as we make our way out of the school basement and back into the summer sun. "I think I am," I respond, catching a whiff of chlorine lingering on my skin. ♦



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