

The Use of Mikveh in Reform Judaism

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I grew up in a “classical” Reform congregation in Philadelphia in the 1950’s and was ordained at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1967. At the College I learned about the *halachic* (pertaining to Jewish law) uses of immersion in the mikveh as a requirement for conversion and for *niddah* following the conclusion of a married woman’s menstrual cycle, but we never discussed the use of the mikveh as a Reform Jewish practice.

The CCAR Rabbi’s Manual published in 1961 which I and my fellow ordainees received as a graduation gift from Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, former President of the UAHC, does not even mention mikveh. According to that edition of the Rabbi’s Manual, the ceremony of conversion was to be conducted by a rabbi before the open ark in the synagogue in the presence of two witnesses. Following an initial prayer, the rabbi would ask the convert five questions of faith. After answering them in the affirmative, the convert would recite the *Sh’ma*. The officiating rabbi would then read the *V’ahavta*, and in the case of a woman also the famous vow of loyalty that Ruth the paradigmatic convert spoke to Naomi.¹ The convert would also be given a Jewish name prior to a concluding blessing. During my first pulpit (1967-70) at Temple Emanuel in Worcester, MA where I served as an assistant to Rabbi Joseph Klein, z”l “may his memory be for a blessing,” I conducted the ceremony of conversion according to the above “mikvehless” format, and I presume the vast majority of my colleagues did the same. I was aware that there was a functioning mikveh on the “East Side” of Worcester where the Jewish community first settled. The Jews who had moved to the more fashionable “West Side” thought of that mikveh as a relic of the past. Although I never saw it, I envisioned it to be a dank, dark and dreary place that no one in their right mind would want to frequent.

In 1970, I assumed the pulpit of Temple Beth David in Westwood, MA, a suburb of Boston. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact time when I began to take candidates for conversion to the mikveh but it was probably in the early or mid 70’s. I think that adding this practice in my rabbinate was due to a number of factors, including my interaction with Conservative colleagues in the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis as well as an emerging atmosphere among Reform Jews who were re-examining many of the traditional rites that had been abandoned by the early Reform rabbis in their rush to distance themselves from Orthodoxy. (The discarding of the requirement of immersion in a mikveh for converts by the early Reform rabbis is described in a 1893 position of the CCAR which declared that the traditional conversion rituals of *milah* (circumcision), *hatafat dam berit* (symbolic circumcision for candidates who were already circumcised) and *tevilah* (immersion in a mikveh) were unnecessary².) I also was influenced by my belief in *K’lal Yisrael*, the unity of the Jewish people. I felt that if I encouraged converts to participate in the traditional rites such as immersion in a mikveh, there would be a greater probability that their conversion would be recognized as valid by the Orthodox community. At the time, this often proved to be true, though in recent years a resurgent Orthodoxy has raised its barriers with the result that any conversion under Reform auspices, even if the convert immerses in a mikveh and undergoes all of the traditional rites required by *halacha* is not considered valid by the Orthodox rabbinate.

As I grew more accustomed to taking conversion candidates to the mikveh, I became aware that immersion added a profound spiritual enhancement to the process. The waters of the mikveh helped impress upon converts that they were making an important transition in their lives, that they were so to speak being “reborn.” Most of the converts whom I took to the mikveh emerged from the “living waters” with broad smiles or tears of joy. The feeling of spirituality and authenticity associated with immersion as a rite of conversion continues to be present with my conversion candidates to this day.

In 1979 the CCAR reversed its negative position on the traditional rites of conversion when it affirmed the following: “We recognize today that there are social, psychological, and religious values associated with the traditional initiatory rites, and therefore recommend that the rabbi acquaint prospective converts with the halachic background and rationale for *berit milah*, *hatafat dam berit*, and *tevila* and offer them the opportunity to observe these rites.”³ In 1988, the CCAR published a revised Rabbi’s Manual. In contrast

to the 1961 edition that I received upon ordination, it included rituals for converts to immerse in a mikveh. Gradually in the 80's and 90's immersion of converts in the mikveh came to be expected if not required as a rite of passage for me and most of my Reform colleagues in the Boston area.

Unfortunately, the Orthodox *mikvaot* that were available to us either limited the hours that the Reform community could use them, or the facilities were so small and lacking in amenities that they were not conducive to the sense of religiosity that is appropriate for such a major occasion in Jewish life.

In response to this problem, Anita Diamant, a Reform Jew and author of the best selling novel The Red Tent and a number of books on Jewish practice, Rabbi Barbara Penzner, a Reconstructionist rabbi and Paula Brody, Director of Outreach in the New England region of the URJ began working on the idea of a new communal mikveh in the Boston area that would be "kosher," attractive, welcoming and open to the entire Jewish community. Knowing my interest in mikveh, the founders asked me to serve on the board of the new mikveh which had been named Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh and Educational Center.

After locating a handsome Victorian house in Newton, MA, we remodeled it to include a beautiful new mikveh with two pools, one of which is handicap accessible. Since our opening two years ago in May of 2004 we have hosted almost three thousand immersions by Jews from all of the movements including Orthodoxy. About thirty per cent of the immersions have been for the purpose of conversion. Others have been for monthly *niddah*, prior to marriage, Shabbat and the High Holydays and many other transitional moments such as Bar/Bat Mitzvah for a child or parent, adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah, in connection with pregnancy, healing, following a divorce, in preparation for a leadership position in a congregation and even as preparation for death.

Some of these innovative uses of the mikveh that have come to life at Mayyim Hayyim bespeak the dynamic within Reform Judaism to search out the spiritual dimension in all aspects of life. And so at Mayyim Hayyim we built a mikveh, made it beautiful in the spirit of *heedur mitzvah* (attention to the aesthetics of Jewish ritual), trained a diverse group of skilled, sensitive and welcoming volunteer male and female mikveh guides, and lo and behold - Jews came to immerse!

What I have described above is an account of my own journey towards tradition in regard to mikveh as well as the journey of the Reform movement in the Boston area. While I hesitate to speak for other URJ regions because I have spent my entire rabbinate of forty years in New England, I would note that the CCAR Committee on Conversion under the leadership of Rabbi Richard J. Shapiro of Tarzana, CA issued a document in 2001 entitled "Guidelines for Rabbis Working with Prospective Gerim" which includes the following statement: "Rabbis should educate *gerim* concerning appropriate traditional rituals for the ceremonies of *gi'or* (conversion) including *milah*, *hatafat dam berit* and *tevilah* (circumcision, symbolic circumcision and immersion) and should use them as appropriate."⁴

Currently, *tevilah* (immersion in a mikveh) as a rite of conversion has reached the status of a universally accepted mitzvah for the Reform movement in the Boston area. I know of no Reform rabbi in the area who doesn't require or strongly encourage it. In regard to the other uses of the mikveh mentioned above, I consider them potential mitzvot, for when a Reform Jew makes a decision that immersion in a mikveh at a transitional moment in one's life is a rite that binds them to God and the Jewish tradition, it becomes for them a mitzvah - "a commandment." For the past three years I myself have immersed at Mayyim Hayyim prior to the High Holydays, and I intend to continue this ceremonial mitzvah for the rest of my life.

In the last three decades, Reform Judaism has reclaimed many ancient ceremonies including the traditional rituals associated with the mikveh. There are many in the Reform movement who fear this move towards tradition. While I take strong exception to those of our movement who by word or deed affirm the principle "if it is traditional, it must be good," I do believe that traditional ceremonies have much to offer us psychologically and spiritually and that it behooves us to "try out" traditional rites so that we can make informed choices as to whether they become part of our lives or not.

[1](#) Ruth replied, “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die and there will I be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you.” Ruth 1:16-17

[2](#) For a full text of the debate and resolution see the CCAR Yearbook, vol. III (1893), p. 36, reprinted in American Reform Responsa, p. 230.

[3](#) Gates of Mitzvah (1979), pp. 146-147, and CCAR Rabbi’s Manual (1988), p. 232.

[4](#) CCAR Divrey Giyor Guidelines for Rabbis Working with Prospective Gerim, 2001, p 9.