

Men plunge into mikvah - slowly

By [Sue Fishkoff](#) · November 30, 1999

NEWTON, Mass., June 19 (JTA) — Two years ago, advertising executive Jeff Berman was going through big changes: He had lost his job, founded his own company and was turning 40. His wife, Lisa, a volunteer at Mayyim Hayyim, a two-year-old community mikvah in this Boston suburb, suggested he try a ritual immersion. “Throughout our marriage, we’d always picked up Jewish rituals and woven them into our lives,” said Berman, who belongs to a local Reform congregation. But mikvah? It’s true that the mikvah slowly has been gaining ground in the non-Orthodox Jewish community. Jewish women have begun taking to the waters this past decade for many reasons: Some are traditional, but others are new rituals — after divorce, to celebrate a marriage or child’s graduation and for spiritual healing. Several dozen liberal mikvahs have sprung up, most of them affiliated with Reform and Conservative congregations, but men haven’t been jumping in as quickly as women. At Mayyim Hayyim, which was decorated with big leather chairs so men would feel comfortable, about one-fifth of the visitors are men. Ruth Kresge, assistant executive director of Shir Ami Bucks County Jewish Congregation in Newtown, Penn., said one-quarter to one-third of those who use her Reform synagogue’s eight-year-old mikvah are men. But most of those immersions are one-time only, for conversion. One reason may be that men don’t have the same ritual ties to mikvah. Only women are required by Jewish law to immerse, after menstruation each month in order to resume sexual relations; men’s mikvah use is purely customary. Some non-Chasidic Orthodox men immerse once a year, before Yom Kippur, as well as before their weddings. Many Chasidic men immerse before Shabbat and major holidays, though some try to immerse daily before prayers. Some men in the Jewish Renewal movement have revived these practices, but other than that, men outside Orthodox circles rarely, if ever, take the plunge. That’s beginning to change, albeit slowly. Jewish educator Yossi Abramowitz goes to Mayyim Hayyim on Friday afternoons with his two young sons, to prepare for Shabbat. They have their routine, Abramowitz reports, from turning on the colored lights in the room to singing particular niggunim, or Chasidic melodies, while they’re in the water. “We have a whole thing we do. It’s part of the natural course of what it means to be Jewish,” he said. “It’s a father-son experience. It’s very special.” Carol Schnitzler, who runs the Conservative movement’s mikvah in Wilmette, Ill., said she has “a few men who come on Fridays.” The number “waxes and wanes,” she said, “but it is probably a steady increase.” Other men come before trips to Israel or Jewish holidays, and before their weddings. “What’s interesting is how important it is to grooms,” Schnitzler related. “In the midst of that crazy, hectic week, to take some time to mark their change in status.” Rachel Adler, professor of Judaic studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the University of Southern California, suggested that “perhaps the great reclaiming of mikvah can only happen when men as well as women return to it.” Those active in the field caution against exaggerating the numbers of non-Orthodox men using mikvahs with any regularity. “I wouldn’t say that it’s big,” said Rivka Slonim, Chabad emissary in Binghamton, N.Y., who lectures widely about mikvah. “Nevertheless, it’s interesting.” Rabbi Sue Ann Wasserman, director of music, worship and religious living at the Union for Reform Judaism, said she “hadn’t heard about it as a significant trend” in the Reform community before she attended “Reclaiming Mikvah,” a three-day conference on liberal mikvahs sponsored by the union this month. It was during a workshop on men and mikvah that Jeff Berman shared his story. “What I wasn’t prepared for was how the

physical ritual would affect me emotionally,” he told the room. He’d prepared some prayers to say while he was dunking, but something unexpected happened to him in the waters: He felt as if his immersion marked the life transition he’d been going through, separating his past from his future in a physical way. “I went in a blank slate, and felt like a different person afterward, as if I’d been through an ordeal and was able to accept my life as different now. I hadn’t expected that,” he said. “I’ve experienced that with other Jewish rituals — the act of doing them allows other things to happen.” The men sitting in this workshop were successful East Coast professionals, active in their Reform and Conservative congregations. As they went around the table, they expressed some of the same things Jewish women say about mikvah: This is my special time, an hour or two when I can focus on myself before tackling the responsibilities of daily life once again. Retired attorney Merrill Hassenfeld went to the mikvah last year with his wife to celebrate their 20th anniversary. He’s not the “spiritual type,” he said, but told his wife he’d be open to the ritual. “When I descended the seven steps into the water, immersed and felt the warmth, it was like being in God’s womb,” he said quietly. “You go down, then you rise up. Go down, and rise up. It’s like an elevation of your spirit and soul. I’d never had that experience before.” Rabbi Daniel Liben of Temple Israel in Natick, Mass., went for his first immersion in 2004, right before the High Holidays. The experience was “so incredible” that he returned last fall, he said. This year, he’s decided not to wait: He’s going before his oldest son’s wedding in August. “I can use this to mark personal moments in my life, not just calendar moments,” he said. Stephen Landau, a rabbinical student at Boston’s Hebrew College, has been an intern at Mayyim Hayyim for the past year. He said men should take a lesson from the feminist movement. “Mikvah can be part of a program that allows men to pay attention to their spiritual lives,” he suggested. Hassenfeld agreed. After his first immersion he became a mikvah guide, ushering other men into the waters. “We’re always doing things for others, why don’t we set aside time to go to the mikvah?” he asked. “It prepares us to go out into the world and start yelling and screaming again.”