

## Immersion in the *Mikveh* Prior to Yom Kippur

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The *mikveh* (ritual bath; plural: *mikvaot*) has long been a distinctive feature of Jewish communal life. *Mikvaot* from the Second Temple period can be seen in Jerusalem; medieval *mikvaot* can be seen in Spain, France and Germany. Even in harsh, inhospitable environments - witness the *mikvaot* that have been excavated on Masada - Jews have held fast to their devotion to the mitzvah of immersion (Heb.: *tevilah*). Although it is true that immersion, which is required by Jewish law in a variety of circumstances, may take place in a stream or a spring, these are rarely accessible, convenient, and private. Hence, wherever Jews have lived, they have built *mikvaot*.

*Mikvaot* are crucial to Jewish life because, according to Jewish law, husband and wife may not resume intimate relations following a woman's monthly period unless and until she immerses herself in a *mikveh*. But there are other reasons why individuals may immerse in a *mikveh*. Conversion is one of them. Ever since the Talmudic period, immersion has been a *sine qua non* for conversion to Judaism. The opportunity for a prospective Jew by choice to immerse his or her body entirely in the pure and purifying waters of the *mikveh* is a wonderfully tangible way to become conscious of the extraordinary transformation that conversion represents.

One never immerses in order to clean oneself in a physical sense. In fact, one must wash and scrub oneself of all dirt before entering a *mikveh*. Rather, one immerses in order to mark, effectuate or celebrate a transition from one metaphysical state to another.

How does it achieve this? Perhaps because the *mikveh* has long been understood to be symbolic of God's embracing and forgiving presence:

How fortunate are you, O Israel! Before whom are you purified? Who purifies you? Your heavenly parent, as it is written, "And I will sprinkle on you pure water, and you shall be purified" (Ezekiel 36:25); and it is also written, "God is the hope (*mikveh*) of Israel." (Jeremiah 17:12). Just as a *mikveh* purifies those who enter it, so too the Holy One purifies Israel. (Mishnah Yoma 8:9).

It is therefore not surprising that the practice arose to immerse oneself in the *mikveh* on the afternoon before Yom Kippur. In his volume of reflections on the High Holy Days (entitled *Yamim Noraim* -- "The Days of Awe"), the writer S.Y. Agnon describes this:

It is a beautiful custom to immerse oneself on the afternoon before Yom Kippur in order to cleanse oneself inside and outside: inside, by performing teshuvah (repentance) and confessing one's sins and transgressions; outside, by washing and immersing, as it is written, "wash yourselves and be clean!" (Isaiah 1:16). *Yamim Noraim* (Hebrew Edition), pp.231-232

Different customs arose concerning the number of times one should fully immerse on this occasion. Rabbi Moses Isserles says that once is sufficient. Another source suggests that it is proper to dip three times, corresponding to the three kinds of negative behavior for which we seek atonement: het, avon and pasha (sin, transgression and iniquity). There are even those whose practice is to dip many more times than this, in order to awaken fully the desire and the

commitment to repent. In response, Rabbi Moses Hayyim Kleinman writes, "They immerse themselves again and again -- and what comes of it? Rather, one should immerse twice: once to remove impurity and once in order to accept purity."

That last statement is a sobering reminder that, in and of itself, immersion accomplishes nothing. It is only when it is performed as part of a process of confession, repentance and purification that it can be meaningful. Immersion on the eve of Yom Kippur is mentioned in the Shulchan Arukh (the Code of Jewish Law, authored by Rabbi Yosef Caro) in the section (Orech Hayyim, 606) that speaks of the obligation to seek to make amends on the eve of Yom Kippur with all those whom one may have offended. If -- and, frankly, only if -- one has sincerely and effectively sought forgiveness from others, does immersion make sense. But if that effort to achieve atonement with the other human beings with whom one lives and interacts has in fact occurred, then one can hope, through immersion, to acknowledge the cleansing that accompanies that atonement, and to prepare for the further cleansing and purifying experiences yet to come on Yom Kippur.

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