

### Jump In! *Start Your Morning*

<b>AUTHOR(S):</b>	Sarra Alpert, Jon Adam Ross
<b>SUMMARY:</b>	Immerse yourself in the Jewish tradition of mikveh. We will learn about the origins and applications of water-based cultural practices and the traditional Jewish rituals while devising and reinventing our own dunking ceremony. Please bring/wear your bathing suit if you want to jump in! - <i>Submitted by Sarra Alpert and Jon Adam Ross</i>
<b>TOPIC(S):</b>	Gender, Sex and Sexuality, Identity, Life Cycle Events, Meditation, Prayer- Tefillah, Wellness
<b>LEARNING OBJECTIVE:</b>	Participants will gain a greater understanding of the value of the Jewish ritual of mikveh.
<b>AUDIENCE:</b>	All ages!
<b>TIMING:</b>	60 minutes
<b>APPENDICES:</b>	Appendices 1-3
<b>MATERIALS NEEDED:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hot cocoa</li> <li>• Cups (one for each participant plus a few extra)</li> <li>• Towels (one for each participant plus a few extra)</li> <li>• 1 gallon size ziploc bag</li> <li>• Plastic tea lights (20 is ideal number)</li> <li>• Speaker with phone hookup</li> </ul>
<b>SET-UP DETAILS:</b>	Hot cocoa should be already hot and ready to serve. The ritual document should already be sealed in a ziploc bag. And the tea lights should be on and set up leading into the pool/lake.

#### SESSION TIMELINE & OUTLINE:

1. The facilitators will invite everyone to change into their swimwear and sit/lie down for a meditation. During the following meditation, the song "The Good Old Way\*" as sung by Alison Krauss will be playing softly in the background ([song](#)). The facilitator should read the starred note at the end while connecting the song to its slave origins and using it to connect to the ways that water, spirituality and liberation have been linked across multiple peoples, eras, and traditions. (this will be reinforced during the debrief with specific examples).

2. Meditation:
  - a. Body scan and then establish a feeling of immersion into safety, a feeling of being embraced, leading into this prompt: How do you feel when you are immersed, embraced?
  - b. There will then be an invitation to be here now, aware of yourself in space.
  - c. The facilitators will now narrate what's happening next: The next part of the activity will be private and individual. Please remain where you are with your eyes closed. One by one, you will be invited to perform your own immersion ceremony led by one of the guides.
  - d. Before we end the meditation and begin the ceremony, we will ask everyone to repeat the following intention/Kavanah - all together:
    - i. In gratitude I come today to celebrate the blessings in my life. I honor those who have helped me along the way and give thanks for their supportive presence. As I prepare to immerse in the waters of the mikveh, I appreciate the journey that has brought me to this moment
3. Each participant will be invited to walk through a runway of lit electric tea candles by themselves and handed [this document](#) in a ziploc bag (waterproof)
  - a. The participant will enter the water, dunk twice, and join one of the facilitators on the other side of the pool, facing away from the immersion spot to await the others.
  - b. This is repeated until every participant has immersed and joined the group at the back of the pool
4. The facilitators will lead a communal closing ritual including a 3rd immersion.
5. Everyone will be invited to exit, change clothes in the changing rooms, and emerge to get hot cocoa and debrief.
6. Participants will be given prompts and partnered up to debrief with partner and share back to circle:
  - a. If it was powerful for you, why was it powerful?
  - b. If you felt like you couldn't fully immerse in the ritual, what kept you from fully immersing?
  - c. If you could/would have done something differently, what might that have been?
7. There will then be a group share from the pairs.
8. The facilitators will now share some context and history of water rituals beyond Judaism (muslim ablutions, christian baptism, etc.)
9. The group will learn the history of mikvah and it's origins in the menstruation 'laws' of Torah establishing the impurity of menstruating women per levticus, and the facilitators will name the misogyny in the tradition. Use the handout below for discussion in small groups.
10. Bring back to camp
  - a. How might you adapt this for campers?
  - b. How might you adapt this for your camp's space (lake/pool)?

\*The earliest known version of the song, titled "The Good Old Way," was published in [Slave Songs of the United States](#) in 1867.<sup>[1]</sup> The song is credited to "Mr. G. H. Allan" of Nashville, Tennessee, who was likely the transcriber rather than the author.

### Some perspectives on the roots and potential reimaginings of Mikveh

#### 1) Excerpts from *Feminist Perspectives on Niddah, the Laws of Separation* from My Jewish Learning, written by Rabbi Jill Hammer:

Like many modern Jewish women, Rachel Adler sought to reclaim Jewish traditions about women by reinterpreting them in a positive way. Adler spoke eloquently of how women, through their menses, embody the cosmic cycle of life, death, and rebirth, of darkness and light. She imagined menstruation as symbolic of loss, and as an expression of hope and life-giving potential. She pointed out that in Temple times purity and impurity applied to everyone, not only to women. She suggested that the forces of life and death, expressed through the ancient dichotomy of tumah (impurity) and taharah (purity), were both ultimately good, and that both menstrual separation and the return to sexual activity were holy phases of a woman's life....

Adler herself, over decades, came to believe that she had been wrong in her thinking... Adler pointed out that while she claimed that impurity applied to women and men, in actual Jewish life it only applied to women, thus associating women with death. She also reanalyzed biblical texts and indicated that while she imagined niddah (menstrual impurity) as a morally neutral term, the Bible used it as a word for corruption and filth ( Lamentations 1:8 ,17). Adler indicated that her experience of Orthodox practice was that women were labeled as impure and were shut out from reading or even from shaking hands with men because of this designation. She feared that her theology had provided an apologia for misogynistic practices, and wished to replace it with a theology in which purity and bodily reality can co-exist.

Adler's two articles represent the poles of Jewish women's experience regarding mikveh. From an uncritical acceptance of the ancient laws, Adler moved to an utter rejection of them, expressing the desire to reimagine the entire Jewish definition of purity. Yet in her later article Adler praises the new and creative uses of mikveh that women have developed in recent years.

#### 2) Excerpts from *"NYC Reform rabbi reclaims -- and reimagines -- the ritual bath"* from Times of Israel, written by Miriam Groner:

When I met Rabbi Sara Luria over coffee on a cold fall afternoon last month in Brooklyn, she had just returned from training a group of Hebrew Union College students in Manhattan, teaching them how a mikveh, or ritual bath, could be used in the communities they will go on to preside over. For some students, this was their first introduction to the concept of ritual immersion, and for others it was a new look at an old tradition.

Her role, as she puts it, is to "put mikveh on their radar" — to encourage the students to experience it for themselves, but also to expand their notion of what mikveh is, and can potentially be used for.

But what's unique about her vision is that it's markedly different from the one traditional, Orthodox Judaism has been promoting for years.

Luria, 35, from Brooklyn, NY, is the founder and executive director of Immerse NYC, a young, and steadily growing community project that aims to put mikveh on the map for everyone. Their objective is simple: To make ritual immersion a pluralistic, open and welcoming space for all....

Whereas immersion in an Orthodox-run mikveh customarily involves specific times you can immerse, a regulated preparation process, and dunking a certain number of times, at a community mikveh, the process is more open to individual preferences. It is also open to essentially anyone who would like to take part in the ritual....

In her work Luria hopes to change the notion that mikveh is gendered.

“It’s not about gender, it’s not about sexuality, it’s about a pool of water as a place of transition,” she says.

Like Mayyim Hayyim [a community mikveh in Boston] whose mikveh houses an art gallery, Luria hopes to one day have a mikveh with a designated space for people to welcome friends and family to commemorate their reasons for immersing, whether that be a birth or to mark a conversion.

And unlike in most traditional mikvehs that house separate pools for men and women, their pools will be open to all. “Gender binaries are not the future,” she said.

Luria encourages her visiting students from Hebrew Union College to shed the trepidation that people often experience when it comes to mikveh, and to embrace it as a core part of their toolkit as practicing rabbis. “I think Judaism can be this loving, welcoming, warm... experience, where you feel like you’re welcome for whoever you are,” Luria says. “If you’re healing from sexual trauma, there’s a place for you in our religion. If you’re recovering from chemotherapy, there’s a place for you. If you’re celebrating your 40th birthday, you can do it in a Jewish way.”

### **Potential questions for discussion:**

- What in the above texts resonates with you?
- What troubles you? Do you disagree with any of Rachel Adler’s or Rabbi Luria’s perspectives on the mikveh?
- Are there other Jewish traditions that you wrestle with in ways that are related to Adler’s wrestling -- traditions where you struggle to figure out whether new interpretations or reclamations can come from practices that might have been rooted in oppressive ways of thinking?
- Are there other Jewish traditions that you have worked to reclaim for yourself or your community as Rabbi Luria and others are doing with mikveh?