

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?