

A person with long hair, seen from behind, stands on a sandy beach looking out at the ocean. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow and a lens flare effect on the left side of the image. The water is calm with gentle waves lapping at the shore. In the distance, there are low mountains or hills under a clear sky.

Rebirthing Ourselves To Rebuild Our World

A Feminist Mikveh Guide

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Mikveh: An Introduction

What is a Mikveh?

Mikveh is an ancient Jewish cleansing ritual performed in a sacred bath or in a natural body of water. We can participate in a mikveh ceremony to mark moments of transition, to make our souls and bodies feel holy, and to metaphorically rebirth ourselves and start anew.

This guide seeks to use mikveh as a tool of empowerment and strives to be inclusive to all genders and experiences. Mikveh is a Jewish technology that allows us to look back and consider where we have come from and what has shaped us, while look forward and set intentions for the future. Throughout the mikveh we also remain present in our bodies to perform rituals that help us to manifest our future intentions and wash away the things we want to let go of.

Reclaiming Mikveh

While there are some ancient uses of mikveh that could be interpreted through a lens of patriarchy and purity (ie. women being required to cleanse themselves following their period) there are also many ways that this practice can be interpreted, framed and expanded to empower us and help us to feel sacred.

"Water is the symbol of birth—now it can be a symbol of rebirth. To take back the water means to open the mikvah up to women not attached to men. In order to do that we may have to build alternative mikvaot, run by women, for women, following women's rules, not funded or run by male rabbis."

- Rabbi Elyse M Goldstein

"Jews who make the transition across genders are adapting Jewish ritual for a whole new set of life cycle events. Bay Area rabbi Jane Litman has led mikveh rituals with people at various stages of gender transition—which, she reports, were extremely powerful"

- Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg

"Mayyim Hayyim is a resource for learning, spiritual discovery, and creativity where women, men, and people of all genders and ages can celebrate milestones like weddings and b'nai mitzvah; where survivors of trauma, illness or loss find solace; and where those who immerse monthly can explore the ritual on their own terms."

- Mayyim Hayyim: a mikveh in Boston, rooted in ancient tradition, reinvented to serve the Jewish community of today

Preparing for Your Mikveh

Seven Kavanot for Mikveh Preparation

Taken From Mayyim Hayyim

Below are 7 ways to prepare your body and mind for the immersion rituals. The following steps can be completed at home or at the site of your mikveh.

Hineni. Here I am.

Take a minute and think about the transition mikveh will help you mark today. Immersion in the mikveh represents a spiritual transformation from one state to another. In traditional language, your change is from ritually unready (tameh) to ritually ready (tahor). Prepare yourself by writing in a journal, or saying a personal prayer, or reading something of meaning to you. Breathe deeply. Sigh audibly.

Hiddur Mitzvah. The unadorned body is beautiful in itself.

Remove all jewelry as well as makeup, paying special attention to the eyes. There is no need for adornment or artifice in the mikveh. There should be no physical barriers between the body and the living waters.

Nekavim nekavim. You fashioned the human being intricate in design.

Empty your bladder. Our tradition celebrates and blesses the body in every possible moment and mode.

Preparing For Your Mikveh

Seven Kavanot Continued

B'tzelem Elohim. I am made in the image of God.

Remove all clothing, eyeglasses, contact lenses, dental plates, hearing aids. Each person enters the mikveh as naked as the day of their birth. Without rank or status. Simply a human being. Gloriously a human being.

Elohai neshama shenatata bi tehorah hi. The soul in me is pure.

Shower or bathe with thoughtful attention to the miracle of your own body. Pay attention to every part of yourself. Wash yourself, head to toe. Relax and enjoy. The water of the mikveh will feel even sweeter after this.

Kol haneshama t'halel yah. The breath of every living thing praises You.

Clean your ears, blow your nose, brush and floss your teeth, rinse your mouth. Stand before the mirror. Consider all of your senses. Look into your own eyes and smile. Think about the words that come from your mouth.

Tikkun Olam. We can stand for justice; we can build a world of peace and justice.

Clean under your nails – toenails, too. (Nails do not need to be cut.)

Consider the power of your hands and feet to create wholeness in your life, in our world.

Before Entering The Waters

Now is the time for us to reflect and set some intentions.

The mikveh represents a space and time of transition, but that time is fleeting, since you cannot remain in the safety of the waters forever. You must re-emerge to breathe air and go on living. The mikveh can help us to deal with feelings of being stuck. Perhaps there is a decision you are struggling to make? Maybe you are experiencing a period of grief or loss? You might even be struggling to connect to yourself and what you have been feeling. Hopefully this mikveh can ground you, and bring you back to yourself.

When you enter the waters, may you feel as holy and deserving as the world created around you. As you submerge yourself, may you feel held by these waters that connect you to all living things. As you emerge from your immersion, may you feel reborn and created anew, in your own image.

Take some deep breaths and meditate on the following questions:

What are the experiences or feelings you want to focus on shedding when you immerse yourself in the waters?

When you are reborn following your immersion, who do you want to be and what are some intentions for your future self?

Entering The Waters

Begin to enter the water, do so slowly, try to be present in your body. Does the water feel cold? Does it feel warm? Is the water a welcomed relief or is it uncomfortable and difficult?

Throughout the course of this mikveh you will be immersing yourself fully three times. Each immersion will help you to move from the past, to the present and into the future. Bring your past selves with you and call upon them as you enter the water. Begin to reflect and focus on the experiences and feelings that you want to shed during this immersion. Continue to summon these experiences and feelings as you wade farther into the water, submerging more of your body.

Whatever you are feeling is valid; whether that be excitement, joy, anger, sadness or maybe you are just plain cold! Continue to do the work of focusing on the things you hope to release and give to the waters.

The First Immersion

We will now perform the first immersion.
Leave the things you have been holding onto in the water.
Wash them away. They are no longer yours.

We say this blessing before immersing in the waters:

*Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam,
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al ha't'vila.*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ,
וְצִוֵּנוּ עַל הַטְּבִילָה.

Source of All Life, In Your oneness, I find healing.
In the promise of Your love, I am soothed. In
Your wholeness, I too can become whole again.

The Second Immersion

We will now perform the second immersion.

Move through the past and into the present. As your body is immersed in the waters connect with all else the water touches, the lands, the people, the animals. You are a part of this magnificent creation, meaning you yourself, are magnificent.

We say the blessing together before immersing in the waters:

*Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam,
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al ha't'vilat
keli.*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ
בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל טְבִילַת כֵּלִי

*Blessed are You, our G-d, Who has sanctified
us with your commandments, and
commanded us with the immersion of a vessel*

The Third Immersion

We will now perform the third immersion. You have called upon the past and experienced the present, now focus on the future and your intentions. When you emerge from this next immersion you will be born anew. Who do you want to become? How will you make the world a better place for yourself and for everyone else?

We say the blessing together before immersing in the waters:

*Baruch ata adonai eloheinu melech ha-olam
asher kid-shanu bi-tevilah b'mayyim hayyim.*

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו בטבלה במים
חיים.

Blessed are You, G-d, Majestic Spirit of the Universe, Who makes us holy by embracing us in living waters.

Rebirth

The waters have allowed us to move from the past to the present and into the future.

Just because you have given birth to a new self does not mean your past selves have been abandoned. Take them with you and allow them to continue to guide you through your joys and hardships.

Emulate the resiliency of water as you flow into new parts of yourself. Continue on your journey of healing, that has been marked by this mikveh. Do not desist from the practice of repairing yourself and repairing the world around you.

Together We Rejoice In Song

The soul that You, my G-d, have given me is
pure

Elohai neshama shenatata bi tehora hi

· אֱלֹהֵי · נְשָׁמָה שֶׁנָּתַתָּ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא ·

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ
לְזֶמַן הַזֶּה

*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheynu melekh ha-olam,
shehekheyanu, v'kiy'manu, v'higianu, la-z'man
ha-zeh.*

Blessed is the Eternal, the G-d of all creation,
who has blessed me with life, sustained me, and
enabled me to reach this moment.