

Parashat Shemini

How Can I Keep Family Purity When the Closest Mikvah is 2000km Away?



Dear Rebbetzin,

I really want to keep the mitzvah of family purity, but where I live there is no ritual bath. The closest mikvah is 2000 km away, which would take about 25 hours to drive by car. What would be a solution? Perhaps I could use the ocean or a lake, as a mikvah since I don't have a regular mikvah available. How would that work? Do you just dip in and say a blessing?

Maya Waternov (name changed)

Dear Maya,

It is wonderful that you are so dedicated to keep the laws of family purity in spite of the fact that you live far from a Jewish community with a proper mikvah. Throughout Jewish history, women have gone into great trouble in order to keep the mitzvah of family purity, sometimes even at the risk of their very lives. Using the Mikvah is so essential as it our primary connection with the Garden of Eden. All the water in the world ultimately has its root in the river that emerged from Eden (*Bechorot* 55a, Malbim, *Bereishit* 2:10). This river is the spiritual source of all water. After Adam was driven out of Eden, he repented by sitting by this river in order to maintain a link with the Garden (*Pirkey d'Rabbi Eliezer* 20). The word מִקְוָה/Mikvah has the same letters as קוֹמָה/*Komah* – the Hebrew word from rising or standing tall. Through the Mikvah we can rise from our fallen state, and reestablish a link with our perfected state in Eden. This explains why the Mikvah must be linked to a natural water source. The most primal forms of mikvaot are the natural bodies of water such as oceans, rivers, wells, and spring-fed lakes. They have the power to purify. However, these waters may be inaccessible or dangerous, not to mention the problems of rough weather and lack of privacy. Therefore, wherever a proper mikvah is available that is certainly preferred. But what can you do if there isn't a proper mikvah in your neighborhood?

Safety Concerns for Using the Ocean as a Mikvah

ספר ויקרא פרק יא (לו) אַךְ מֵעַיִן וּבוֹר מִקְוֵה מַיִם יִהְיֶה טָהוֹר וְנִגְעַ בְּנִבְלָתָם יִטְמָא:

“Nevertheless a spring or a cistern, in which water is collected shall be pure, but whoever touches such a carcass within it shall be impure (*Vayikra* 11:36).

The construction of a mikvah is very complex, and there is an entire tractate of the Mishnah called Mikvaot devoted to this topic. As we learn in *Parashat Shemini*, a mikvah must be connected to a natural spring, or a natural well, or be connected to a cistern of rainwater (*Mikvaot* 7:1). Oceans qualify for they are considered springs, as do rivers that do not originate from rainwater. If you're using a river or spring that's made up mainly of rainwater, you need to find a part of the water that is not moving. The water also needs to be deep enough for you to immerse your whole body at once. Immersing in the mikvah for family purity must ideally be done at night. Deep oceans with strong currents can be dangerous. If you can't swim, an ocean mikvah is not for you. Make sure that whatever body of water you're using is safe, and if necessary find out about the schedule of the tides so you won't be suddenly caught at high tide. You also need to ensure the area is well lit and safe at night, at the very least you need to bring strong flashlights. If the area is not safe at night but is safe during the day, some rabbinic authorities allow for immersion during the day. This would be a good thing to ask your rabbi.

Please send your **Ask the Rebbetzin Questions** to director@berotbatayin.org
 Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum | Director, Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin | www.berotbatayin.org

How to Overcome the Challenges of Using the Ocean as a Mikvah

There are several challenges when using the ocean as a mikvah:

1. There is no mikvah attendant to watch and check that you are completely immersed in the water for each dunk.
2. There is no adjacent room to bathe and remove everything separating you from the water.
3. You have to make sure no man will see you going naked into the ocean.
4. There is sometimes wind that may tangle the hair.

I highly recommend to bring a girlfriend (preferably someone married) who will act as your mikvah 'lady' at the ocean. This woman should be Jewish and over the age of 12 (the age that constitutes adulthood for women according to Jewish law). Some rabbinic authorities allow your husband to fill this role, if no woman is available. Prior to immersing, your mikvah attendant needs to check you as well as can be done with a flashlight, to ensure that there is nothing separating between you and the water, like fallen hair etc. She also needs to ensure that you are immersing deeply enough in the water so that your entire body including the top of your head and hair are covered when you dunk. This is especially vital if you have long hair, some of which may float above the water. You will need to go to a beach that is not populated and it needs to be dark. It may be permissible to dunk in the water with a very loose-fitting dress, if you cannot be sure that there won't be any men on the beach who may see you. This again is a question for your rabbi.

Guidelines for Preparing Yourself for Ritual Immersion

On your mikvah night, prepare as you usually do. Soak in a luscious bath (not a shower) for at least half an hour to soften up any kind of dirt, and dead skin. Make sure to remove all jewelry, hair bands, elastics, pins, false teeth, eyelashes, temporary dental fillings, nail polish, contact lenses, and dry scab on old wounds. Wash your entire body and hair well with soap and shampoo. Do not use conditioner, as it will leave a coating on your hair. Clean your ears with a cue-tip. Brush and comb your hair until the comb passes through your hair easily to ensure there are no knots. Comb your pubic hair, the hair in your armpits and even your eyebrows. Cut your fingernails and toenails. After you cut your fingernails, they should not be visible above the tips of your fingers when you turn your hands towards your face. If long fingernails are part of your everyday look, make sure they are equally long and smooth. Clean your fingernails well. Brush your teeth and use dental floss. The time of preparation varies from person to person. Usually it takes about one hour, but for some people it can take almost two hours.

Ocean Immersion

Using the ocean as a mikvah is not as romantic as it sounds. I recommend finding out where there is a safe and quiet area with calm water. Depending on the privacy of the area you're using, you may want to wear a long robe to get into the water. Then, when you've gotten to a point where the water is deep enough you can take off your robe under water and hand it to your helper. Before you dunk, shake off any sand or mud that may have clung to the bottom of your feet (you may want to walk out in flip-flops and take them off just before you dunk). Remember to choose a spot that is light enough that your helper can see that you've completely immersed.

Go out into the water wearing your robe right before sunset. Swim around and get comfortable for a little while. Then right after the sun sets, take off your dress and dunk, while your friend is right by you to watch. When your head emerges from the water say the following blessing with full intention:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה הַשֵּׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל הַטְּבִילָה:

Baruch ata Ado-nai Elo-heinu melech haolam asher kiddeshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al hatevila

Blessed are You O Hashem our G-d, King of the universe, Who has made us holy with His commandments and commanded us to immerse.

Transformation through Water

Using a Mikvah is one of the main factors distinguishing a Jew from non-Jew. A Mikvah is actually more important than synagogue. A congregation that does not have its own Mikvah does not even have the halachic status of a community. The Mikvah represents womb. The world's most primary state was water: "The spirit of G-d was hovering over the water" (*Bereishit* 1:2). Thus the water is the womb of creation. Emerging from a Mikvah is very much like a process of rebirth. "A convert who embraces Judaism is like a newborn child" (*Yevamot* 22a). The convert's first step into Judaism involves immersing in a Mikvah. The consecration of Aaron and his sons to become Kohanim involved immersion in a Mikvah. Thus, the Mikvah facilitates a change of status – an elevation from one state to another. Water is the essence of impermanence, while ego is the essence of permanence. When dunking in the Mikvah, we place ourselves in the state of non-existence and non-life. Since breath is the essence of life, submerging in a Mikvah momentarily without being able to breath, makes us enter the realm of the non-living, to emerge like one reborn. Mikvah can't be a vessel or tub but must be built directly in the ground, for in a sense, the Mikvah also represents the grave. We immerse temporarily into a state of nonliving, so that we emerge resurrected with new status. In Hebrew, the word *קֶבֶר*/*Kever* means both womb and grave. Both are endpoints in the cycle of life. Our sages liken a person who immerses in the Mikvah to seeds planted in the ground. The seeds return to their source where they can once again begin the cycle of growth.

Hashem is Our Ultimate Mikvah

משנה מסכת יומא פרק ח משנה ט

מר רבי עקיבא, אשריכם ישראל, לפני מי אתם מטהרין, ומי מטהר אתכם, אביכם שבשמים, שנאמר, (יחזקאל לו) וזרקתי עליכם מים טהורים וטהרתם. ואומר, (ירמיה יז) מקוה ישראל ה', מה מקוה מטהר את הטמאים, אף הקדוש ברוך הוא מטהר את ישראל:

Rabbi Akiva said, "Happy are you, Israel. Before whom do you purify yourselves? Who purifies you? Your Father in heaven!" It is thus written, "*I will sprinkle pure water upon you, and you shall be pure*" (*Yechezkiel* 36:25).

It also states, "*G-d, Hashem is the Mikvah of Israel*" (*Yirmeyahu* 14:8). Just as the Mikvah purifies the impure, so does G-d purify Israel (*Mishna Yoma* 8:9). What does it mean that G-d is Israel's Mikvah? The word *מקוה*/Mikvah is related to the word *תקוה/tikvah* – hope. The Mikvah gives us the ability to transcend the bonds of time and become reborn as a new person. Hashem is our Mikvah and hope for the perfected future. When we hope that a future event will happen, we free ourselves from the limitations of time. G-d is our ultimate Mikvah, which extends beyond time. His unity gathers past and future into the present moment. The word Mikvah literally means gathering. When we dunk into the cleansing waters of the Mikvah, let's keep up our hope in Hashem, Who purifies us. Then we can truly become transformed and let all our past wrongdoings dissolve into the expiating waters of the Mikvah by our resolve to emerge pure and reborn.