

Rabbi Julie Pelc Adler

### Living Waters

The sign outside the entrance to the pool area read, “please observe silence.” I whispered to Mary, “how can you observe something you can’t even hear?” She smiled, but did not reply. We were careful not to look at one another’s naked bodies as we dropped our towels on the benches lining the walls. In the changing area, she had given me round circles of orange scented soap as a gift on the occasion of my first *mikva*, only days before my ordination as a rabbi. I had lathered my skin with citrus freshness, trimmed my finger and toenails according to the specifications of a kosher *mikva*, and washed and combed my hair to free its curls from any tangles which might prevent the water from fully embracing every inch of me.

Jewish law states that it is incumbent upon every new Jewish community to build a *mikva* immediately upon arrival: it is as important to the sustenance of Judaism as having a Jewish cemetery, a Jewish school and even a synagogue. A *mikva* ensures that the laws of “family purity” might be observed and maintained: visiting a *mikva* generally is required anytime a Jewish adult brushes against potential death. For traditional men, this necessitates a dip in the waters after any seminal emission and for a (married) woman, after the requisite “clean days” following every menstrual cycle. Most often, though, the *mikva* is used

by the women. A visit to the *mikva* signals the return of a woman's sexual permissibility to her husband after nearly two weeks apart, comprised of the days of her period and up to seven additional "clean days" after the last appearance of any blood.

*Mikva* is as personal and private as it is invasive and public: a "mikva lady" is present to assure that the "dunk" in the *mikva* is "kosher" and also checks for any stray hairs or forgotten toe nail polish which might stand between the woman's body and the waters. Eyes and lips must remain gently closed, limbs extended, head completely submerged in order for the "dunk" to be considered kosher.

The *mikva* is also called, "living waters", and going to a *mikva* signals a kind of spiritual and metaphysical renewal. As an unmarried, not traditionally observant woman, I had never actually been to a *mikva* and always assumed my first (and last) visit would be on the eve of my wedding, as I never planned to observe "family purity" laws in my own married life.

My classmates began talking about creating a special *mikva* ritual for themselves on the eve of our ordinations as rabbis to signify the spiritual and metaphysical transition in becoming a rabbi. I was excited to participate and looked forward to fully immersing myself in "living waters" to signify the magnitude of the transformation of my identity. But then I got my period. I pondered the horrific effect my bleeding into

the pure, sacred space of others would have upon the Jewish people in my midst whose religious and spiritual identities depended on the *mikva*.

*Do you really think that menstrual blood makes for impurity?* I asked myself after I had already told my classmates that I would not be joining them at the *mikva*.

*They cleanse the mikva with fresh water and with chlorine all the time, and then,*

*Why contribute to a system that you ultimately believe oppresses women and believes the natural workings of the female anatomy to create impurity?*

The questions in my mind pushed against my adamant refusal to go to the *mikva* with my period. I called my dear friend, Mary, and asked if she might accompany me to a natural hot springs at a Korean Day Spa nearby – also filled with “living waters” – for my own, personal *mikva*. She photocopied the *mikva* blessings from a traditional prayer book and I carried the damp page into the steamy pool area, trying not to splash as I stepped down into the warm water. I wondered if saying Hebrew blessings aloud violated the request that patrons of the hot springs “observe silence”.

I followed Mary into the deeper waters toward the back of the pool and she served as my “mikva lady”, checking that each of my three dunks in the “living waters” was kosher. I was careful to stretch my legs and arms out so as to maximize contact between my skin and the water.

I smiled as I rose from the pool and put my feet back on the floor of the pool.

“Kosher!” Mary proclaimed.

We then left the warm waters of the hot springs to submerge in the accompanying cool water of the neighboring pool. We were the only two people in the cold pool, and I told Mary that, in fact, I *felt* different. I *felt* changed. I *felt* kosher.

We then proceeded to the “treatment room” where patrons of the day spa received Korean massages. Mary and I lay on twin stretchers side-by-side, completely naked, as the Korean masseurs poured buckets of water haphazardly across our backs, pounding intermittently with fists while humming what sounded like Korean church hymns to themselves. As my masseur rubbed scented oils along the length of my naked flesh, I imagined her anointing me like a high priest in the ancient Temple. She massaged fruit oils: strawberry, kiwi and rum-raisin into my skin; placed a mask of cucumber, yogurt and honey on my face; rubbed coconut shampoo into my hair. I could not remember a more thorough massage in my life: she missed no crevice and did not pause tentatively nor avoid the parts of my body I had learned were private or not-to-be-touched by strangers.

I thought of the *Hevre Kaddisha*, a tribe of holy Jews who cleanse bodies and prepare them for burial, leaving no body part untouched.

*There is no shame in death, why must there be shame in life?*

Holy, holy, holy is every part of me: the scar behind my head at the base of my neck; behind and around my left knee, the space near my heart – all of which ached as she pressed into them.

But this, more than any other ritual surrounding and including my Ordination ceremony the following Sunday morning, made me a rabbi in my own mind, making the change on my physical body that was taking place inside me, silently, the entire time.