Living Water, Sacred Space:
An Outsider's Look at Contemporary Mikveh Practice

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ABSTRACT

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Mikveh practice is a Jewish ritual that often appears to be shrouded in mystery and misconception. This study has grown out of a personal desire to explore past and present attitudes towards this ritual, and to look beyond the surface issues surrounding the practice of mikveh amongst contemporary Canadian Jewish women in Montreal, Quebec. Consequently, Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the responses gained through personal interviews with women from different groups within Judaism. Some of these women use the mikveh for the traditional purpose of ritual cleansing, while others have developed more innovative practices. The first part of the study focuses on a brief history of mikveh ritual, its origins and its place in relation to Jewish menstrual laws. The last section includes the interviews, followed by an analysis and a summary of the collected material.

One of the most common and often-voiced perceptions surrounding mikveh practice is that it is an archaic form of patriarchal control and subjugation of women. Added to this is the further observation that the ritual preserves and reinforces the flawed idea that women's bodies are categorically unclean by virtue of the menstrual flow. I intend to address these issues with a view to discovering what role perception plays in the way the ritual is understood or approached by Jewish women themselves.

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FOR MY LATE HUSBAND, DEREK – *Zha devlesa, hotchi-witchi* – AND FOR KAREN AND EMILY, THE WOMEN IN HIS FAMILY WHO HAVE UNCOVERED AND RECLAIMED THEIR JEWISH ROOTS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Purpose

In deciding to do my thesis on contemporary mikveh practice in Canada, and more specifically in Montreal I was, and still am, well aware of the difficulties facing an "outsider", a non-Jew who could easily be perceived as, if not a threat to the community, then at least, a nosy person with an unsavoury agenda. As I initially explained to one Orthodox rabbi's wife, I do indeed have an agenda, but I believe it is far from threatening or unsavoury. My research and conversations with mikveh-observant women have led me to the firm belief that, regardless of the accusations of "patriarchal oppression" and other negative perceptions about the practice, this ritual can be, and often is, deeply empowering for the women who avail themselves of it. My curiosity about mikveh ritual gradually evolved into a desire to explore the concept more fully. Since I have no personal experience of this ritual, I decided to speak with women who are, or have been, mikveh-observant, in the hope that they would share their own ideas and stories with me. My curiosity and the interviews with the women form the foundation from which I have conducted my research for this thesis.

As a non-Jew, the concept and practice of mikveh was certainly not something I grew up with, and I'm not sure at exactly what point I became aware of it. Several years ago, however, when the topic was introduced in an undergraduate course, it was not only something that was already familiar, but also a subject that rapidly drew me in and fuelled a desire for further research and knowledge. That research led me to the

Orthodox community of Montreal, the city where I live, as well as to a Reform temple in Hamilton where my niece and her daughter are in the process of reclaiming the Jewish roots that the family buried in World War II. This personal connection gave me initial access to personal information I would otherwise not have had

While still an undergraduate, I completed a photographic essay of a Montreal mikveh, and in the process, learned many things about the dynamics of insider and outsider, as well as the issues of privacy that surround this ritual. This information has proved to be extremely valuable to my current research. At the same time, I began reading as many books and articles on mikveh as I could find – the history, the scriptural and rabbinic foundations for the practice, as well as first-hand accounts of observant women. Friends got on board and I received information, support and, from Houston, a copy of Janis Ruben's "The Mikvah Project", a collection of amazing photographs of women actually using the mikveh, together with their comments about the practice.

1.2 Methodology

My primary source for this thesis has been Jewish women themselves. Although mikveh ritual is practised by some Orthodox men, my areas of interest and concern are women and their experiences and perceptions of this practice. This thesis has therefore focused solely on Jewish women. The interviewees were from different religious backgrounds and included Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist communities. Initially, I anticipated interviewing at least twenty subjects. However; finding women who were willing to discuss their personal experiences of mikveh was

both challenging and time-consuming, and while all the meetings I did manage to arrange were extremely rewarding, in the end, I was finally able to conduct only twelve interviews. These challenges and difficulties added another dimension to my research, which is discussed in the chapter on Conclusions.

The interviews took place in Montreal, and they focused on the place and significance of mikveh in the women's lives, their motives or reasons for participation, and the meaning and benefits that they attach to the performance and concept of this ritual. In choosing to interview across denominational boundaries, I sought to explore the relationship between obligation and choice, and to investigate how these issues are filtered through a gendered analysis.

This is not a traditional anthropological project. If it were, the logical way to proceed would have been to go to a mikveh, or to several mikvaot, and speak with the women who were there for the purpose of ritual immersion. This was neither possible nor advisable for several reasons. To begin with, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible for me, as a non-Jew, to gain access to a mikveh when it was actively in use. I have first-hand knowledge of this fact.

I have already mentioned that, while working on my under-graduate degree, I received a small grant in order to do a photographic study of a mikveh in Montreal. Although this work was to be done in the day time when the mikveh was not in use and only the secretary was on the premises, it took over three months of negotiating with the

administration, the rabbi and finally, with the rabbi's wife before I was granted permission to go ahead with the project. The ritual of mikveh continues to be a very private one that is not openly discussed even among the women who participate in it. Consequently, if I had attempted to obtain interviews for this thesis at an actual mikveh, the presence of a non-Jewish female in the waiting room would have been most unwelcome and certainly counter-productive to getting any information about this practice. In fact, because of the privacy issues that surround this ritual, the women would have been reluctant to speak with me even if I were Jewish.

My referrals for potential interviewees came from several alternative sources. They came from supportive friends and colleagues, they came from rabbis who generously agreed to put me in touch with women in their congregations whom they thought might be receptive, and they came from the women themselves. Three of my interviews were the direct result of referrals from meetings with other Jewish women.

My first contact with potential interviewees was either by phone or by email. I made calls to the women whose phone numbers had been given to me and sent emails to the ones for whom this information had been provided. In both cases, I emailed explanatory material to each potential interviewee, including the questionnaire, so that all the women would be able to gain a clearer understanding of what I was doing and of the interview process itself. Because the purpose of my research was to discover what role perception plays in the way that individual women value the practice of mikveh, the questionnaire includes a number of items specifically designed to give the interviewees

the opportunity to talk about their feelings and experiences in this area. The questionnaire itself is explained in more detail in Chapter 3 and a copy of it is included at the end of this thesis as Appendix A.

As previously mentioned, my original goal was to conduct twenty interviews. Over a two-year period, from 2006 to 2008, I did, in fact, contact twenty women by phone or by email. Nine of these women responded favourably. I also contacted five rabbis. Two of them referred me to women in their congregations, and three of those women agreed to be interviewed. The other eleven women and the three rabbis with whom I got in touch either never returned my calls or emails, or else told me that they were unable to be of assistance.

The actual interviews took place at various times and in different venues, at the convenience of the individual women. I held interviews in professional offices during lunch hour, in small cafés and in people's homes. In the instance of women with young families, the interviews were done in the late evening, after the children had gone to bed and we could be reasonably assured of enough quiet and uninterrupted time to complete the questionnaire. Depending on the preference of the women involved, the interview discussions were either taped or taken down in longhand notes.

Among the women I interviewed, there are five who are not at all mikveh-observant, but who have definite opinions on the subject. In keeping with my intention to interview across denominational boundaries, I decided to incorporate their thoughts and

experiences, not only to get as much information as possible, but also to widen the field of discussion. The purpose of this thesis is not to prove the inherent value of mikveh practice (or the lack of it), but to discover what place individual perception has in a woman's approach to or feelings about this ritual. In that regard, the experiences of the non-mikveh-observant interviewees were very much an essential part of my research.

1.3 Textual Sources

In terms of secondary sources, my research relies heavily on the work of Charlotte E. Fonrobert, contained in her book "Menstrual Purity". Fonrobert discusses both the "classic rabbinic discourse on menstruation", as well as the Talmudic writings or the "regulations derived from biblical law that are applied to menstruation." (1) that focus on the variety of meanings associated with women's bodies. The texts that she uses date from the time of the redaction of the Mishnah to the end of the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud. I will also be referring to Rachel Adler's work in "Tum'ah and Toharah", where she specifically discusses how the translation of those two terms has contributed to negative perceptions about mikveh, and to articles by Joelle Alouche-Bennayoun, Leslie Cook, Naomi Marmon, and Tirzah Meacham, contained in "Women and Water", edited by Rachel Wassserfall. Rachel Biale's research in "Women and Jewish Law" is foundational to my interpretation of biblical sources. With regard to contemporary mikveh practice and innovations in the use of the ritual, I have referred to Rabbi Elyse Goldstein's chapters on "Women and Water in the Torah" and "A Feminist Reexamination of Mikveh" from her book, "ReVisions", and the observations of Janice

Rubin and Leah Lax in "The Mikvah Project". In short, through my secondary sources, I will be considering the legal, cultural and ethnographic aspects of mikveh practice.

The goal behind my research for this thesis is to allow the women's voices to be heard. It is their first-hand thoughts and experiences that I want to predominate, rather than my own speculations drawn from textual sources. As a non-Jew, I have only an intellectual understanding of mikveh ritual, whereas the women I have interviewed have literally lived the experience, or in the case of the non-observant women, lived with some knowledge of it. Insofar as possible, the core of this thesis will reflect that experience. I have therefore decided not to italicize any of the Hebrew terms, since doing so might highlight my own perception of their strangeness, whereas these terms are not unfamiliar or "strange" to the women. Instead, I have created a Glossary of Hebrew Terms, which is included as Appendix B at the end of the thesis.

1.4 My Own Voice

Finally, although my own overall perception of mikveh is positive, my intention in this thesis was to provide basic background information on the biblical and historical origins and development of mikveh, both as a concept and as a practice, and then to briefly discuss the evolution of the social implications of this ritual, as well as some of the changes and innovations that have been taking place in the last few years. These changes have not occurred in all denominations, and in that regard, I have also attempted to explore the tension that exists between continuity and innovation in religious rituals.

Throughout this thesis, my primary motivation behind the interview process was to allow Jewish women to speak for themselves and to speak across denominational boundaries.

I have presented and discussed my own research from primary and secondary sources and I have summarized my findings in the Conclusions. As an outsider and a non-Jew, I have made every attempt to be as objective as possible, a position I have taken out of respect for the women who trusted me enough to share their personal experiences with me.

CHAPTER 2: EXPLANATION AND BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PRACTICE

2.1 Overview

The term "mikveh" is used in more than one way. It refers both to the Jewish practice of ritual immersion and to the ritual pool itself in which this practice is performed by religiously observant and married Jewish women of childbearing age at the end of each menstrual period.

Several sentences in Leviticus refer to the necessity of water for ritual purification. Leviticus 11:36, which is part of a long list of what is considered "clean" and "unclean" for Jews, states that "a spring or cistern in which water is collected shall be clean" (Tanakh, 170) Naomi Marmon concludes that it is from this verse and other subsequent teachings that "the Sages articulated the laws governing the construction of a *mikveh*". (The Culture of Ritual Immersion, 11) About 200 gallons (40 se'ah) of undrawn water is required in order for the actual body of water "to qualify as a *mikveh*" and this must either be "built into the ground or be an integral part of a building attached to the ground which cannot be disconnected", thus ruling out the use of a bathtub. (11) The contained body of water must be "large enough for an average-sized adult to fully immerse in" vertically and the water itself "cannot be running or flowing unless it originates from a natural spring". (11) Therefore, in terms of "outdoor" mikvaot (pl. form of mikveh), natural bodies of water such as streams, rivers or lakes, meet the criteria.

Tevilah (mikveh immersion) is not uniquely a women's ritual. It is practised by some Orthodox Jewish men on a weekly basis before Shabbat, and on special occasions, such as before the High Holidays, especially Yom Kippur. It is also an essential part of the conversion process for both sexes. This thesis, however, will specifically focus only on the uses, traditional and otherwise, that Jewish women make of this ritual.

2.2 Biblical Sources

Mikvah ritual is commonly understood to be based on two main biblical sources. Both can be found in Leviticus. The entire text of Chapter 15 is devoted to ritual purification of both men and women, while Chapters 18 and 20 focus on transgressions and their consequences.

The 18th chapter of Leviticus deals with prohibitions and the penalties that incur if they are not obeyed. The 19th sentence gives the following commandment to men " Do not come near a woman during her period of uncleanness to uncover her nakedness"; the 29th sentence explains the consequences of disobeying this injunction, as well as the many others contained in this chapter: "All who do any of those abhorrent things – such persons shall be cut off from their people." (Tanakh, 184) Likewise, the 18th sentence of Leviticus 20 is a clear warning: "If a man lies with a woman in her infirmity and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow and she has exposed her blood flow, both of them shall be cut off from among their people." (Tanakh, 187-188)

These sources differ widely in their treatment of the subject of purity, impurity and the need for ritual cleansing. Leviticus 15 is a section of scripture that deals with the laws of purity and impurity within a religious context, and specifically with ritual purification for both men and women. At this point, it is appropriate and important to emphasize that the purification referred to here is *ritual* in nature and is tied to the fitness of the person involved to take part in Temple worship. As Rachel Biale notes, "The laws of purity were a cornerstone of the ritual practice of the Temple...Purity should be understood as a state which permits a person (or object) to approach the place of divine presence such as the Temple. Impurity is a state, caused by numerous factors (listed in Leviticus 11-15), which bars a person from approaching or touching anything connected with God's residence." (148)

The first biblical source, Leviticus 15, discusses four categories of ritual impurity. Of those four categories, only the zav, a male with an irregular penile discharge other than ejaculation, is specifically commanded to bathe "in living waters" at the end of a seven-day period during which there has been no discharge at all. Women were divided into two categories: niddah (Hebrew for "separation" and the term used to describe a menstruating woman) and zava (bleeding not related to menstruation). The difference between the two was the time factor. Any bleeding that lasted for more than seven days was deemed abnormal and conferred zava status upon the woman. Contrary to the laws governing the zav, "there was no particular cleansing ritual" for women in either state. (Meacham, 28) Specifically in the case of the niddah, "normal menstruation lasted seven

days" (28), at the end of which time, provided the flow had ceased, the woman was considered ritually clean.

The difference between Leviticus 15 and Leviticus 18 and 20 is the context in which the term "niddah" is used. In Leviticus 15, as mentioned previously, "niddah" is used to describe the menstruant, but its meaning is simply "separated". In Leviticus 18 and 20, "niddah" is linked to forbidden women and specifically to sexual acts such as adultery and incest. Leviticus 18 "lists all the sexual transgressions including incest, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and sexual relations with a *niddah*" (Biale,155) through which "the land became defiled" and was punished by God: it "spewed out its inhabitants" (Tanakh, 184, v 25). Although the woman in a state of niddah was not a sin in herself, sleeping with her was, and in Leviticus 20, the term niddah again is linked to forbidden sexual acts as well as to other proscribed practices associated with non-Israelites, such as human sacrifice and divination. Inevitably, this understanding of the term was associated with the menstruating woman who became not simply ritually impure and therefore "separated" (from participating in Temple ritual and from the Temple environs), but physically, morally and socially repugnant. Over the centuries, many of these negative connotations eventually attached themselves to the menstruating woman, the "niddah". In "Menstrual Purity", Fonrobert states that since the time of the Mishnah, "almost the entire rabbinic discourse" related to the biblical discussion of menstruation has been framed by and focused on this aspect of "im/purity". (3)

Rachel Biale specifically points out the contradiction between Leviticus 15, and 18 and 20. She notes that the tone of Leviticus 15 is generally neutral. "Impurity is an objective, if undesirable, state which one should seek to avoid and should remove by following proper ritual ... in and of itself, [it] is no transgression, only approaching the Temple in such a state is." (153-154). In Leviticus 15, "intercourse with a "niddah" causes a state of impurity but there is no hint that it is considered a sin", but in Leviticus 18 and 20, "it is an offensive sexual transgression", carrying with it the punishment of "karet, being cut off from his people." (155)

Another way of looking at this apparent contradiction is by exploring the way some scholars have grouped the different chapters in Leviticus. The 8^{th} – 15^{th} chapters contain what has become known as the Purity Code, and Chapters 18 – 27 contain the Holiness Code. In simplified terms, the Holiness Code refers to actions that are volitional, specifically forbidden sexual relations, while the Purity Code focuses on what is seen as non-volitional: it sets out the *times* when a person can contract impurity, rather than focusing on deliberate actions that cause this state, and therefore includes situations like childbirth, death, menstruation, leprosy, etc.

Leslie Cook notes that within the context of the Holiness Code, making the wrong choice leads to sin, whereas the Purity Code defines sin as "not engaging in the correct rituals of purification before approaching God." (48) She concludes from this that "Impurity is not **in its essence** a moral issue". (48, emphasis mine) and that applying this

interpretation to niddah shows that menstruation is treated as an ethical issue under the Holiness Code and as a ritual issue within the Purity Code.

Cook goes on to note that the rituals described in Leviticus, of which mikveh is one, demonstrate the difference between humans and the Creator through the examples of body, food and blood. "The body generates impurity" (48) but in the right context, blood itself purifies, as was the case with Temple sacrifices. Out of context, blood can make a person "impure", leading to cleansing rituals where there is an emphasis on the absence of blood, as is the case with mikveh practice.

2.3 Rabbinic sources

The relatively straightforward approach to women's purification, found in Leviticus 15, was radically transformed during the period between the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. and the mid 3rd century CE. Meacham states that this "new, normative Judaism" developed within the context of a "strong Hellenic influence, not only in terms of bathing but also in terms of the low status of women in Greek culture." (28) The specific requirement for bathing as a means of post-menstrual purification for women was the product of the tannaitic period, between 70 CE. and the mid 3rd century CE. Immersion became an essential component of this developing ritual.

The Babylonian Talmud, a product of the later amoraic (3rd to 6th century CE) period, contains one long tractate devoted to the laws and practices dealing with menstruation. In her commentary on *Tractate Niddah*, as this section is known, Charlotte

Elisheva Fonrobert states that the rabbis transformed women's "blood and bodies into language" and analyzed the "nature of blood and pads, of births and abortions or miscarriages", and she states that they did all this with as much detachment as if they were discussing "zoology, astronomy, physics or mathematics."(2) Although the Mishnah dates from either the end of the 2nd century CE. or the beginning of the 3rd, it was compiled after the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE, thereby rendering its pronouncements on ritual "im/purity" theoretical, since the focal point and need for ritual purity, that is, the Temple itself, no longer existed. Nevertheless, as Fonrobert notes, "almost the entire rabbinic discourse on niddah, from the Mishnah on, is framed by and committed to just this aspect [i.e., im/purity] of the biblical discourse on menstruation." (3)

As previously stated, rabbinic sources from the tannaitic period began to stipulate that bathing following menstruation was a requirement for a woman's ritual purification. Biblically, mikveh was referred to as "mayim chayim", living water. This referred to water that was moving and not stagnant, such as a lake, river or sea. During the rabbinic period, the focus shifted to the ritual pool itself, which used an "approximation of natural water, that is, water collected through the force of gravity, usually rainwater" (Ukeles, 220) that was gathered into a huge pit or container called a bor. The bor became the centre for a building that was constructed around it, containing at least one, and sometimes several "small pools individual sunken pools for private immersion". (Ukeles, 220) One of the walls of each pool was shared with the bor and had a hole in it that could be opened or closed in order to "seed" or "kiss" the water in the pool and make it a valid

mikveh. At this point in time, total immersion of the woman's body, including her hair, became necessary. Both the dimensions of the mikveh pool and the type of water involved were and still are scrupulously defined and controlled. For most mikvaot (pl of mikveh) in Canada today, the stipulation of "living water" can include melted snow as well as the rainwater that is collected from the roof, stored in the bor and routed to the pool(s) by a series of conduits.

The Mishnah devotes an entire section to this issue, entitled "Miqvaot", which sets out the laws regarding these pools. Meacham states that "as long as the quantity of water remained sufficient [referring here to the dry season when natural pools could disappear] it purified the woman, **proving that the ritual impurity is indeed ritual, not physical**." (29, emphasis mine)

2.4 A Few Words About Halakhah

At this point, it is appropriate and necessary to define and briefly discuss Jewish law in general so that mikveh practice can be understood within that context. Halakhah is more than a "conglomeration of legal rules isolated from religious and moral precepts...It evolved and developed over a period of more than 3 millennia" and now "embraces every aspect of life" from the spiritual to the physical. It consists of material "from early Biblical times to the most recent responsa [rabbinic discussions and commentaries] and legal opinions of present-day halakhic authorities." (The Status of the women and the family according to Halakha, 3)

Halakhah is based on the Mosaic laws contained in the Torah (Pentateuch) which were discussed by the Rabbis who followed the Prophets and applied to "life situations as they evolved over time". (Status of Women and the Family According to Halakhic Law, (3) The first compilation of post-Biblical Jewish law, the Mishnah, recorded these teachings and rulings and over time, became "the basis for further exposition and adaptation" (3) by the Talmudic rabbis. This tradition of "continued exposition and adaptation" has been an ongoing process ever since.

2.5 Halakhah and Mikveh

How does halakhah relate to or impact on mikveh? Rachel Biale states that although initially, halakhah in today's society may appear to be "a marginal issue as it is not central to the lives of a majority of Jewish women (and men) in North America" (xi), this point of view "misses the profound impact of the halakhic discussion on Jewish life." (xi) Far from being a "marginal issue" (xi), Biale notes that in spite of "the many arenas of social change, cultural flux and intellectual engagement ... halakhah remains a central issue" regardless of denominational affiliation. (xi)

In terms of ritual cleansing for women, many scholars such as Adler, Fonrobert and Biale agree that the system of purification became redundant after the 2nd Temple was destroyed in 70 CE. Although it was gradually replaced by the growth of an elaborate and ritualized system of Torah study and prayer, in practice, the Temple laws of purity persisted. As Rachel Biale states, "...the vital core of the laws of *niddah* is shifted from the sphere of the Temple to the orbit of the family," thus preserving the power of

those laws "despite the disappearance of the Temple." (158) This may well have been, as Lax proposes in "The Mikvah Project", a means to preserve Jewish identity, but the purity laws eventually became focused, to a large extent, on women and women's bodies. Biale notes in her observation that, from the beginning of the talmudic period, "we see the transfer of the focus of the laws of *niddah* from the realm of ritual impurity to the sphere of marital and sexual relations." (158) This focus continued through the medieval period.

It is worth noting that this change of emphasis to "the sphere of marital and sexual relations" (Biale, 158) and the resulting shift in halakhah created "more restrictions on the contact of a *niddah* with her husband than on her contact with any other member of the community." (167) However, while halakhah itself did not restrict the niddah's interaction with family, fiends and society in general, "the custom of many Jewish communities did curtail the activities of the *niddah* in the public sphere" (167), with the result that "it was common for women to abstain from synagogue during their period of *niddut*." (167) Here we have a clear example of how culture and custom can not only establish, but also modify the foundational legal precepts.

For several centuries, both the Mishnah and the Talmud did not view the menstruant as a source of danger, although they agreed that she was impure. With the development of the Baraita da Niddah, which probably took place in Israel during the 6th or 7th century CE, the attitude shifted significantly, and rules governing the menstruant became much more stringent. They included enforced separation from her husband,

family and community. Although the authorship of the *Baraita da Niddah* remains unknown, this document "made a definite entry into mainstream opinions through the writing of Nachmanides [1194-1270 CE] and exercised influence on many later authorities" (Biale, 170), although it was never accepted as authoritative halakhah. The treatment of the niddah and the "attitude toward menstruation and the menstruant woman" contained in the Baraita da Niddah "are clearly extreme and in some instances in direct contradiction of the Halakhah." (172)

These restrictive regulations and the perception of the menstruating woman on which they were based were strongly debated from the time of the appearance of Baraita da Niddah until the statements of R. Moses Isserles in the Shulkan Arukh some 1000 years later. The Shulkan Arukh was written by Joseph Caro and published in Venice in 1563. As previously noted, it contains commentaries by R. Moses Isserles (16th century, Poland), as well as later halakhic authorities, and by the 17th century, it had become "the final authority to which one turned for the definite halakhah." (Fishman, 290) "The *Shulkhan Arukh* begins with the general legislation that all those who have become impure are permitted to participate in the three major events of public worship", that is, Torah reading, recitation of the Shema and prayer, and as Biale notes, "this rule is also applicable to women." (168) Isserles commentary seems to work both sides of the issue. Halakhically, he is of the opinion "that the *niddah* may enter the synagogue and participate in all the services in the usual way." (169) However, he does state that "the custom in the communities of eastern Europe is to exclude the *niddah* from synagogue worship" (169) with two exceptions only: during the "white days" following the cessation

of the menstrual flow prior to immersion, and during the High Holidays. Again, we can see what Biale says "exemplifies what was true for Jewish communities in general" (169): that although "Halakhah does not mandate exclusion of the *niddah* from public life and ritual, customs and actual practice did curtail her considerably." (169)

Between 300 CE and 600 CE, Talmudic rabbis had created what Meacham calls a "new science and expertise of menstrual blood." (22) Rachel Adler's opinion is that "pathology entered halakha" (126) when the initial state of ritual impurity due to menstruation (tum'at niddah) became separate and isolated from the general state of tum'ah (ritual impurity). Tum'at niddah had, at least potentially, been a way "for women to experience death and rebirth through the cycle of their own bodies" (Adler, 126) in what was generally a positive manner. Adler goes on to say that the rabbis who instigated this change were "tainted by foreign asceticism" (126) and distorted the concept of tum'at niddah "into a method of controlling the fearsome power of sexual desire..." (126), thereby turning the mikveh from "the primal sea in which all were made new" (126) into "the pool at which women were cleansed of their filth and thus became acceptable sexual partners once more." (126) She concludes that the rabbis' statements about the "filth" being spiritual and not physical did nothing to help women who were understandably offended by both the language and the attitude.

Continuing in this vein, Charlotte Fonrobert's previously cited work "Menstrual Purity" is an attempt "to trace ... the particular "face" that the rabbis gave to this discussion of menstruation" (37) and she notes that although it was not the rabbis

themselves who created "a language particular to sexual inaccessibility" (37), (referring to menstrual separation), they **did** readapt the existing biblical language to their own use. In the same way, they "did not simply inherit biblical law", but "chose to inherit it in a particular way." (37)

2.6 A Brief Historical Overview of Ritual Practice

Having given a brief explanation of the origins and development of mikveh up until the 1600's, I will now turn my attention to the main context of the thesis, which is the modern observance of this ritual in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Although this thesis is not primarily concerned with the history of mikveh, a quick look at some of the practices over the centuries shows that generally, the ritual has not always been uniform or consistent. In her research into the practices of Algerian Jewish women, J. Allouche-Benayoun notes that older women viewed mikveh as a "place of implementation of family purity" (201); although they realized that the ritual itself was not hygiene-related, they nevertheless felt that the immersion was a sacred purification that allowed for the resumption of sexual relations in marriage. By the 1940's, Allouche-Benayoun found that most Algerian Jewish women would take part in a mikveh ritual before marriage, but it was the ones who belonged to the more observant congregations who continued the monthly halakhic practice. Many in this latter group remained observant out of concern or fear that without the mikveh ritual, any children born would risk being ugly, deformed, sickly or otherwise physically or mentally impaired.

Allouche-Benayoun goes on to state that, in modern times, mikveh practice has become identified primarily, or solely, with the resumption of marital intimacy, and has thereby lost much of the richness of interpretation that Rachel Adler speaks of. This strong connection between public ritual and private intimacy has resulted in a sense on the part of some (or perhaps many) that mikveh practice is an "intrusion into a couple's life" (201) and that it represents "the control of the couple's sexuality by the religious community to which they belong." (201)

From one perspective, a woman's total immersion in the mikveh is a symbolic means of erasing a kind of death (menstruation being the proof that conception did not occur), and her emergence from the same waters represents both new life for the woman as well as another opportunity to give life, to conceive. However, Allouche-Benayoun's research points to a loss of the strong link that may have connected mikveh, purity and the sacred. Allouche-Benayoun carried out studies of Algerian Jewish women who currently live in France. Her findings show that the use of mikveh has almost disappeared in that community. In Paris, it is not uncommon for Algerian Jewish women to get married in the synagogue without having first gone to the mikveh and the rabbis, who are likely aware of the situation, seem to forget to ask for the certificate. Whatever mikveh practice is still followed by this group of women in France now seems to be confined principally to "the young women who are very observant." (210) This includes any woman who is ba'alat teshuva (a female Jew who has returned to a more observant lifestyle), members of ultra-Orthodox communities such as the Lubavitch, women of other Orthodox groups, and often, converts.

On the subject of converts, one interpretation, put forth by various scholars including Rachel Wasserfall, is that the mikveh ritual marks the physical change of identity: immersion is "the symbolic death of what one used to be" (Women and Water, 212), while emergence from the water signifies "the rebirth of the new being" (212) as a Jew. In a similar vein, the link between mikveh, menstruation and women's identity in Morocco is also discussed in Wasserfall's article "Menstruation and Identity", with the conclusion that "it is the ritual bath that enables the women to identify as not just women but Jewish women. If blood turns the girl into a woman, the miqve turns the woman into a Jew." (People of the Body, 317) This transformative significance of mikveh is repeated in a slightly different context in the words of a young contemporary Hasidic bride. Speaking of her pre-marriage immersion, she said, "...I had this overwhelming sense that I was going in that water a girl, and coming out a woman." (Lax, 20)

In "Reflections on Contemporary Miqveh Practice", contained in the collection entitled "Women and Water", Naomi Marmon discusses the results of a study she conducted amongst American-born Ashkenazi women whose traditions ranged from modern Orthodox to Hassidic. In contrast with Allouche-Benayoun's research, she found that "twenty-eight percent of the interviewees" reported that "going to the miqveh furnishes them with a special connection to Judaism and creates a community of women within the larger Jewish population." These women also had a sense of being associated with Jewish life in a uniquely female manner. Speaking of immersion, one interviewee said that she felt "connected to Jewish women all over the world ... It is a tangible

connection to the past, present and future generations ... as well as a link to other women across space and time today." (255-265)

2.7 Contemporary Mikveh Practice: Reclaiming the Ritual

In this section, I will continue the discussion of contemporary mikveh practice and go on to explore some of the innovations that are being made to this ritual in different denominations of Judaism.

In contemporary North America, the mikvaot are generally clean and functional. Ones that have been more recently built, especially in the U.S., can be quite elaborate, but the main features remain the same: private bathrooms that provide for scrupulous physical cleansing prior to tevilah (ritual immersion), and the required proportion of "living water" in the mikveh pool itself.

Traditionally, the mikveh was often a place where regular users socialized while they waited their turn to immerse. It remains so, to a large extent, today. In general, visits to the mikveh take place in the evening – the practice of "under cover of darkness" persists, as does the external anonymity of the building. The tradition is usually explained as a way to protect the women's privacy and modesty, but among the women I interviewed, there are those who see (and feel) it as an ongoing reminder of an archaic mindset that points to women and their bodily functions being somehow unclean and shameful. Although Leah Lax's view is that the laws surrounding mikveh practice are there "to elevate the sexual act, preserve its modesty and protect the woman." (16), she

likewise acknowledges that the negative attitudes that have grown up around these laws over the centuries have "contributed to the marginalizing of women in Jewish life" and that they are reinforced by "many comments in Jewish texts". (16)

Naomi Marmon's research into the ritual practice of contemporary Orthodox women in the Boston, Massachusetts area demonstrates that even within this observant community, "no two women follow the laws in precisely the same manner and no two women are effected by observance in exactly the same way." (The Culture of Ritual Immersion, 153) In "An Abrreviated History of Jewish Menstrual Laws", Meacham reaches a similar conclusion about the variety of ritual observance, noting that "among the Orthodox in North America and much of Europe ... observance of menstrual laws varies considerably, as does miqveh usage." (34)

All the women who took part in Marmon's survey upheld the laws regarding family purity and mikveh ritual "because they are a part of *halakha*" (Jewish law), but their attitudes and emotional reactions to those laws were "diverse and multifaceted". (The Culture of Ritual Immersion, 153) At the same time, Marmon notes similarities both in the women's relation to the laws and in what they see "as the positive and negative aspects" of being observant. (153)

Of Marmon's interviewees, eight-seven per cent reported being "comfortable" with their halakhic practice, but many of this same group, as well as others, also said they felt pressured by the laws and sometimes resented the ways they effected the women or

their relationship to their husbands. Meacham's work echoes the results of Marmon's research with the observation that the additional laws that were added during the rabbinic period "certainly functioned [and continue to function] to limit sexual expression for everyone" (36), not just the women to whom they were directed. Generally, however, the women's responses to Marmon's interviews depended on the way they felt about their marriages, on whether they had children and/or on how many children there were, as well as on how long they had been married. (The Culture of Ritual Immersion, 154)

Out of all the women interviewed, ninety-six per cent spoke of negative *aspects* of observance, yet only two of them (four per cent) believed that the *overall* effect of observance on their relationship with their husbands was negative. In fact, Marmon discovered that, in spite of the presence of other results from the interviews that might at first indicate otherwise, seventy-two per cent of the women "believe that practicing these laws has had an overall positive impact" on their marital situation. (The Culture of Ritual Immersion, 154)

Turning now to the concept of "reclaiming" this practice, Reform Rabbi Elyse Goldstein devotes a chapter in "Re-Visions" specifically to "A Feminist Re-Examination of Mikveh". From her perspective, mikveh ritual is more than just the final act before resuming heterosexual relations within the context of a traditionally-defined marriage. It is "taking back the water" in a very literal sense. In response to some women whose attitude is, "Why bother to re-appropriate what has become for many a symbol of patriarchal authority?" (131), Goldstein responds that this action is an essential one for

Jewish women to take because "we have so little that is ours." (131) The point she makes is that many of the other symbols and rituals that have been recently taken on by Jewish women are borrowed from men, but "the water belongs to us" (131) She strongly believes that women can and must reclaim and reinvent the traditional use of mikveh. If feminism has re-appropriated menstruation "as a symbol of power and danger" (131), then mikveh ritual can truly become a celebration of that symbol. Her position is not just a "re-visioning" or a change in the perception of mikveh practice, but a transformation of it, a widening of the boundaries to include circumstances beyond the traditional as reasons for ritual immersion. Some of these circumstances would include marking the end of the 30 day mourning period in Judaism, reconciliation after marital infidelity, milestone birthdays and menopause, as well as part of the healing process from the trauma of "rape, incest, infertility, loss of pregnancy, invasive surgery, crisis points and life-changing situations." (129)

To illustrate the value of non-traditional use of mikveh, Goldstein refers to her own experience. She states that before her ordination as a rabbi, she "wanted a private way to prepare", and because she was unmarried at the time, she managed to somehow convince the "mikveh lady" that she was "like a bride". (128) She says that she "felt the mikveh experience in a deeply personal way", emerging from the pool "cleansed ... of personal doubts and obstacles to [her] ordination." (128) While not suggesting that mikveh ritual could or should take the place of more traditional forms of therapy. (in Goldstein's words, "It is not voodoo ... It offers no quick fix"), she nevertheless recognizes it as "a tool for cleansing both ... body and soul." (129)

In another chapter of "ReVisions" entitled "Women and Water in the Torah", Goldstein notes that water was never actually created; it was present from the beginning. In the first chapter of Genesis, God's spirit (ruach, in Hebrew, which is the feminine form of the word), hovers over it. "Water appears as the mother of the world", Goldstein notes, concluding that, in this context, "the primordial state of the universe is one of the dark, wet womb." (122) She goes on to say that blood and water are similar in that they are both capable of giving life and of taking it away. She notes the many scriptural references to water as both destroyer and life-giver - the Great Flood, the appearance of Hagar's well in the desert, the Red Sea episode in the Exodus story, etc.- and states that while blood is a powerful symbol in the Torah, and the symbolic partner of water, it is also its opposite, by virtue of the fact that it has no source outside the body. Although the human body is composed largely of water, "if we need more, we can go almost anywhere to find it." (124) Goldstein posits that water became a transformative element of "the ultimate symbol of purity and purification" because "it is both in us and independent of us"; to bathe in it is to experience "a change in status and a form of rebirth." (124) Because a baby floats in water inside the womb, there is "an organic connection" between women and water, as well as the scriptural one found in the Torah. (124)

From these foundational connections, Goldstein sees a natural progression to the use of immersion in the living waters of the mikveh as a symbolic rebirth for Jewish women. She states that the mikveh has the potential to "give back strength to Jewish women" in the same way that Miriam's well renewed the strength of the ancient

Israelites. (127) Goldstein also refers to Rachel Adler's idea of mikveh ritual as "salvage"(131) and, from a feminist stance, she sees it as becoming "salvage of a woman's reality, salvage of ourselves as whole but spiritually fragile, salvage of a tradition that was once put upon us but that we have embraced as our own ... a tradition with a potential that exists beyond that tradition's narrow scope." (131)

A more traditional, and at the same time contemporary approach to mikveh is illustrated through the performance art of Mierel Laderman Ukeles, a practising Orthodox woman from New York. In 1978, she wrote and performed "Mikva Dreams", a monologue that focuses on her personal experience of traditional mikveh observance. In the Introduction, Ukeles writes that mikveh is "the site-intersection" of the multiple aspects of Matronit-Schechina, "the Jew's Female Divinity"; all "the holy energies" of "eternal renewed virgin *and* eternal passionate lover *and* eternal creating mother" converge in mikveh ritual. (218)

Echoing this positive perception, Susan Weideman Schneider writes, "At the heart of the *mikveh* law is a complete individual. Every month the practicing woman and her husband are reminded that she is more than an appendage to him, that she does not exist [solely] to serve his sexual needs. Yet this system also allows enough time together for the couple to grow sexually." (206-207)

At the same time, Ukeles is also aware of the negative perceptions that surround this practice. She notes that this ancient menstrual ritual has "survived – barely"

[centuries of] cultural hang-ups towards menstruation itself: superstition which was really fear and loathing of woman body herself, woman deep mysterious fertile magic body and her times." (218) She continues with the observation that misunderstandings cling "like parasitical barnacles" to the "truly nurturant source ... the concept and power of the Mikva", which is "not about woman as dirty."(218) As Ukeles says, in the course of a month, she gets dirty many times and when that happens, she takes a bath. (218)

Ukeles' performance-experience of mikveh is at once universal and intensely personal. She acknowledges her connection to countless previous generations, noting that the mikveh gives a woman the opportunity "to go down into, to be swallowed by the people's living waters, to come back to life just as her people's women have done for so many thousands of years." (220) On a personal level, the woman herself "is reborn. The living waters return her to life ..." (220)

This particular understanding of the nature of mikveh practice is crucial here. In her article, "Tum'ah and Toharah", Rachel Adler emphasizes that these words do not mean "dirty" and "clean" respectively in any hygienic sense, but were originally used to denote a person's fitness (toharah), or lack of it, (tum'ah) to enter the Temple and perform or take part in ritual activities. (119) As previously mentioned, it is well worth noting that since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the rituals themselves for which a person was required to be "toharah" no longer exist and therefore, all Jews today, both men and women, are ***ritually*** "tum'ah", or "unfit" to participate in Temple rituals.

In "Expanding the Palace of Torah - Orthodoxy and Feminism", Tamar Ross comes to many of the same conclusions as Meacham and Rachel Adler. She notes that many Orthodox women are beginning to question male perceptions of female requirements, and that "...the assumption of the stringent laws of family purity" is being called into question in some areas. (238) "Biblical law requires women to separate from their husbands only while menstruating and to undertake ritual immersion in the mikveh on the evening after cessation of the menstrual flow. However, obligations of ritual purity affecting flow of blood outside the menstrual period (zivah) have been superimposed by rabbinic decree on the laws of niddah (which affect sexual relations alone). This imposition is despite the fact that ever since the destruction of the Second Temple, both men and women are regarded ritually defiled to the highest degree (temeiei metim) without any means of purification from such defilement." (239) Again, echoing Adler's premise, she goes on to say, "Over and above this practical outcome of conflation between the laws of niddah and definition of ritual impurity, however, is the fact that the language of defilement has been unnecessarily retained as something that applies to women only. This factor has contributed to the negative attitudes regarding women's bodies, to regarding them as inherently more impure than those of men. Such attitudes spill over subtly into women's self-perception. They also affect folk practice and ritual in inappropriate ways, as reflected in the widespread notion that women may not touch a Torah scroll when menstruant, even though Torah scrolls by halakhic definition do not contract impurity." (239)

In their book "The Mikvah Project", Janice Rubin and Leah Lax explore contemporary mikveh use among ritually observant American women through a collection of photographs and excerpts from interviews. The photography, showing women immersing in a mikveh, is the work of Janice Rubin, while Leah Lax is responsible for most of the text. The photos, especially the ones taken underwater, are compelling and often very moving, but it is the text that is of particular interest for my own research. I will take some time here to discuss the textual contents of this project.

Speaking about mikveh in general and about her own project specifically, Janice Rubin said that initially, "I had little interest in what I considered to be an archaic custom. I had scoffed at the ritual, which seemed to perpetuate the religious myth that women in general, and menstruating women in particular, were "unclean". But all of this is based on a misinterpretation of the mysterious biblical word "*tameh*", which has no equivalent in English. Several of my life experiences...led me to interpret the word *tameh* to mean "spiritually vulnerable". (11) This statement underlines once again the difficulty in accurately translating the terms "tam'eh" and "toharah" and the problems that this difficulty has caused over the centuries, in terms of the perception of mikveh practice and what it might say about women. It also reinforces the importance that perception, both collective and individual, has on the way in which this ritual is viewed, especially by Jewish women.

Leah Lax refers to the difference between Leviticus 15 and Leviticus 18, which I have already discussed in Chapter 2. Her interpretation, however, is interesting, and

perhaps helpful since it changes the focus of the prohibition. She reads the warning in Leviticus 18 (that a man will be karet, cut off from his people, if he has sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman), as part of a more general message: if Jews do not define themselves as different, they run the risk of being "absorbed into the surrounding cultures" and losing their identity. She concludes that the purity code contained in Leviticus 15 was no longer relevant after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, but the holiness code of Leviticus 18, which contained "the injunction against sexual relations before mikvah" was "a means of preserving identity" and therefore assumed primary importance from that time forward. (16)

Lax notes the central importance of mikvah as set out in the Shulchan Arukh, which states that when a new Jewish community is being established and funds are limited, "building a mikvah is to take priority over the purchase of a Torah scroll." (15) Although "The Torah scroll was the source of daily Jewish identity and clarified the boundaries of the Jewish community", it was the mikvah that gave a future to that community. "Without a future, " Lax concludes, "the daily laws were useless, which is why the mikvah was to precede even the scroll of the Law." (15)

Lax also discusses "the ancient practice of mikvah immersion" (15) and acknowledges that the innate nature of this ritual has "resulted in a culture of secrecy and modesty" that surround an observance that "has always been performed under cloak of night and not disclosed to anyone." (16) She acknowledges the different and frequently negative attitudes towards mikveh that have developed over the centuries. Her opinion is

that these attitudes have "contributed to the marginalizing of women in Jewish life" and that they are reinforced by "many comments in Jewish texts". However, her own interpretation is more positive, in that she believes that the laws surrounding mikvah practice are "humane and detailed" and function as "guidelines governing sexual behavior." Their aim, according to Lax, is "to elevate the sexual act, preserve its modesty and protect the woman." (16)

Rubin notes that after the first exhibit of "The Mikvah Project" in Denver, Colorado in 2000, "It wasn't long before I realized that mikvah was making a comeback, and that the ritual was also being reinvented in ways I'd never imagined." (12) Lax states that she "found mikvah being used in creative rituals for healing and for a variety of personal events such as life transitions" (18) She also notes that many women did not follow this observance solely in the context of a marital relationship, but would use it as part of their own individual "search for spirituality" in what has become for them "a solitary, very feminine rite." (19)

CHAPTER 3: THE INTERVIEWS

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the experiences, thoughts and opinions expressed by Jewish women during the interviews. All of the women have chosen some degree of anonymity. A few have agreed to allow the use of their first names while others have declined to be identified in any way. In the interest of clarity, I have assigned each woman a letter, so that while there will be some specific description as to age, denomination, etc., they will all be referred to as "Mrs. A", "Mrs. B", etc.

Before embarking on the interview process, it was necessary to formulate a questionnaire, a copy of which is included in Appendix A. In doing so, my intention was to leave at least a few questions open-ended in order to facilitate conversation and discussion if the interviewee chose to do so.

I wanted the women to feel free to speak as openly as possible. To this end, the questionnaire is straightforward, uncomplicated and relatively short. Three of the nine questions (Nos. 1, 2 and 8) serve to set a basic factual foundation regarding the woman's regularity of observance and her denomination. Questions 3 and 6 specifically ask for the women's thoughts and feelings, and the last question gives the option to speak about any other experiences that have not been covered in the interview. The remaining three questions (Nos. 4, 5 and 7) give the women the opportunity to discuss their own personal situations as well as the manner in which they learned about this ritual.

I have divided this chapter into four sections in order to present the results of the interviews in as coherent a manner as possible. Section A contains the women's thoughts on how the ritual of mikveh connects them to the Jewish faith and to the community. Section B is a discussion of the importance the women place on halakhah (Jewish law) in their observance of mikveh practice. Section C deals with how the women learned about this ritual. Section D contains the women's personal experiences relating to mikveh practice and their reflections on it.

3.2 The Women Speak

In this section, I will be looking at a number of categories and using them to more specifically discuss the women's responses to my interview questions.

3.2.1 Connection

Many of the mikveh-observant women whom I interviewed reported that this practice fostered a close connection to both Judaism and the community, as well as a sense of historical connection to the generations of Jewish women who had practiced this ritual, often under difficult and dangerous circumstances.

> In this regard, one woman, who wished to remain anonymous and will be referred to as Mrs. A, said that mikveh observance was one of the main ways in which she was able to understand her place in Judaism because it made her aware that she was part of a long chain of women, including her mother and grandmother. She spoke about the mikvaot that were found at Masada, noting

that over the centuries, many Jewish women have risked considerable hardship in order to fulfill this commandment.

She went on to say that certain practices exist within Jewish communities and one of their purposes is to provide a Jewish identity, to enable one to, as she put it, "live Jewishly" (March 26, 2008). While acknowledging that some of these practices supercede logic, she nevertheless confirmed her belief that to be Jewish means identifying with the Jewish community, and these practices, of which mikveh ritual is one, provide the means to do this.

However, as always, there are exceptions to what looks like the norm. Betty, a young woman who is mikveh-observant and describes herself as modern Orthodox, stated clearly that although she is regular in her practice and very positive about it, the effects are more personal and she is not aware of any overt sense of connection to a wider community or to other Jewish women. Another young woman, Mrs. B, who is also modern Orthodox, echoed the statement that mikveh ritual is extremely personal and during the process of immersion, she is not aware of any sense of connection to a wider community (although she jokingly added that she probably would be from now on since we had discussed the idea.)

Mrs. J is an older woman with a grown family. She is Orthodox and told

me she belongs to a synagogue that is not Lubavitch but whose rabbi is. She said that connection to other Jewish women was a concept she was aware of when she went to the mikveh, but this was not something that touched her deeply or played a large part in her own observance. Primarily, it was "a way of being Jewish" (June 29, 2006), and was as much a part of her life as was "wearing a long skirt and covering her head." (June 29, 2006)

The sense of being connected was different among the women who were not mikveh-observant. While most of these women felt connected to their religion and their community, they stated that they achieved this through other avenues, such as Sabbath dinners, celebration of the High Holidays, or as one interviewee, Mrs. C, summed it up, through "food and family" (June 22, 2006). The sense of being historically or emotionally connected to other Jewish women was not mentioned.

One woman, Mrs. D, a member of a Conservative congregation, said that she only went to the mikveh once, before she got married. The friend who introduced her to her future husband was observant and " taught me about the Laws of Family Purity with the hope that my husband and I would follow them." (April 30, 2008) While this woman enjoyed and appreciated her pre-wedding immersion, she did not integrate the practice into her marriage and in terms of a way of connecting to Judaism or the community, she stated very clearly that, "As I, my closest friends and peers do not practice the laws of family purity, it

[mikveh ritual] really has no bearing on my feelings as a member of the community." (April 30, 2008)

3.2.2 Place of Halakhah

The importance of Jewish law was much more evident among the mikveh-observant women, who all made it clear, in one way or another, that halakhah and a Jewish woman's obligation to follow it, were of primary importance, especially regarding this ritual.

Mrs. A acknowledged the primacy of the legal obligation, but stated that continuity and the sense of having a specific place in time were, for her, almost equal as major motivations for being mikveh-observant. Betty spoke of halakhah in relation to the wider subject of niddah, saying that while the observance of strict separation from her husband can be especially difficult after childbirth, when she has prolonged bleeding for 3 months, she nevertheless follows the law, both as an obligation and because she believes that "this is a system that works". (May 14, 2008) In a discussion about new and non-traditional uses for mikveh ritual, another woman, Mrs. E, said that although she had not personally taken part in any, she had read about them and thought that they were a good thing as long as they did not become the primary focus. She made it clear that in her opinion, halakhah and a Jewish woman's obedience to it must remain the main objective of and motivation for this mikveh practice. Mrs. J also made it clear

that halakhah was foundational to her mikveh observance, although she repeated that the ritual itself was an important way for her to express her Jewish faith.

3.2.3 Sources of Information

Not all, and in fact, not even most of the mikveh-observant women whom I interviewed were taught about the practice while they were growing up. Only two of my interviewees learned about the ritual through family.

Mrs. A, who is a professional woman and is now post-menopausal, told me that she never questioned whether mikveh ritual would be part of her life. Her primary source of instruction was her own mother and she said that her learning came through watching what her mother did. Secondary sources of information were literature and the rabbi's wife. Similarly, Mrs. J said that she learned about the tradition within her own family and has also passed the information on to her own daughter.

The experiences of the other women I interviewed were varied.

Mrs. D, who has not integrated mikveh practice into her married life, explained that she immersed before her wedding, and although she "knew it wasn't likely that we would adopt that lifestyle, I liked the idea of starting my married life in a "pure" state. I imagined cleansing myself of my past and starting my new life with my husband with a clean slate." (April 30, 2008)

Mrs. E explained that she "did not grow up religious" (March 27, 2008), but became more observant in her 20's. Initially, the concept and value of mikveh practice was unclear to her. She told me that she did not like the fact that a natural function of a woman's body, such as menstruation, was considered "impure", especially since the process had been part of God's creation. She did some reading on her own and discussed the matter with others, coming to the conclusion that in religious language, "impure" does not mean the same thing as "unclean" in the usual physical sense of the word. Once she felt clear on this point, she said she began to understand and appreciate the value of mikveh practice.

Betty reported learning about mikveh ritual from classes she took with a woman in Israel before she was married and said that this was the usual way that most women she knew learned about this aspect of Jewish life. She went on to explain that the woman who taught her is a feminist and a teacher at a women's yeshiva where there is a program to instruct women how to teach other women about the laws of niddah.

Another interviewee, Mrs. B, who is a young woman with children, said that as a child and a teenager, she had been aware that the practice existed, but did not grow up observant and initially, had an extremely negative perception of mikveh. After a period of searching in young adulthood, she took the decision to become more observant and found a good teacher, a woman she described as

Ultra-Orthodox who was very down-to-earth and understanding. Following a period of instruction, she became intrigued by the idea of the ritual and decided to try it. She told me that her experience dispelled her previous negative view.

The participants who are not mikveh-observant came from backgrounds where the ritual was neither practised nor taught.

Mrs. C told me that most of what she knows about mikveh comes from a novel by Faye Kellerman entitled "The Ritual Bath". (I am familiar with this book and in fact, it does give some good foundational information regarding mikveh practice amongst Orthodox American women.) Another woman, Mrs. F, stated bluntly, "I have no plans to ever go to a mikveh. It is not something I believe in and this is probably due to the fact that it was never valued in my house growing up." (April, 2008)

3.2.4 Personal Experiences and Reflections:

This is the area where I found the most diversity, both among observant women as well as the less or non-observant. Although the mikveh-observant women generally experienced this practice in a positive way, their responses to this part of the questionnaire were not identical.

Mrs. A told me that while the practice enriched her life overall, it was not

always easy or comfortable. Travelling, for example, could become complicated, since vacations needed to be planned either around her menstrual cycle or around the availability of a mikveh at the destination point. Even at home, there was also the question of privacy, especially when her children were younger.

Betty's ideas about mikveh were not positive in the beginning. In her words, she is a "total shower person" (May 14, 2008) and originally thought she would not like the mikveh at all. However, when she actually participated in the ritual before her marriage, her experience was so unexpectedly positive that she says she now really enjoys the preparatory bath before the actual immersion.

Mrs. E told me that the most important part of this observance was not necessarily the act of going to the mikveh, because in itself, this simply becomes part of her personal routine. She reported that her experience of the ritual is not always spiritual, although she found the immersion before her marriage to be so. What she values most about this practice is the way that the rules and the reasons for them make a lot of psychological sense. She cited the period of separation, niddah, as valuable because it takes the stress off sexuality and requires both partners, male and female, to devise and focus on other forms of communication. In her experience, this does create respect between spouses.

Mrs. D, who is from a Conservative background, told me that although she

thinks "the idea that a woman is "impure" once she gets her period and until she goes to the mikveh is a little dated and derogatory" (April 30, 2006), she is still able to "appreciate the symbolism of using fresh running water as a way to cleanse your spirit and your body. Regarding the laws of niddah, which she herself does not follow, she nevertheless said that she can "appreciate the idea that a husband and wife are separate from each other for a certain period each month." (April 30, 2006) She acknowledged that it has the potential for "the couple each to have more space" and that it could make "the coming together after the mikveh that much more exciting and special." (April 30, 2006)

Mrs. E explained niddah and mikveh to me this way. She believes that men and women are different, though not in a "one is better than the other" way. In her view, the Torah understands and allows for this difference, including the fact that women generally have more self-control than men. Mikveh practice, and the laws of niddah that surround it, foster moderation and respect in a marriage. Her perception and experience is that this continued observance allows the wife to be a separate person in her own right and not "merely a sexual object". (March 27, 2008) Her conclusion is that "mikveh practice puts women in touch with their own bodies in a very real and positive way, in that it brings an awareness to the monthly cycles, the potential of renewal and the power of creation within". (March 27, 2008)

My post-menopausal interviewee, Mrs. A, had a similar experience and

outlook. She told me that like many other practices in Judaism, mikveh observance gave her a specific awareness of time and her place in the scheme of things. Because of its specifically physical overtones, mikveh ritual and the preceding period of niddah gave her "an awareness of my own female body that heightened my sense of self-respect and enhanced the growth of respect between myself and my husband". (March 26, 2008) In her experience, "the contrast between the period of separation prior to the mikveh ritual and the resumption of intimacy afterwards resulted in a positive renewal of the marriage". (March 26, 2008)

Liliana is a teacher and a member of a Reconstructionist community. Her country of origin is South America, where she was involved in teaching conversion classes. She also served as a "witness/companion" and an officiant at mikveh rituals prior to weddings, as well as at ceremonies for the purpose of conversion.

She told me that there was no actual mikveh in the small community where she lived, but the rabbi in charge wanted the ritual performed and she wanted to be involved. They arranged for the ritual to take place at a hot springs, at times and on days when there would be no one else there. One bath was blocked off and Liliana told me that, for the purposes of her community, all the water was "mayim chayim" (living water) as required. She pointed out that even though the mikveh was taking place in a spa, sacred space was created and the experience, as well as the intention, was therefore quite different.

Liliana talked very freely about her background and her feelings about mikveh. She grew up in what she described as "a family of agnostics" (June 26, 2008) and learned about the practice through study later in life. Her understanding of mikveh ritual is that originally, it centered on purification and hygiene for both sexes and for this reason, she firmly believes that the practice should be used more by men than by women (since, as she explained with a smile, men of all ages from puberty on, are prone to nocturnal emissions). However, she realizes that both the system and the ritual were developed by men and that, over time, the practice became focused on women. She reminded me that much of Jewish practice is home-based and that the idea of purification was a radical one when it was first presented, especially since it came out of a predominantly desert and nomadic culture. She noted that religions do not exist in a vacuum. The Christian misperception of women being "dirty" eventually rubbed off on Judaism to some extent and Liliana acknowledged that during the Middle Ages, the mikvaot themselves were not always pleasant or even particularly clean. She told me the change that occurred during the Enlightenment 19th century Europe accelerated after World War II, when there began to be more focus on what could be reclaimed and "resignified", especially with regard to what is relevant to women. Mikveh, of course, figured largely in this new way of looking at things. Instead of the ritual being performed because women are filthy, Liliana told me that it began to be used as a rite of passage. This use of mikveh is not prevalent among the Orthodox, but the Reform and Reconstructionist communities have taken it up in many places. Liliana went on to say that some people, including

herself, began to rewrite mikveh ceremonies to apply them to miscarriage, abortion, divorce, healing from abuse, birth, physical healing, etc. She told me of one incident where she personally accompanied a woman through an immersion ceremony for healing from the death of an adult child. Her perception is that through these innovations, mikveh ritual has begun to symbolize primarily a new beginning on many more levels than the renewal of marital relations after menstruation.

Liliana describes herself as "observant in a liberal sense" (June 26, 2008), which for her, means that she attends the morning minyan at her synagogue and sometimes takes part in a form of meditation known as Jewish mindfulness. She said that she keeps some of the laws of kashrut (she doesn't eat pork or shellfish), but her own feeling is that a lot of the prohibitions are "enforcing men's laws". (June 26, 2008) In summing up, she told me "Observance is more in your attitude than in your ritual." (June 26, 2008)

Mrs. B, a young woman with small children, also had something to say on the subject of religious practice. She told me that the idea that some women have about bad things happening if the ritual surrounding mikveh is not done exactly right sometimes makes her "a little bit paranoid". (May 29,2008) She explained that the woman who taught her about niddah and mikveh once omitted some part of the ritual and was concerned enough that she immediately went to the rabbi to find out if this was a serious problem. My interviewee said that the health of a

person's religious practice depends very much on how that practice is approached. The type of literalism exemplified by her teacher's actions is not the approach she herself has chosen.

Another woman, Mrs. G, who is a member of a Reconstructionist synagogue, who has never incorporated mikveh practice into her life, had an interesting story that showed a progression in her thinking about this ritual. She told me that her father "started out as an Orthodox Jew and then he fell from grace". (March 21, 2006) I asked her how it was possible to do that and her response was that "he found other ways of thinking about the Jewish religion..." (March 21, 2006) She went on to explain that mikveh was not something he would ever have forced her to do.

However, her prospective husband was the first male grandchild of a very Orthodox Jewish grandfather, and "all of the cousins who were married before...were all female and they all had to go to the mikveh or the grandfather would not have participated" in the wedding ceremony. (March 21, 2006) My interviewee was the first girl coming into that family from outside and she recounted telling her own father in no uncertain terms, "If he [her fiancé's grandfather] asks me to go to the mikveh, I'm not going to go. There's no way I'm going to go to the mikveh." (March 21, 2006) She told me this was because, by that time in her life, she had some thoughts about the idea of the purity and the impurity of women and it didn't sit well with her. However, her fiancé's

grandfather never did insist that she go to mikveh before the marriage and as she put it, "I never went and nobody said anything to me about it...they didn't talk about it and that was it." (March 21, 2006)

She went on to say that she maintained her negative perception of the ritual for many years even though she had Orthodox friends who told her "it's a wonderful thing in the sense that after you've gone to the mikveh after you've had your period and you come back home, with your husband it's kind of a honeymoon..." (March 21, 2006) She told me she could partly understand this but continued to feel that "somehow, beneath all that, there's this implicit idea of dirtiness and cleanliness and perhaps the second-class status of women ...this feeling of looking down your nose at women." (March 21, 2006) She said that she always had a kind of antipathy to this ritual and explained, "someone would mention the word mikveh and I would maybe make a comment or roll my eyes..." (March 21, 2006)

However, a year before I interviewed her, she was asked to attend a conversion ceremony for another woman. This, of course, involved ritual immersion and my interviewee went to the mikveh in Cote St-Luc, Montreal. She told me that the ceremony (which she had never witnessed before) changed her perception of this practice. Whereas she had always pictured the mikveh as "this big huge swimming pool", she found in reality that "it was a tiny little pool, no bigger than the size of this room" (the dining room in her home). (March 21,

2006) A female rabbi officiated at the ritual and my interviewee found the entire experience very moving. She told me, "...the woman who was being converted had this beautiful head of long blonde hair that comes down to her waist and she got undressed and got into the mikveh and there she was with her hair falling down all around her...And I swear I could have filled that mikveh with my tears, it was just such a beautiful ceremony." (March 21, 2006) Following that, her views about mikveh changed. As she told meat the end of our interview, "I can see there are other uses for the mikveh and they're beautiful." (March 21, 2006)

She also remembered being in Israel and going to Masada, where she found that "In every large archeological remain that we went to, there was a mikveh." (March 21, 2006) She realized that this ritual has its roots in antiquity and found that her negativity was far less pronounced than it had been. As she said to me towards the end of the interview, "young people tend to feel very strongly about things and have very strong opinions ... I do somehow see that there's a very good use for it [mikveh]." (March 21, 2006)

Mrs. B explained how she went through a time of spiritual searching prior to returning to observant Judaism. On one retreat, during which she said her own tradition, including the question of mikveh, had been very much on her mind, she came to the realization that woman have the potential every month to create life. When this doesn't occur, menstruation is a form of death, at which point, in her opinion, there is a possibility of connection with "the other side" (May 28, 2008),

which she told me is not widely encouraged in Judaism. She says she believes that women have the opportunity and the potential of going closer to the spirit world than men do because they are givers of life, and she also thinks that the idea of impurity connected to mikveh practice may come from this possibility of being associated with death (although she acknowledges that this is only one aspect among many others). For herself, she says she tries to get at what she refers to as the "core of the practice" (May 28, 2008) and in this regard, told me a little about the mystical interpretation of Hebrew texts, where basic understanding is only the first level that most people never get beyond. The area of symbolism is obviously important to Mrs. B, especially with regard to her own observance of mikveh ritual.

She went on to tell me that overall, her experience has been positive, although with 2 small children, it is now harder to fit the practice into her schedule. However, she said that this obstacle also has a positive side because it forces her to make time for herself which she told me is a good thing from a number of angles – physical, psychological and spiritual. She says that she values this "alone time". (May 28, 2008) She finds it quiet and peaceful and sees an element of transformation in the immersion itself.

This young woman described herself as "traditionally observant" and "modern Orthodox". (May 28, 2008) With regard to the subject of niddah, she told me that she personally likes the flow of separation and togetherness, although

she is aware that it's different for everyone. She acknowledged the tension that can exist during the time of separation because the couple must find alternative ways of communicating, but in her experience, this time can also be used productively to work through old issues that may surface. She told me that she believes if the couple has this perception, niddah can be a good time to identify problem areas in the relationship.

Mrs. B also spoke about a one-time out of the ordinary use of mikveh. She explained that when it was time for her to immerse before her wedding, she found she was still in niddah. She did not want to postpone the marriage but she also wanted to go through the traditional mikveh ritual. She found a rabbi who gave her permission to immerse with the provision that she do it "differently" from the regular practice. She couldn't remember exactly how she arranged this (she thinks she may have left out one of the prayers), but she was grateful to be able to do it at all.

Another interviewee, Mrs. H, who refers to herself as an Orthodox Jewish woman who attends a Lubavitch shul, told me that she is mikveh-observant "most of the time". (June 17, 2008) She explained that, during the seasons when there are lots of parties and she's just had her hair and her nails done, "then it's really inconvenient to "undo" all that for the mikveh" (June 17, 2008), but even under these circumstances, she always observes niddah, the period of separation.

Her experience is mainly positive. She said that, for her, "it's great to keep the clean days" (June 17, 2008) (the 7 days after the menstrual flow stops, during which there is no bleeding), because it increases the excitement she feels when she returns to her husband after going to the mikveh. Like several other of the women I interviewed, she told me that the ritual immersion was a personal experience and she did not find that it gave her a sense of connection to other Jewish women or to the community.

In terms of learning about the laws of niddah and mikveh observance, she told me that this happened only when she changed synagogues after her marriage. She went to mikveh before her wedding but did not keep up the practice until she began going to a Lubavitch shul where she received instruction from the rabbi's wife.

I spoke with all of these women about the way that mikveh ritual is negatively viewed and they each told me that this way of thinking exists within the Jewish community as well as outside of it.

Mrs. A said that while she understood the negative perception that mikveh devalues and subjugates women, this viewpoint represents only one aspect. She thinks there is a need to look at the bigger picture where this practice is concerned and try to understand its ability "to situate a woman in place and in time." (March 26, 2008) Far from being a demeaning ritual, she strongly believes that this

practice fosters respect for women and promotes "a reverence for the sanctity of life." (March 26, 2008) Her final comment with regard to negative ideas about mikveh was that "without experience, it is difficult to grasp the full meaning of any ritual." (March 26, 2008)

On the same topic, Betty ended her interview by telling me that she has had conversations with a number of Jewish women who dislike the whole idea of mikveh. In these circumstances, she really enjoys talking about her own positive experiences since she personally finds this ritual to be very empowering.

Mrs. C, who is from a Reform background and now describes herself as "just Jewish", told me did not go to the mikveh before her wedding, although this was a common practice, even among non-observant women. She told me that she simply does not feel connected to this ritual, and the idea of "not being clean" has always been a problem for her. (June 22, 2006) At this point in the interview, we discussed how the focus of the terms "clean" and "unclean" had shifted from the concept of ritual purity to women's physical bodies. However, my interviewee maintained that, for her, it is "the interpretation of the purpose behind the practice that's an issue, not the actual immersion itself." (June 22, 2006)

Mrs. I, who also refers to herself as "just Jewish" stated that, "When I knew nothing about the meaning of the ritual but only of its existence, I found it to be 'disgusting'. It would not have been anything that I would consider doing."

(March 25, 2008) To date, she has never taken part in mikveh ritual and says that even though "I went to afternoon Hebrew school for many years, ...I felt that I learned nothing of the rituals and their significance." (March 25, 2008) This woman continues to feel "a very strong identity with Judaism", and went on to tell me that she has attended study classes in order to learn "whatever I can about the meaning behind the rituals". (March 25, 2008) She can now "appreciate the significance of rituals and the ... benefit once can derive from observing them (March 25, 2008)"; however, she finds it "hard to implement them now" (March 25, 2008) since she was not raised in an observant family and has no foundational context. She is aware of a sense of sorrow and loss about her own lack of understanding in this area because it has meant that she has "not been able to transfer this knowledge of Judaism" to her children. (March 25, 2008)

Still another young woman, Mrs. F, told me that although she "goes to an Orthodox synagogue" because of family tradition, she considers herself "to be traditional and not an Orthodox Jew by any means." (April 1, 2008) She has never been to a mikveh and says, "I am not religious, but I am a traditional person and going to the mikveh has never been part of my family's traditions. Also, I do not consider myself to be "un-pure" when menstruating and therefore do not feel that I need to "cleanse" myself afterwards." (April 1, 2008) She told me clearly that she has no plans "to ever go to a mikveh" and that it "is not something I believe in." (April 1, 2008) She went on to say, "I would probably feel inconvenienced if I was made to go." (April 1, 2008) On the other hand, she also

made it clear that "I don't look down on people who go [to mikveh] (but I do hope that they don't view themselves as unclean), it's just not something that applies to my life." (April 1, 2008) Regarding the laws of niddah, like mikveh, she told me that they "have no place in my life" and in fact, "I don't really truly know what they are and I'm not really interested in learning about them for personal use." (April 1, 2008)

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will be reviewing the material from the interviews, with the goal of organizing the results into categories for the purpose of analysis. I will be looking at similarities and differences in the experiences and attitudes of the women with whom I spoke, with a view to making correlations between the results of the interviews and the information contained in my textual sources.

4.2 General Similarities

Of the twelve women I interviewed, nine of them had positive experiences or ideas about mikveh. This is interesting in itself, since only six of these women were mikveh-observant on a regular basis. Betty, Mrs. A, Mrs. B, Mrs. E, Mrs. H and Mrs. J are all practising Orthodox women, whereas Liliana and Mrs. G are both members of a Reconstructionist congregation, and Mrs. D belongs to a Conservative synagogue.

The six women who are or have been mikveh-observant fall into two categories with regard to age. Both Mrs. A and Mrs. J are post-menopausal and have grown children. These two women are also the only ones who reported learning about the laws of niddah and mikveh ritual from their mothers. The other four – Mrs. B, Mrs. D, Mrs. I and Betty – are all younger and are still raising and/or having children. Each of these four women explained that this information came from an outside source. Betty attended formal classes at an institute in Israel specifically designed to teach women; the other

three learned about the laws and the practice through reading, instructions from their rabbis' wives or classes at their synagogues.

The three non-observant women each had a different experience and a slightly different attitude towards mikveh practice, although as previously stated, this was generally positive. Mrs. D learned about the practice from a friend who was Lubavitch. She immersed prior to her wedding and felt that she was washing away her past in order to start a new life with her husband. Later in the interview, she explained that although she did not remain mikveh-observant, she still appreciates the symbolism of "living water" as a renewal for both body and spirit, and she also acknowledged that the laws of niddah, which she does not follow, have the potential to enhance husband-wife relationships.

Mrs. G grew up with what she described as a pronounced antipathy to the concept of mikveh. She felt that the practice perpetuated the idea that women were somehow second-class citizens by virtue of the bodily function of menstruation and the requirement to be cleansed afterwards. However, later in her life, she witnessed the immersion of a convert and found the ritual to be extremely moving. Her views about mikveh subsequently became more positive when she realized that this ritual had other applications aside from the one that had troubled her so much. Her negativity decreased further after she visited Masada and noted that there were mikvaot in every large archeological remain on the tour. She realized at that point how tightly mikveh practice was woven into Jewish history.

Of the three non mikveh-observant women, Liliana's ideas and experiences were the most positive. She grew up in a non-religious family and learned about the practice later in life through independent study. Her statements in the interview revealed a deep knowledge and understanding of the origin and development of mikveh practice and although she herself does not observe this ritual, she is profoundly appreciative of its use, both for conversion and for rites of passage. Liliana is one of a number of women in the Reform and Reconstructionist communities who have reclaimed mikveh ritual for such life events as miscarriage, abortion, divorce and healing from physical illness. For her, mikveh is a positive symbol of new beginnings on many more levels than the resumption of marital intimacy.

4.3 General Differences

In this section, I will discuss the different attitudes expressed by the other three interviewees: Mrs. C, Mrs. F and Mrs. I. All of them reported varying degrees of negativity about the concept and practice of mikveh. This group was composed of women in mid-life. Two of them (Mrs. C and Mrs. I) are married and one (Mrs. F) is divorced. Two referred to themselves as "just Jewish" (Mrs. C and Mrs. I) and one said that she attends an Orthodox synagogue because of tradition, although she is not particularly observant (Mrs. F).

Mrs. C. and Mrs. F. both grew up in homes where the practice of mikveh was not valued. Consequently, they learned little or nothing about it in either a family or a more formal setting, such as Hebrew School. Mrs. I told me that although she did attend

Hebrew School in the afternoon for many years, she felt that she learned nothing about the rituals or their meanings.

Mrs. C, who was raised in the Reform tradition and now refers to herself as "just Jewish", admitted that her knowledge of mikveh was sketchy, at best. Most of what she knew about the ritual came from a mystery novel whose story centred on a fictional mikveh in Brooklyn. She told me that the idea of immersion was not an issue, but that her aversion came from the idea that she, as a woman, was somehow not clean. This perception, which relates back to the interpretation of the purpose, rather than the practice itself, was primarily responsible for her negative attitude towards the ritual.

Mrs. I, who also says she is "just Jewish", expressed a similar view of mikveh. She told me that even before she understood fully what it meant, she found the very existence of such a ritual to be, in her words, "disgusting". Even though she has now attended study classes to learn about the deeper meanings behind rituals such as mikveh, she said she has only an intellectual appreciation of them and the potential benefits they might bring.

Mrs. F was the most negative of the three women. Although she attends an Orthodox synagogue, she refers to herself as "traditional" and made it clear to me that by no means is she an Orthodox Jew. She was aware of the concept and practice of mikveh while growing up, but it was not something to which her family attached any value. She told me that she cannot relate to this ritual and has no plans to ever participate in it. Like

Mrs C and Mrs. I, she has a major problem with the idea that a woman becomes impure or unclean through menstruation.

4.4 Comparison and Contrast of Specific Areas

In this section, I will focus on a number of different points that were raised during the interviews. I will be looking for similarities and differences among my interviewees, and I will also be referring back to the textual sources in order to find out where they are relevant to the women's thoughts and experiences of mikveh.

4.4.1 Masada

Both Mrs. A and Mrs. G mentioned the importance of Masada in connection with mikveh. Mrs. A is a modern Orthodox woman who was mikveh-observant throughout her childbearing years, whereas Mrs. G is from a Reconstructionist community and has never been to mikveh. However, the presence of mikvaot in the ruins of Masada was a point of connection for each of these women. For Mrs. A, it served as a reminder of all the Jewish women who had fulfilled this commandment over the centuries and who had done so in difficult and often dangerous situations. For Mrs. G, seeing the mikvaot at Masada and realizing how deeply this practice is rooted in the Jewish tradition was a major factor in changing her negative perception of mikveh.

4.4.2 Living Jewishly

Mrs. A. and Mrs. J both stated that their regular observance of mikveh had

been something that contributed to their awareness of their place in Judaism. Mrs. A said that the cyclic nature of the practice created a way for her to, in her own words, "live Jewishly", while Mrs J told me that the ritual was woven into her life and her identity, and was as much an expression of her Orthodox beliefs and lifestyle as was wearing a long skirt and covering her head.

Mrs. A and Mrs. J both exhibited a very down-to-earth approach to mikveh and appeared to have made it an integral part of their lives with a degree of comfort that was greater than what I found with the other interviewees, who were younger and still raising families. I cannot be completely certain that this is a generational difference, since I have no way of knowing how Mrs. A and Mrs. J would have responded to my questions had they been in a similar situation to the other women with whom I spoke. However, it was a noticeable difference and I have therefore recorded it.

4.4.3 Connections: Historical or Personal?

Of the six mikveh-observant women interviewed, three of them stated specifically that whatever sense of connection they experienced from this practice was primarily personal rather than historical. Betty and Mrs. B both told me that mikveh observance is an important part of their lives but it is extremely personal. Neither of them were aware of any sense of a wider connection to the community or to other Jewish women, although Mrs. B laughed and said that she likely would be conscious of this in the future now that we had talked about it.

Mrs. J said that she was aware of the historical connection to other Jewish women as a concept, but that this was not part of her experience or something that had much influence on her own practice of this ritual.

Mrs. A was the only woman I interviewed who specifically spoke about mikveh ritual giving her a sense of being part of a long chain of Jewish women, as well as an appreciation for the hardships and danger that many of them had to face over the centuries in order to observe this commandment. Her experience resonates with the statements Ukeles makes in "Mikva Dreams" where she notes that this ritual allows the woman "to go down into, to be swallowed by the people's living waters, to come back to life just as her people have done for so many thousands of years." (220)

The other women, including those who are non mikveh-observant, did not mention anything about a sense of connection to the wider community or to other Jewish women in relation to this observance. In fact, two of the non-observant women said that they either felt absolutely no connection to the ritual (Mrs. F) or that it simply had no place in their lives (Mrs. D).

The combined experiences of these women are more or less in line with Marmon's findings in "Reflections on Contemporary Miqveh Practice" (232-254). Marmon noted that only twenty-eight per cent of her interviewees said that participating in mikveh ritual gave them a special sense of connection to Judaism

and to women in the wider community. Unlike Marmon's, my own research included women from other than the Orthodox tradition and I had a much smaller group of respondents. Only two of the twelve women whom I interviewed spoke about knowledge and/or experience of a connection other than a personal one.

4.4.4 Halakhic Obligation

Not surprisingly, the Orthodox women, Mrs. A, Mrs. B, Mrs. E, Mrs. H, Mrs. J and Betty all mentioned the importance of halakhah as a motivation for mikveh observance. However, the emphasis that each of these women placed on Jewish law was not the same.

Mrs. A acknowledged the primacy of the legal obligation but also told me that, for her, continuity and the manner in which mikveh ritual situated her in space and in time were also very important factors. Mrs. J said that although halakhah was the foundation of her practice, mikveh observance was also an important way for her to regularly express her Jewish faith. Betty discussed halakhah in the wider context of niddah and said that even though it was sometimes difficult to abide by the rules of separation, she followed the law, not only because it was an obligation but because in her experience, it represents a system that works. Mrs. E commented on halakhah in response to a question about innovative or non-traditional uses of mikveh. She told me that she sees no harm in them as long as the reasons for doing them do not become more important than halakhah, which, for her, is the main motivation for this ritual

practice. The place of halakhah in Mrs. H's life was slightly different. She said she always observed the laws of niddah and usually participated in mikveh practice, so there appeared to be a split in the application of halakhah as it applies to these two areas.

The responses of these women are similar to what Marmon reported in "The Culture of Ritual Immersion", where she states that "no two women follow the laws in precisely the same manner and no two women are effected by observance in exactly the same way." (153) Meacham reached the same conclusion, noting that "among the Orthodox in North America...observance of menstrual laws varies, as does miqveh usage." (34)

4.4.5 Learning

The women I interviewed did not all learn about mikveh practice and the laws of niddah in the same way. Among the observant women, only Mrs. A and Mrs. J said that they followed the examples and instructions of their mothers and grandmothers. Mrs. A added that her secondary sources of information were personal reading and conversations with the rabbi's wife. Before her marriage, Betty took formal classes at an institute in Israel that is specifically designed to teach women about these practices. Similarly, Mrs. B, who was not raised in an observant family, found an Ultra-Orthodox woman who gave her the instruction she required. Mrs. H told me that her introduction to mikveh practice happened only after she married, although she did follow the

tradition of immersing before her wedding. It was not until she began attending a Lubavitch shul that she actually received any formal education about mikveh and the laws of niddah. This instruction was given by the rabbi's wife.

Mrs. E, who by her own admission did not "grow up religious", did her own research into mikveh ritual. (March 27, 2008) Initially, she was troubled by the terms "clean" and "unclean", but through her reading and conversations with other women, she became convinced that these words did not mean the same in a religiously observant context as they did in everyday speech. Mrs. E's difficulty with the terms "tum'ah" and "toharah" is exactly what Rachel Adler discusses in her article of the same name. She emphasizes that these Hebrew terms do not mean "dirty" and "clean" respectively in any sense related to physical hygiene, but were originally used to describe a person's (not just a woman's) fitness to enter the Temple and perform or take part in ritual activities. In fact, since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., those particular rituals can no longer be held and Adler makes it clear that today, all Jews, male and female, are ritually "tun'ah", unfit to participate in Temple activity. (119-121) In a similar vein, Janis Rubin wrote, "I had scoffed at the ritual, which seemed to perpetuate the religious myth that women in general, and menstruating women in particular, were "unclean". But all of this is based on a misinterpretation of the mysterious biblical word "*tameh*", which has no equivalent in English. Several of my life experiences...led me to interpret the word *tameh* to mean "spiritually vulnerable". (11)

The non-observant women had different degrees of knowledge. Mrs. C told me that she had never formally learned anything about mikveh and that the little she did know came from a mystery novel that is set in a haredi community in the United States. Mrs. D had learned about the practice from a Lubavitch friend. She immersed prior to her wedding but has not continued the observance. Mrs. F has never received any formal instruction and is extremely negative about mikveh observance. She told me that the laws of niddah have no place in her life and she is "not really interested in learning about them for personal use". Mrs. G grew up in a family that moved from the Orthodox to the Reform tradition. Her knowledge of mikveh has accumulated over her lifetime and through her personal experiences, although she herself has never taken part in the ritual. Mrs. I said that although she had gone to Hebrew school for many years, she learned nothing of the rituals or their significance. As an adult, she has attended classes in order to learn more about the meaning behind mikveh observance and the laws of niddah, but she says it is difficult to act on this knowledge at this point in her life.

4.4.6 Enriching...

Of the twelve interviewees, five of the six Orthodox women told me that their lives were enriched by the observance of mikveh ritual and the laws of niddah. Mrs A said that the specifically physical focus of mikveh gave her a positive awareness of her own female body, which resulted in an increase in self-respect. Speaking of niddah, she also said that the time of separation contributed to the growth of self-respect between her husband and herself, and that the

resumption of intimacy after immersion became a regular renewal of the marriage.

Mrs. E agreed that mikveh practice and the laws of niddah foster respect in a marital relationship, as well as a sense of moderation. She believes it is an important aspect of these observances that they provide for the woman to be seen as a separate person and not "merely as a sexual object". (March 27, 2008) Like Mrs. A, she finds that mikveh ritual puts her in touch with her body and with her own power and potential for renewal in an ongoing and very positive way.

Mrs. B emphasized the mystical and spiritual aspects of mikveh practice. She explained briefly that, in the Jewish tradition, the mystical interpretation of religious texts sees basic understanding as the first and foundational level where most people are content to stay. She told me that she recognizes that there are many aspects and many levels of significance to mikveh observance, and that she always makes a conscious attempt to get at what she refers to as the "core of the practice". (May 28, 2008) On a more practical note, Mrs. B also said that she finds the period of niddah to be useful as a time for working through any past issues that can surface during this time when the ordinary ways of communicating are significantly altered. In her own experience, niddah can be an excellent opportunity for a couple to identify and confront areas in their relationship that are problematic.

Mrs. H, who is generally (but not always) mikveh-observant, told me that the ritual helped to renew her marriage relationship on a regular basis. In terms of Betty's own life and marriage, even though it is difficult to maintain the laws of niddah after childbirth, when she has prolonged bleeding, she does so because she believes that "this is a system that works." (May 14, 2008) She explained that she finds this ritual to be very empowering for women.

Among the women who are not mikveh-observant, Mrs. G and Mrs. I both had, at the very least, an intellectual appreciation for the potential benefits of the practice, while Mrs. D, who immersed before her wedding but did not retain the practice, said that it was a way to cleanse herself of her past and mark a new beginning in her life. Liliana's experiences and opinions differed somewhat from those of mikveh-observant and non mikveh-observant women alike. In the Reconstructionist community of which she is a part, mikveh ritual is not an obligation. However, Liliana has been involved for many years in alternative mikveh ceremonies and has found them to be very enriching, both for the women who participate as well as for herself, as she accompanies them through the process.

Some of the women's comments resonate with the textual sources cited earlier in this thesis. Mrs. A and Mrs. E both spoke about an increase in self-respect and the ability of these observances to allow the woman to be a separate person and not just a sexual object. In "Jewish and Female", Suzan Weideman

Schneider states that there is a complete individual at the heart of the laws surrounding mikveh. "Every month the practicing woman and her husband are reminded that she is more than an appendage to him, that she does not exist [solely] to serve his sexual needs." (206-207) Schneider's concluding statement is relevant also, since all the mikveh-observant women reported a positive effect on the marriage as a result of their observance: "Yet this system also allows enough time together for the couple to grow sexually." (206-207)

4.4.7 ...But Not Always Easy

Although seven of the twelve women I interviewed reported that mikveh observance had a positive effect on at least one area in their lives, four of them also mentioned the difficulties involved in maintaining this practice. Mrs. A told me that going on vacation could become quite complicated because of the need to make plans that either took her menstrual cycle into account or ensured the availability of a mikveh wherever she and her family were going. Privacy was also an issue, whether travelling or at home, especially when her children were younger. Betty's area of difficulty is more related to the laws of niddah. She said that she finds the necessity to remain apart from her husband after childbirth very hard to deal with since she generally has prolonged bleeding for up to three months. Mrs. B said that now that she has two small children, it is much more difficult to fit the practice into her schedule than it was previously, but she also went on to explain that even this obstacle has a positive side in that it forces her to make time for herself. As a young wife and mother, Mrs. B says she really values

this "alone time" (May 28, 2008) and finds an element of transformation in the immersion. Mrs. H, who told me that she was mikveh-observant most of the time, explained that when there are a lot of parties to celebrate events such as weddings, graduations and so on, the ritual becomes, in her words, "really inconvenient". (June 17, 2008) One of the requirements prior to immersing is the scrupulous cleaning of the entire body and the removal of anything, such as nail polish, that might get between the woman and the water in the mikveh. Mrs. H said that if it was time to go to mikveh and she had just had her hair and nails done for an event, it was too much work to undo all that for the sake of immersion.

Referring back to Marmon's study in "The Culture of Ritual Immersion", ninety-six per cent of her interviewees spoke about negative aspects of mikveh practice; however, seventy-two per cent of them clearly felt that this observance had a positive influence overall on their lives. (154) My results differ slightly. Of my six observant interviewees, four of them mentioned negative aspects of mikveh observance, but all six of them believed that this practice was beneficial both to them personally as women and to their marital relationships.

4.4.8 Change in Perception

Two of my interviewees spoke about a definite change in the way they thought about mikveh practice. Mrs. G is a member of a Reconstructionist community and has never participated in mikveh ritual. Growing up in a family that changed from the Orthodox to the Reform tradition, she had some knowledge

of the practice as well as some very negative opinions about it. As a young woman, she viewed this ritual as a way to perpetuate the idea that women were somehow second-class citizens because of their menstrual cycles, which are a normal function of their bodies. She did not buy into any of it. However, as she said to me towards the end of our interview, "Young people tend to feel very strongly about things and have very strong opinions". (March 21, 2006) Later in life, she had two experiences that caused a change in her outlook.

While on a trip to Israel, she visited Masada and had the realization about mikveh practice that I have discussed previously in Chapter 3. Some years later, back in Montreal, she was asked to attend the conversion ceremony of a young woman, which was held in a mikveh in Cote St-Luc. Mrs. G found the ceremony, which she had never actually witnessed before, to be extremely moving. She told me that although she still has no personal desire to observe this ritual, she now realizes that there are positive uses for it.

Mrs. E explained that she became more observant in early adulthood, having grown up in a non-religious household. She told me that, at first, it was difficult for her to see the value of mikveh ritual. She had a problem with the idea of menstruation creating impurity, especially since this process was part of God's creation and a natural function of a woman's body. After doing some research on her own and discussing her concerns with other friends, she decided that in the context of its religious usage, "impure" does not carry the same negative force as

"unclean" in the way that the term would ordinarily apply to the body. Here again I find echoes of Rachel Adler's statements in "Tum'ah and Toharah" as well as the ideas expressed by Janis Rubin in "The Mikvah Project". Mrs. E said that once she had resolved this problem to her own satisfaction, she was able to begin to appreciate and value mikveh observance.

4.4.9 Innovation

Of the twelve women I interviewed only two have experienced the use of mikveh in non-traditional ways. Mrs. B said that she had one out-of-the-ordinary mikveh ritual. The night before her wedding, when it was time for her to do the traditional immersion, she realized that she was still in niddah. Not wanting to postpone the marriage and at the same time, desiring to participate in the customary ritual, she sought out a rabbi who gave her permission to immerse. His sole condition was that she perform the ritual differently than usual. Mrs. B thinks that she omitted one of the prayers that are normally said.

Liliana was an excellent source of concrete examples of innovative uses for mikveh ritual. Although she herself is a member of a Reconstructionist synagogue and non-mikveh observant, Liliana's keen interest and involvement in alternative uses for this ritual have spanned a number of years and two continents. Her country of origin is South America, where she taught conversion classes and facilitated at pre-wedding ceremonies, both of which included immersion. She has also designed new mikveh rituals for rite of passage events in women's lives,

such as miscarriage, abortion, divorce and healing from physical illness. She spoke to me about a powerful experience of writing a ceremony for healing from the death of an adult child and then accompanying the woman through the ritual. However, since moving to Montreal, Liliana has found it almost impossible for members of Reform and Reconstructionist congregations to have access to the existing mikvaot because of denominational misunderstandings. This has not, however, lessened her interest in innovative uses for mikveh ritual.

Liliana's experiences and her responses to the interview questions resonate with much of what Rabbi Elyse Goldstein has written in "ReVisions". Liliana's sense of mikveh as being a multi-faceted ritual with many more applications that the final necessary act before the resumption of heterosexual marital intimacy is echoed by Goldstein's statement, "We can appropriate the "spiritual cleansing" properties of immersion, called in Hebrew *tevilah*, for a variety of other occasions" besides the traditional one that is linked to menstruation. (128) Goldstein speaks about "taking back the water" (131), and explains this is necessary because "the water belongs to us" (131), while so many of the other rituals that Jewish women have recently taken on have been borrowed from men. In this statement, I hear echoes of Liliana's observation that so much of Jewish practice is "enforcing men's laws" and that there is a need to "resignify" the use of mikveh for women. (June 26, 2008)

4.4.10 Summary of Analysis and Contribution of the Research

My motivation for doing the research that resulted in this thesis was to discover what Jewish women thought and felt about mikveh, both as a concept and as a practice. I wanted to discover how great a role individual perception played in the women's understanding and approach to this ritual. For this reason, I chose to gather my information through interviews, so that the women's first-hand experiences could not only be heard, but also compared with some of the existing literature on this subject.

The references to my textual sources in this section have usually confirmed what the women told me during the interviews. With regard to the number of my interviewees who spoke about negative aspects of mikveh practice versus the benefits, my results are generally more positive than Marmon's (The Culture of Ritual Immersion and Contemporary Miqveh Practice); however, since she interviewed a great many more women than I did, this may not be a significant statistical variation.

In the foregoing sections of this chapter, I have discussed my interviewees' responses in a number of areas with a view to answering my primary question: what role does perception play in the way that women generally address and understand mikveh practice, and what factors affect that perception. To this end, I have used the women's responses to explore whether mikveh ritual gives them a sense of historical or personal connection to other

Jewish women or to the wider community; I have discussed the influence of halakhah on the observance of this ritual, and I have looked at what place learning or questioning might have in how these women understand mikveh practice.

Through the filter of my interviewees' experiences, I have discussed the positive and negative aspects of mikveh observance, actual changes in individual perception about the practice, and innovations or alternative uses for this ritual. While the stated purpose of this thesis is the discovery of the importance of perception in how Jewish women think about or approach this ritual, the real contribution is, I think, the fact that everything in this section and the one that precedes it is based on the results of my interviews, which reflect the women's own ideas, feelings and experiences. The contribution of my research, then, is the women's own voices, their stories told in their words.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

In the foregoing chapters, I have given a brief, but I hope, foundational history of mikveh practice from its scriptural origins to its contemporary usage among Canadian Jewish women in Montreal. I have demonstrated what I see as a progression from the biblical concepts of ritual impurity and the means of dealing with that as found in the book of Leviticus to the complex and frequently misunderstood ideas that currently prevail. On a more positive note, the responses to my interview questions show that most of the Jewish women I met with are capable of dealing with these issues, either by embracing mikveh observance in the traditional manner according to halakhah, by creating new uses for the ritual or by questioning the existing perceptions of this practice. My twelve interviewees were from Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist communities, and half of them were non-mikveh-observant, yet only one woman completely rejected all aspects of mikveh practice.

As a non-Jewish woman who undertook research into mikveh practice, my status was very much that of an outsider. Mikveh ritual is a very specific and intimate area in the life of many Jewish women. Because I cannot claim membership in any Jewish community, I anticipated that this might create difficulties, especially since my chosen method of gathering information was through interviews with Jewish women. I did, in fact, encounter some obstacles, but I discovered that they were as much related to issues

of privacy as they were to the fact that I was an outsider. I would like to discuss those two issues in this final section of my thesis.

5.2 Issues of Privacy

Privacy, sometimes to the point where it might more accurately be termed secrecy, is a real concern for most, if not all mikveh-observant women, although "modesty", a traditional ideal for Jewish women, is the word that is more often used. One of my interviewees, Mrs. B, told me of an experience she had that illustrates how deeply this attitude is ingrained.

When she first moved to Montreal and started going to a mikveh, she naturally encountered other women in the waiting room and over time, had conversations with a few of them. Some months later, she and her husband were at a dinner party that was also attended by one of the women she had met at the mikveh. Mrs. B, who, as a young wife was relatively new to mikveh observance, spoke to this woman and mentioned where they had met. In the interview, she told me that although nothing was said to her directly, the silence around the table and the attitude of the woman she was speaking with let her know that she had crossed an invisible line.

I believe that this incident illustrates the extreme sense of privacy that surrounds mikveh ritual, even, and perhaps especially, among those women who are regular participants. In reviewing my research and the results of my interviews, I have found what I think may be at least one reason for this attitude.

Traditionally, mikveh ritual concerns itself with the most intimate aspects of a woman's body and her relationship to her husband. Issues of procreation are also involved, since the need to immerse follows the appearance of the woman's menses, a sign that conception has not occurred. The immersion itself takes place on the night when a woman resumes sexual relations with her husband, an act of extreme intimacy that is clearly no one else's business. Leah Lax states that this inherent nature of the ritual itself has "resulted in a culture of secrecy and modesty" (16); it is therefore not surprising that visits to the mikveh have "always been performed under cloak of night and not disclosed to anyone" (16), the idea being, once again, that it is of no concern to anyone else who goes to mikveh or when. The privacy that surrounds this ritual means that it cannot be discussed or even intimated publicly. This practice continues today, and as my interviewee's experience demonstrated, the reluctance to discuss the observance extends even to those women one might meet in the mikveh waiting room.

5.3 Insider/Outsider

The insider/outsider question follows from the embedded need for privacy, as discussed above. There is also more to this issue than the fact that I was a non-Jew. To reduce some of the situations I encountered solely to a problem of insider/outsider tensions would be simplistic, and further research has led me to believe that those tensions appear to exist to some extent even when it is an insider who becomes the observer. The following example illustrates this point.

Samuel Heilman is a practising American Orthodox Jewish male. In "Defenders

of the Faith", he gives a first hand account of his own research into the haredi community in Jerusalem. His own Jewishness, however, did not offset the fact that he was not part of an Ultra-Orthodox group. It offered him no protection against many of the same problems I encountered in my efforts, as a non-Jew, to arrange interviews with Jewish women. In his "Acknowledgements", he states that "some were suspicious of me and others looked upon me as the incarnation of all they considered wrong about contemporary civilization." (ix), but he goes on to say that most people were "wonderfully open". (ix)

In my own experience, none of the women who refused to be interviewed gave any indication that they "looked upon me as the incarnation of all they considered wrong about contemporary civilization", but, although some of them **were** Orthodox, it is true that I did not contact anyone from the Ultra-Orthodox community. However, I did get the distinct impression that many of the women were suspicious of me. Referring back to the attitudes I encountered in 2000 when I was working on the photographic essay of a mikveh, I was not totally surprised by this reaction. Part of it, I think, has its roots in the privacy issue and the fact that this ritual is simply not discussed, even among Jewish women themselves. Part of it was due to the women's uncertainty about my possible motivation: what was I going to do with any information they gave me? Part of it was probably because I was a non-Jew, an outsider, wanting to do research into what is for most of these women, a very closely guarded area. However, similar to what Heilman observed in his own situation, many of the women I contacted, and in fact, all of the ones whom I actually interviewed, were "wonderfully open". Given both the privacy concerns

and the fact that I was not part of the Jewish community, I now look back on the experience and am amazed and grateful that I was granted even the small number of interviews represented in this thesis.

5.4 Value of Individual Perception

To return to my original questions for this thesis, how greatly does the individual woman's perception of the practice of mikveh impact on her observance of this ritual? What factors contribute to that perception? How much of that perception is dependent on the woman's denomination at birth and/or her upbringing in the family? Finally, can this perception change? If so, what are the causes and are the results always the same or do they vary with the individual? In this section, I will attempt to formulate answers, based on the experiences of the women themselves as they were told to me in the interviews.

Of my twelve interviewees, only Mrs. A and Mrs. J told me that they had grown up in observant Orthodox families and had followed the traditions and examples of their mothers and grandmothers regarding mikveh practice. Although four of the remaining women were regularly mikveh-observant, all ten of them had different backgrounds and experiences and only one of the non-observant women was completely negative on the subject of mikveh.

Mrs. B and Mrs. E told me that they did not, in Mrs. E's words, "grow up religious". (March 27, 2008) As adolescents and young women, they both had reservations about the place of mikveh ritual in the life of a 20th century Jewish woman.

Today, they are wives and mothers, and mikveh-observant women who describe themselves as modern Orthodox. What events or experiences brought them to their current perceptions and understanding of mikveh practice?

During the interview, Mrs. B told me that in her approach to mikveh, she is always trying to reach what she calls the "core of the practice". (May 28, 2008) She appeared to be someone for whom the spiritual aspect is, and possibly always has been, very important. When she was a young adult, Mrs. B went through a period of what she described to me as intense spiritual searching. In a conscious attempt to discover her own path in life, she investigated a number of different faith traditions, although she made it clear in the interview that she at no time completely abandoned her Jewish roots. The turning point, epiphany, moment of truth or whatever you wish to call it occurred while she was taking part in a traditional Native North American vision quest.

Mrs. B said that questions about her own tradition, including mikveh practice, were very much on her mind as she participated in this ritual. She told me that this was when she realized, in a way that was much more personal and visceral than intellectual, that a woman's menstrual cycles are symbolic of her continuing potential to create life. When there is no conception, menstruation naturally occurs and Mrs. B sees it as a form of death, or a symbol that death, rather than life has taken place. She believes that this proximity to death creates the possibility for connection with what she called "the other side", the world of spirit. (May 28, 2008) Although she went on to explain that this concept is not widely encouraged in Judaism, Mrs. B's experiences have led her to

believe that women are potentially closer to the spiritual world than men. She also thinks that the association with death, symbolized by menstruation, is one of the reasons why the concept of impurity continues to be linked to mikveh practice. This spiritual realization was perhaps paradoxically arrived at through participation in a ritual from a different faith tradition; however, for Mrs. B, it addressed a number of issues connected with her identity as a Jewish woman and marked the beginning of her journey to a more observant lifestyle.

As a young woman, Mrs. E found herself questioning the reasons for the use of terms like "pure" and "impure" in relation to women, menstruation and mikveh practice. She told me she did not like the idea that menstruation, which is not only a natural function of a woman's body, but also part of God's creation, could make a woman "impure". In order to deal with this confusion, she did some research on her own. She also discussed her concerns with friends and came to the conclusion that in religious language, "impure" does not have the same negative force as "unclean" in the usual physical sense. Her confusion did not evaporate overnight, but the recognition of the difference in the meaning of the word in its religious context allowed her to look at mikveh practice in a new light and begin to understand and appreciate its value.

Betty's change in perception was not as dramatic as the two foregoing examples. However, it was an important one for her as she approached her marriage with the commitment to be mikveh-observant. Betty explained to me that she was uncomfortable with the idea of having to completely immerse her body. In her own words, she is "a

total shower person" (May 14, 2008), and she was concerned that this halakhic obligation, which she had every intention of fulfilling, was going to be hard work. However, after a period of instruction, she went through the traditional immersion the night before her wedding and was surprised at how positive she found the experience to be. During our interview, she told me that she now looks forward to taking a bath in preparation for the actual immersion in the mikveh.

There were also notable changes in perception within the group of non mikveh-observant women. Mrs. G, who grew up in a family that made a major shift from the Orthodox to the Reform tradition, initially had a very negative view of mikveh. In her own words, if someone mentioned the word, she would "make a comment or roll [her] eyes". (March 21, 2006) From what she told me during the interview, there were two experiences that changed her attitude.

The first was a trip to Israel that included a tour of Masada, the fortress eventually taken by the Romans in 73 CE. The tour guide pointed out a number of mikveh pools that had been discovered during the archeological excavations, and Mrs. G said that this was when she realized how old this practice was and how tightly it was woven into the fabric of Judaism. The second event occurred about a year before I interviewed her, when Mrs. G was asked to be present at a mikveh ritual to mark the conversion of a young woman. She told me that she had never even been inside a mikveh before that time and she found the entire experience to be extremely moving. She said it made her

realize that the ritual could be positive and beautiful (something she would never have considered previously), and she can now see that there are good uses for it.

Mrs. I, who identifies herself as "just Jewish", told me that when she first heard about the practice of mikveh, before she knew anything about its meaning, her reaction was that it was disgusting and not something she would ever consider doing. Although as a young girl, she went to Hebrew school in the afternoon when her regular classes had finished for the day, she has no memory of ever learning about mikveh or any other ritual. Today, as an adult, she is attending classes in order to discover the significance of these practices. During the interview, she told me that she can now appreciate the rituals, what they symbolize and the benefits of observance, but she finds it difficult to incorporate them into her life. Having grown up in a non-observant family, she feels she has no context into which she can integrate these practices.

Mrs. C comes from a Reform background but currently describes herself as "just Jewish". Her knowledge of mikveh practice is minimal and she admitted to me that most of her understanding came from a mystery novel that is set in a haredi community in the U.S. She did, however, tell me that she had trouble with the idea that a woman who had menstruated was "unclean" until she went through mikveh immersion. During the interview, we discussed the issue of purity and impurity, what it might mean in a deeper sense, and how it has affected women's ideas about mikveh practice, and Mrs. C's perception specifically. At the end of our discussion, my interviewee said that although she understood that the terminology might have a different meaning in a religious

context, she still felt that the negative connotations were the strongest. She maintained that what is important for her is "the interpretation of the purpose behind the practice....not the actual immersion itself." (June 22, 2006)

Although the preceding events do not show any overt change in Mrs. C's perceptions of mikveh ritual, the interview left her with a desire to know more about the practice. With this in mind, she phoned an observant Orthodox friend and one of the results of their conversation was that Mrs. C contacted me a few days later with a referral for an interview with that woman. She also told me that the questions I had asked her had caused her to begin to question her ideas about mikveh ritual and she intended to pursue her newly found interest in the practice in order to gain more understanding of its significance in Judaism.

The three observant women I have discussed here are all members of Orthodox communities where mikveh practice is an accepted (and expected) part of their lives. In each case, the shift in individual perception changed the ritual from being solely a halakhic obligation to something that is also a personally meaningful and positive experience. For the three non-observant women, the changes in perception, even such a small one as occurred in the case of Mrs. C, created the possibility to re-evaluate mikveh practice in a more positive light.

Mrs. F was the only woman I interviewed who was adamantly against the ideas

and the practice of mikveh. Although she attends an Orthodox synagogue, she made it clear that she does this because of family tradition and in no way considers herself a member of the Orthodox community. She also told me that mikveh practice was never taught or valued in her home and that she "would probably feel inconvenienced" (April 1, 2008) if she had to take part in this ritual. She continues to find the concept of impurity insulting and said that since she does not consider herself "to be "un-pure" while menstruating", she sees no need to "cleanse" herself afterwards. (April 1, 2008) She ended this section of the interview by stating that she does not know what the laws of niddah are, but as far as she is concerned, they have no place in her life and she is "not really interested in learning about them for personal use." (April 1, 2008) It is not possible to say whether a shift in perception would make a difference to Mrs. F or not, since she is so strong in her opposition to the idea of mikveh practice that she does not appear open to the concept of change.

In summing up this section on the role of perception, two of the women whom I interviewed, Mrs. A and Mrs. J, were both completely comfortable with the concept and practice of mikveh. Seven other women, both observant and non-observant, indicated in their responses to my questions that some positive change had occurred in the way they thought about this ritual. In other words, positive perception of mikveh practice, whether it was acted on or not, was an important factor in the way that nine of the twelve women approached the ritual. This leads me to conclude that perception strongly influences how a Jewish woman experiences or understands the practice of mikveh.

Judging from the responses to my interview questions, it would appear that upbringing and learning are not major contributing factors in how Jewish women relate to mikveh ritual. Fulfilling halakhic obligations **is** an important foundational consideration, especially for Orthodox women, but a positive perception of this practice can make the difference between the observance being solely a matter of obedience to the Law, and a ritual that is also personally meaningful to the participant.

The majority of my interviewees' responses demonstrate that if a woman perceives this ritual as something that is good and woman-affirming, she might practise it. For women who view mikveh immersion as a source of renewal or as an opportunity for spiritual connection, the issues of whether this is an archaic, patriarchal practice meant to subjugate them or demean their bodies will have little or no real impact on their lives or their feelings about this observance. In plain language, they simply will not care very much about the negative perceptions because their own personal experiences will refute them.

What is also important and again, was clearly demonstrated through the women's responses, was that perceptions about mikveh can and do change. Some of the women I spoke with told me that initially, they did not want to have anything to do with mikveh ritual, but when their perceptions changed, either their practice or their relation to the ritual also changed. These positive changes in perception usually occurred as the result of life experiences or the conscious decision on the woman's part to challenge her own ideas, and investigate the concept and practice of mikveh ritual more fully.

I would like to end with a few thoughts on the innovations to mikveh practice as discussed by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein in "ReVisions" and as described to me by Liliana during our interview. None of the women I met with voiced any strong objection to these alternative ceremonies, although Mrs. E was clear on the fact that halakhah needs to be the primary motivation for these, as well as for the more traditional ritual. I think that these innovations are part of (or could be part of) a perceptual change that may be necessary at this time in order to move mikveh out of the "shadows" of secrecy and silence. Because of the misconceptions that still surround mikveh practice – that it demeans women, that women's bodies are "unclean", that there is something inherently flawed with the female that continually needs to be "cleansed" or put right – much of this secrecy and silence is, I believe, a mask for a sense of shame on the part of some women. The fact that this sense of shame may very well be unconscious does nothing to lessen its negative impact on the women or on the general way in which many of them still think about mikveh practice. Rabbi Goldstein's desire to "take back the water" is, in a wider application, I think, a desire for women to take back themselves.

The current innovations to mikveh ritual, which are often promoted through the feminist movement in Judaism, may well be one of the major channels for positive changes in women's perception, not only of the ritual itself but also of themselves. A more positive understanding of mikveh practice and the foundational thinking behind it, could result in a real movement on the part of Jewish women of all denominations to "take back the water" and to re-appropriate this practice in both traditional and alternative ways, but above all, in ways that are significant and empowering for the participants.

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. Do you observe the ritual of mikveh? Regularly?

2. If you are not regularly observant, or if your practice is infrequent, what are the reasons for this?

3. How do you feel about this practice? What are your thoughts, positive or otherwise, about how it affects you as a woman, a wife and a member of the Jewish community?

4. How observant would you personally consider yourself to be in your practice of Judaism in general? What place, if any, do the laws of niddah/family purity have in your life?

5. How did you learn about these laws and observances?

6. Have you taken part in mikveh ritual for purposes other than traditional ones? If so, can you talk a little about that – what was the focus of the ritual? How did you feel about it?

7. If you have only recently incorporated mikveh ritual, traditional or otherwise, into your practice, what prompted you to do so?

8. What denomination are you part of – Lubavitch, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, secular, "just Jewish" … ?

9. Do you have any other thoughts or experiences to add that might not be covered by these questions?

APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY OF HEBREW TERMS

Ashkenazi	a term originally used in the Middle Ages to refer to Jews living in Northern France and Western Germany; it became primarily identified with Jews of German descent; however, today, most Jewish communities outside Israel are Ashkenazi
Ba'alat teshuva	a female Jew who has returned to a more observant, often Orthodox, lifestyle (masc.: ba'al teshuva)
Baraita da Niddah	a writing of uncertain origin, mentioned by Nachmanides and likely known to the geonim of the 13th century; a strict code for women in niddah that has never been accepted as halakhah ("Baraita" refers to a tradition in Jewish oral law that has not been incorporated in the Mishnah and therefore, has less authority.)
Bor	a container or holding pool connected to the mikveh that holds at least 40 se'ah of water from a natural source (approximately 198 gallons)
Halakhah	Jewish law
Kashruth	Jewish dietary laws, governed by halakhah; food that conforms to these standards is referred to as "kosher" (variation: kashrut)
Keret	literally, "cut off" – in the biblical context, cast out from the Jewish community, often for reasons of disobedience to the Law
Mayim Chayim	literally, "living water" – a reference to the fact that a proportion of water in the mikveh pool must be of natural source
Mikveh	word referring both to the Jewish practice of ritual immersion and to the ritual pool itself (variations: mikve, miqve, mikvah)
Mikvaot	plural of **"mikveh"** (variation: miqvaot)
Mishnah	otherwise known as the Oral Torah, it was redacted in or about 200 CE and is a collection of existing traditions that date back to earlier times

Niddah	literally "separation", this word can refer to the period of time between the onset of menstruation and mikveh immersion (usually about 12 days), or it can refer to the woman who is in that state
Tanakh	the Jewish scriptures, sometimes referred to as the "Hebrew Bible"
Tosefta	literally, "supplement", this is a halakhic work that acts in many ways as a commentary on the Mishnah
Tum'at niddah	separation for because of menstrual defilement or ritual impurity
Sephardic	a term that refers to Jews who left Spain and Portugal during and after the 1492 expulsion
Shulchan Arukh	a comprehensive legal code compiled in the mid-1500's by the Sephardic rabbi, Joseph Caro. It is still the standard code today, especially in Orthodox circles.
Tameh	ritually impure and therefore unfit to take part in Temple activities or ritual (variation: tum'ah)
Tevilah	physical immersion in a mikveh
Toharah	ritually pure and therefore fit to take part in Temple activities or ritual
Zav	male with a penile discharge other than ejaculation (variation: zab)
Zava	woman with any bleeding that is not menstrual (variation: zivah)

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