



By
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Transforming the mikveh

The staff members at Mayyim Hayyim: Living Waters Community Mikveh love to think up catchy program titles having to do with – what else – water. Their latest wordplay, “Gathering the Waters: Ancient Ritual, Open Access and New Meaning,” was a spectacular, bustling conference dedicated to all things mikveh. Over Columbus Day weekend, more than 250 attendees from 22 states and Israel came together to support the groundbreaking idea that 21st century Jews need a community mikveh to address their complex, unprecedented needs.

Mayyim Hayyim has been on an upward trajectory since its founding a decade ago. Among the reasons for the mikveh’s success is the passion of its founder and president, best-selling author Anita Diamant. Diamant wanted a mikveh that passed muster with Jewish law, but was also beautiful and inclusive. Her innovation was to make Mayyim Hayyim a place of healing as well as a destination to celebrate life-cycle events. Her partner in creating a “mikveh rooted in ancient tradition yet reinvented to serve the Jewish community of today” is Mayyim Hayyim’s executive director Aliza Kline – a woman who has the energy and vitality of Niagara Falls. (I was upfront about the puns on water.)

In the interest of full disclosure, I have volunteered and freelanced for Mayyim Hayyim. Three years ago, I coordinated a small conference called “Mainstream” designed for Jewish professionals aspiring to implement the Mayyim Hayyim model in their own communities. It was a trademark Mayyim Hayyim event in that it inspired people to dream big about the endless spiritual opportunities of a community mikveh.

Looking back, “Mainstream” was to “Gathering the Waters” what a brook is to a river.

In 2010, the conference relocated from the renovated Victorian house in West Newton that is home to Mayyim Hayyim’s sparkling two mikva’ot to the much larger Temple Shalom a mile down the road. Over the course of two days, the temple’s three floors buzzed with 25 workshops, including “The Mikveh Lady Has Left the Building: Training and Sustaining Volunteer Guides”; “The Family Mikveh”: “Programming for Young Couples and Bat Mitzvah Girls and Their Moms”; and “OMG: Tools for Teaching Mikveh to Teens.”

There’s an inherent irony about a public event focused on a private ritual. Dr. Erica Brown, a noted scholar of Jewish text and a conference keynote speaker, added a layer to the paradox. “The reemergence of mikveh,”



PHOTO BY JUSTIN KNIGHT

Keynote panelists at Mayyim Hayyim’s Gathering The Waters International Mikveh Conference (from left): executive director Aliza Kline; author and Mayyim Hayyim president Anita Diamant; and Brandeis Professor Jonathan Sarna.

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she said, “is both stabilizing and destabilizing.” Brown put a thought-provoking spin on the notion that Mayyim Hayyim was not the mikveh of our mothers and grandmothers. Rather, Mayyim Hayyim was something entirely new – a response to the complexities of 21st century Jewry with an ancient ritual that had been largely marginalized. It quickly took on the importance and urgency of a phenomenon.

I first saw a mikveh when I was 13-years-old, and, looking back, it felt like going to a speakeasy during Prohibition. I was told that when I menstruated as a married woman I’d be expected to go to the mikveh, most likely at night, a week after my period ended. For two weeks of each month I couldn’t so much as hold my husband’s hand or even directly pass him something as innocuous as a plate. It was the first time I thought of my body as impure.

When I was married, Mayyim Hayyim was still 15 years into the future. I had nowhere to float in living waters peacefully and joyfully before my wedding. And so I didn’t immerse until my daughter’s bat mitzvah, marking my transformation into the mother of a young woman.

Before Mayyim Hayyim, a woman or man had no place to acknowledge spiritually the profound gratitude and relief after finishing a grueling course of chemotherapy.

Mayyim Hayyim would become a safe place to shed inhibitions and doubt when coming out as lesbian or homosexual. Mayyim Hayyim was also a mikveh to celebrate a milestone birthday, an upcoming marriage or the renewal of sexual love between partners.

With Mayyim Hayyim in the picture, the mikveh was no longer a Jewish woman’s dirty little secret. It was a light and airy place to revitalize the soul. There was a garden to walk through before immersing any

time of the day or night. It was a spa for Jewish souls: women, men and Jews by choice.

As much as I love Mayyim Hayyim and how it has transformed Judaism and Jews, I still harbor some residual fear and resentment from my first encounter with the earlier mikveh. Niddah – separating and refraining from sex during a woman’s menstrual cycle – felt like punishment to me as a woman. My cycles were an ineffable part of me. Sure enough, there was a workshop at “Gathering the Waters” to help me get over my resentment: “Sanctifying Sex: Personal Perspectives on Niddah.”

The presenters were an eclectic group whose practice of niddah ranged from traditional to idiosyncratic. One couple completely separated and avoided directly passing objects to each other. Another couple made it a point to make love the night after immersion to share symbolically the mayyim hayyim – the living waters – with one another. Another practiced a form of niddah that involved intentional separation, but was not punctuated by an immersion. I was impressed that the men on the panel were acutely aware of – I’d go as far as to say they experienced – their wives’ monthly cycles. Furthermore, niddah created an intimate rhythm in their relationships. The couples on the panel also represented four branches of Judaism. Pluralism finally comes to the practice of niddah!

In a workshop on developing middle school curricula for day schools and synagogue schools, Lisa Berman, Mayyim Hayyim’s education director, observed that once students recognize the power of water, they soon tap into the potential of ritual itself. During a visit to the mikveh, Berman asked students to write about the mikveh from the perspective of the window that looks down on people immersing. One “window” proclaimed to love witnessing the “changingness” that happens with each immersion. Another was honored to be trusted with people’s secrets about their traumas and illnesses. The exercise beautifully articulated Mayyim Hayyim’s sacred mission to support all Jews at myriad stages of their lives. It also demonstrated that Mayyim Hayyim could very well become an integral part of our children’s spiritual lives.

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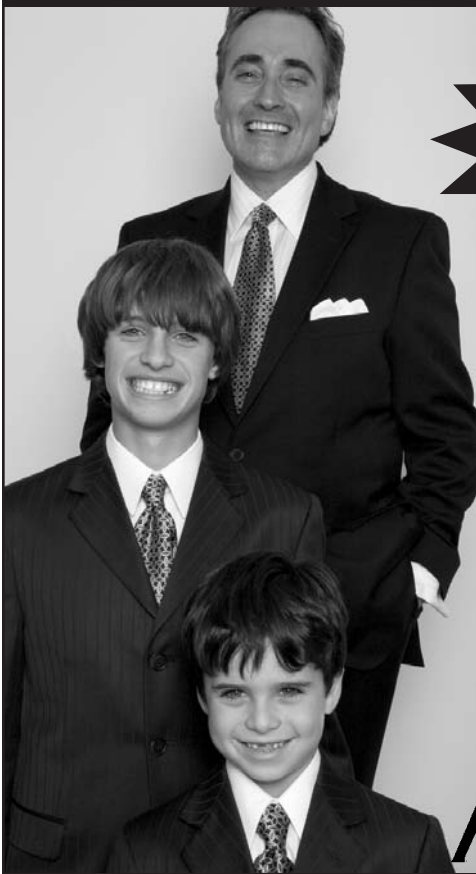


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