

A Post-Katrina Mikveh

Few people are more intimately familiar with water's destructive potential than Rabbi Uri Topolosky.

When Hurricane Katrina unleashed massive flooding, the rabbi's synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel New Orleans in Metairie, La., was one of the many victims. Water destroyed Beth Israel's building, Torah scrolls and, somewhat ironically, even its ritual bath.

But last month, while attending a conference, as part of a New Orleans delegation working to rebuild the mikveh, Rabbi Topolosky had a personal encounter with water's healing potential.

Still reeling from the loss of a congregant who had suffered a brain aneurysm during a meeting with him, Rabbi Topolosky was inspired when another conference participant, a hospice worker, shared her practice of immersing in the mikveh each time one of her patients dies.

He scheduled an impromptu immersion at Mayyim Hayyim, the innovative Boston mikveh that organized the conference, and the experience was "very powerful."

While he had used a mikveh on previous occasions as a way to spiritually prepare before holidays and Shabbat, he had never considered going for the purpose of healing.

"It was very transformative," he explained. "It made me realize the power this ritual can have for people in all sorts of pain, trauma and joy."

As a result, Rabbi Topolosky has returned to New Orleans with a much broader vision for the new mikveh, one that will be freestanding and under communal, not synagogue auspices.

He is now hoping to help create something that will engage not just traditional Jews observing niddah (women immerse in the mikveh before resuming sexual contact with their husbands, something forbidden during and for several days follow-



Rabbi Uri Topolosky (with wife and children) broadened his vision for a New Orleans mikveh project after attending last month's Gathering The Waters conference.

ing menstruation) and rabbis performing conversions, but a wide spectrum of Jews, including clinicians and social service agencies.

While New Orleans has another mikveh, run by Chabad Lubavitch, that one, like most Chabad mikve'ot, is only used for niddah and cannot be used for conversions, even Orthodox ones. As a result, Rabbi Topolosky and other area rabbis currently must fly with potential converts to Houston to use a mikveh there.

As an Orthodox man, Rabbi Topolosky was hardly the typical participant at the Mayyim Hayyim conference, where the gender balance tilted decidedly toward fe-

male and where — aside from Rabba Sara Hurwitz and Rabbi Haviva Ner-David, two women who have at different times been dubbed the "first Orthodox woman rabbi" — most of the clergy was on the more liberal end of the spectrum. (Rabbi Ner-David, who is helping establish a pluralistic mikveh on a Conservative/Masorti kibbutz in Israel, now identifies as "post-denominational.")

He was typical, however, in his zeal to bring the mikveh to new users. And while it's hard to drum up support for new projects and outreach in an economic climate of cutbacks, broadening the pool, so to speak, of mikveh users would actually make for more financially viable institution, he said.

"My experience coming to this conference made me realize we're so short-sighted because our funding and support base is going to be so limited if [niddah and conversion is] our focus," he said.

"It became apparent that there is a model of mikveh that can be relevant, exciting and meaningful to so many different people on different issues," he added, noting that it increases the "possibilities for partnerships."

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