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A decade ago, when best-selling author Anita Diamant started recruiting support for Mayyim Hayyim (Living Waters), an innovative mikveh and educational center in suburban Boston, money for new projects was considerably easier to come by.

Today, with many Jewish funders struggling to maintain existing commitments, and with the recession leading to increased demand for social services, a ritual bath can seem like a luxury item. Particularly one that, like Mayyim Hayyim, has its own art gallery, features spa-like baths and preparation rooms, and welcomes new, nontraditional uses, such as ceremonies marking the end of chemotherapy or the dissolution of a marriage.

Nonetheless, while Mayyim Hayyim and the larger mikveh movement it has helped grow are not exactly swimming in cash, neither are they allowing the recession to drown their ambitions.

Indeed, at Gathering the Waters, a conference last month with more than 275 participants (including about 70 presenters) from 22 states and Israel, the mood was relatively optimistic, with economic malaise surprisingly absent from discussions.

Plans for a number of Mayyim Hayyim-inspired mikve'ot are moving forward. A pluralistic San Diego mikveh called Gardens of Eden is slated to break ground next year, and a newly refurbished mikveh on a Conservative/Masorti kibbutz in Israel's Galilee is, under the leadership of Rabbi Haviva Ner-David, seeking to become "an Israeli Mayyim Hayyim." A New Orleans mikveh in the planning stages, initially conceived merely as a replacement for one destroyed in Hurricane Katrina, is also considering expanding its mission to welcome a more diverse group of ritual uses (see sidebar).

With the tagline "Ancient Rituals, Open Access, New Meaning," the conference, Mayyim Hayyim's second since opening in 2004, focused largely on issues like spirituality, meaning and ways to encourage more Jews to make use of an institution that has long been shrouded in secrecy and has been regarded, in some circles, as demeaning to women.

"There's a hunger for ritual that is physical, spiritual and meaningful," noted Aliza Kline, Mayyim Hayyim's executive director, at the opening session, explaining the emerging appeal of mikveh among liberal Jews.

The conference addressed everything from the importance of ritual in marking life transitions to how best to welcome converts to Judaism (mikveh immersion is traditionally the final step in the process) to new interpretations of *taharat mishpacha*, the practice of refraining from sexual contact during menstruation and then immersing at the mikveh before resuming contact.

"We say *niddah*, or monthly immersion, rather than *taharat mishpacha*," Kline noted at the opening session, explaining that the traditional term's literal meaning, "family purity" is off-putting to many women.

In a session called "Tumah/Taharah: Clean/dirty? Pure/impure? Ready/not ready? What are we really talking about?" Rabbi Susan Grossman, who is a congregational rabbi in Columbia, Md., and also serves on the Conservative movement's law committee, said, "Perhaps it's time to put to bed the term 'taharat mishpacha.' Maybe we should move to *kedushat* [sanctification] *mishpacha*."

Recession Not Sinking Mikveh Movement

Growth seen for liberal usage amid funding concerns; West Side Mikvah in talks on expansion.

At that same session, Rabbi Dov Linzer, dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a liberal Orthodox seminary in Riverdale, noted that growing numbers of people are talking of counting the "white" days necessary before going to the mikveh, rather than the traditional language of "clean" days, in order to reduce feelings of stigma, and that many have begun referring to a woman as "in niddah" rather than "a niddah."

Of the more than 20 sessions offered at Gathering the Waters, not one had to do with fundraising or economic challenges, topics that have been staples of most Jewish conferences in recent years. Instead, inside the spacious, sun-drenched, state-of-the-art suburban temple where much of the conference was held, it was easy to forget the recession outside.

Which is not to say that Mayyim Hayyim and the mikveh movement have not experienced ripples from the recession.

In fact, in an interview after the conference, Kline, who jokingly describes herself as "the mikveh lady CEO," told The Jewish Week that "pending grant support," the Boston mikveh/educational center may have to "seriously cut back on national programming" in the coming year.

"That's painful, particularly on the heels of this conference, when it's clear the interest is there," she said, noting that all the Mayyim Hayyim materials at the conference, various books describing new rituals and ceremonies, sold out.

"Right now, we're the convener, and it will be a loss if we can't continue to be," Kline said. "In the past year, foundation support has been 'much harder to come by.'"

That said, funding for Mayyim Hayyim's local operations is relatively stable thanks, in part, to two "transformative" gifts made in 2007, just before the markets crashed.

"If we could go back to the '07 economy, we would be in good shape," Kline said. "If we could receive another six-or-seven-figure gift, we could endow this space."

While giving may be down, usage of the mikveh is up, with more than 1,400 "immersions" in 2010 so far, up from 1,400 last year and 1,200 in 2008.

Touring Mayyim Hayyim is now a routine component of Boston-area Introduction to Judaism classes, and many day school and Hebrew schools have field trips to see the mikveh. Last year, almost 100 young people chose to immerse at Mayyim Hayyim in preparation for their bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies.

"At this point, we have become so in-



Mayyim Hayyim's Aliza Kline and Anita Diamant with historian Jonathan Sarna at the group's recent conference.
COURTESY OF MAYYIM HAYYIM

tegrated into the community here — we see well over 80 clergy who spend a lot of time here — that people have a real sense of ownership and support," Kline said. "If we had to go in crisis mode, there are enough people who have our back."

Approximately 75 percent of Mayyim Hayyim immersions are for "traditional purposes," such as niddah, pre-wedding, pre-Shabbat and conversion, with between 200-300 people converting there each year.

The remaining visits are to mark other moments, everything from celebrating recovery from alcoholism to mourning a miscarriage.

The mikveh operates on a "pay what you can" basis, with regular users asked but not required to donate \$36 per visit, while those who come for a one-time ceremony are asked

to donate \$90.

Though unaware of any specific new mikveh projects that have been put on hold due to the recession, Kline said "some communities got stalled" even before the recession, and that "There may be other communities that are saying, 'Oy, we aren't going to start that yet.'"

Such is the case in New York, where real estate costs and scarcity of available space make building a mikveh particularly daunting.

Over the past decade, various communal leaders have explored the possibility of establishing a pluralistic or liberal mikveh in Manhattan or even Brooklyn, but little has materialized. That's partly due to the enormous expense, but also due to a relatively high level of satisfaction with the West Side Mikvah, which, while under Orthodox auspices, allows liberal rabbis to perform conversions and other ceremonies there.

That mikveh, on West 74th Street, was built in 2006 and is, by all accounts, an attractive, well-run facility. "It's clean, it's beautiful, and if you're going in for traditional use of niddah, it's great," said Rabbi Marion Lev-Cohen, director of adult education and engagement at Central Synagogue, which is Reform. "But there is no place to sit and do a bet din [interview before a panel of rabbis] before conversion other than the waiting room or hair dryer room. It doesn't lend itself to the ability to create moments of holiness."

In addition, she noted, it "is completely booked" and cannot accommodate an influx of new users.

Mayyim Hayyim, by contrast, has a room designated for bet din meetings, as well as a "celebration room" available for rentals.

Rabbi Lev-Cohen, who was unable to attend Mayyim Hayyim's recent conference but has had meetings with its leaders, emphasized that the "welcoming" is great at the West Side Mikvah, and that its board members are "receptive to the possibility of trying to create a better space."

"Given financial times and costs, we're better off working with the mikveh we have" than trying to build a new one, she said, noting that mikve'ot are expensive not only to build, but to maintain.

Rabbi Joy Levitt, executive director of the JCC in Manhattan, agreed that expanding the West Side Mikvah, just a few blocks from the JCC, makes more sense right now than starting something new.

"We're at the very beginning of this stage in talking with folks on the West Side about ways it could expand," she said. "It's almost entirely a space issue, like everything else in Manhattan. But there's good will and interest."

Asked whether an Orthodox-run mikveh can ever be as open and inclusive as Mayyim Hayyim, Rabbi Levitt said, "I want to start from the place that [the West Side Mikvah] is a community mikveh. It's true that it's run by the Orthodox community, but as a woman rabbi I've never ever had a problem doing anything in the mikveh. They have an open, pluralistic approach. I have never had an experience there that was in any way unwelcoming, nor have I heard of such from colleagues."

Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine that very many Orthodox mikve'ot would be comfortable with some of the boundary pushing that Mayyim Hayyim, which is supervised by a Conservative, not Orthodox, rabbi, has done.

The Boston mikveh not only allows its space to be used by trans-gendered, lesbian and gay Jews in preparation for same-sex weddings, but trains volunteer mikveh guides to be sensitive to their needs. In addition, on the wall of one of its dressing rooms hangs a certificate commemorating a recent infant conversion, with the text noting that the baby's non-Jewish mother (the father is Jewish) is supportive, but has no plans to convert herself.

Indeed, while interest in reclaiming rituals has been a factor in the success of Mayyim Hayyim and other liberal mikve'ot, high intermarriage — and conversion — rates have also fueled the growth.

It was the issue of conversion that first spurred Mayyim Hayyim founder Anita Diamant, whose husband is a Jew by choice, to get into the mikveh business.

Diamant, who is best known for the novel "The Red Tent" and several contemporary guides to Jewish life, said in the opening panel of the conference, that she wanted to create a more welcoming and inviting space for conversion ceremonies.

"This is a huge change in someone's life, and we owe them a beautiful, dignified, individual welcome," she said.

Having friends or family members who have experienced the mikveh firsthand during conversion has added to many liberal Jews' comfort with the ritual baths, Diamant noted.

"When I'm fundraising I often hear that 'I hate mikveh' or 'that's not for me,'" she said. "But everybody's related to someone who's not Jewish; most extended families have a Jew by choice ... A woman who said 'that's not for me' 10 years ago, now has two daughters-in-law who converted at Mayyim Hayyim, and feels different now." ■