

Continuing Education Session for Volunteer Mikveh Guides II: Mikveh in the Aftermath of Abuse and Trauma

Last night I had the privilege of being part of a woman's healing ritual. She had been sexually assaulted by a former "good" friend, and was coming to us as part of her moving forward with her life.

What I want to first say about this experience is that I did not do anything different for her than I was trained to do for all our immersees. Since the domestic violence workshop, though, I have been closing the blinds for evening appointments, because we don't know many women's situations when they come.

I welcomed her at the door, and she was with another woman. I offered to make tea and asked her what I could do for her while she was at the mikveh, which I usually ask everyone (except my "regulars"). After we did the paperwork, and the tea was ready, we sat down in the reception area. She told me she was from Virginia, and it was actually her mother who, in an "off-handed way" suggested she go to a mikveh to help herself. She went online and found us. The woman she was with had been her rabbi/teacher a few years ago, and had since moved to the Boston area. So she decided she would be able to visit her rabbi and come to the mikveh in one trip.

She had read about us online, and Carrie had sent her healing rituals. She wanted to see the facility, so I gave her a tour. When we were in the mikveh pool area, I explained that we value modesty and privacy above all else, and I would only see the top of her head when she immersed. I asked if she wanted a bath or shower; she said since she lives with several other people who share one bathroom, and since the tub probably hadn't been cleaned in years, she'd like a bath.

While she prepared, her friend and I chatted a bit, I did the holy work of the laundry, and responded to some calls. When the phone rang, I went through the bath, and opened the door. After her immersion, I asked if she'd like a few moments alone. She said yes, and I left.

When she came back to the reception area, she sat on the couch. She looked at us and said, "I didn't think it would happen, but it worked." And when we asked how she felt, she said "clean." She thanked me, and I told her how honored I felt that she came to us to be part of her healing.

After a short while, she signed the book and they left.

What is unusual about witnessing a sexual assault survival immersion? That it is not unusual at all. I did nothing we have not been trained to do. I welcomed her, offered her tea, asked what else we could offer, listened, and witnessed. I'm not sure we need to act differently for different types of immersions, as long as we listen. I think our women bring to us what they need, and we give it to them. We may not always feel comfortable, or confident; we may be nervous and scared. But we are the only ones who know that. Our women see a mikveh guide who is present: a guide to bear witness to whatever they want us to see and hear. And that is what we can do--all of us.

--Mayyim Hayyim Mikveh Guide

CORE CONCEPTS

- There are many uses of mikveh at different stages of healing from abuse or trauma.
- In creating a welcoming atmosphere for all immersees, Mikveh Guides support trauma and abuse survivors.
- Mikveh Guides should be prepared for occasions when a survivor discloses trauma or abuse, or they have reasons to be concerned about an immersee's safety.

OUTLINE OF SESSION

CONNECTING TOGETHER

10 minutes Settling In and Kavanah

HEART OF THE MATTER

30 minutes The Stages of Recovery and the Uses of Mikveh

30 minutes Guidelines for Mikveh Guides.

60 minutes Scenarios

10 minutes Self Care

HOME REFLECTIONS

Readings

WRAP UP

10 minutes Evaluation

CONNECTING TOGETHER

V'ha'er eynenu b'torahtecha, v'dabek li'baynu b'mitzvotcha, v'yached livaveinu l'ahavah ul'yirah et shimecha, v'lo neyvosh l'olam va'ed.

May our eyes be filled with the divine light of seeing and observing with the Torah as our source wisdom and the intent Mitzvot our guide; may our hearts be unified together in love, awe and divine inspiration, and may we not feel inner shame for all eternity.

May our eyes be filled with light so that we can see the suffering as well as the divinity of all. May we unify our collective hearts with openness and non-judgmentalness to prepare ourselves for our sacred tasks of guiding the transformation of shame...for our sacred task of Pi'kuah nefesh, the protection and safety of the pure souls who come to the mikveh. Amen.

(Interpretive translation of *Ahavah Rabah* prayer, before *Shema*)

In pairs or small groups, brainstorm ways to make the mikveh a welcoming, safe, and non-judgmental space.

HEART OF THE MATTER

The Stages of Recovery and the Uses of Mikveh

As discussed in the first Mikveh Guide training, the process of recovery from trauma and abuse varies, but often progresses through a series of stages which can continue throughout the lifespan in an ongoing process, though it is important to note that these stages are not always linear (Judith Herman, 1992). At each stage, mikveh can provide an important healing ritual.

Discuss the following stages.

1. *Safety and Self Care*: During this stage, the survivor focuses on creating physical and emotional safety, a safe environment, secure finances, safe relationships, stable physical health, and healthy strategies for dealing with emotions. Priorities during this stage, which can take place of a significant span of time, include comforting oneself, resolving disruptions from trauma, and coping with stress.

During this stage, individuals may come to the mikveh specifically for the purpose of assisting in the process of recovery. They may also come for other reasons and not identify that they are survivors or still in an unsafe situation. The function of the mikveh experience at this point is to provide privacy, respect and dignity, while also making information available, if the immersee requests it, or even if she doesn't. It is important to make domestic abuse and sexual assault resource lists available in the mikveh preparation rooms, to let the immersee know that help is available and mikveh staff is aware that domestic and sexual abuse is a concern in the Jewish community. Ideally, mikveh staff should also be trained in recognizing signs of abuse and trauma and supporting women implicitly and, where appropriate, explicitly.

2. *Remembrance, Mourning, Integration*: Once safety has been established, the survivor may be ready to explore the impact of the traumatic events. This can involve retelling the story of what happened, grieving physical and emotional losses, and continuing to establish self-care and comfort. Individual and/or group therapy are often critical supports during this stage.

Coming to the mikveh during this phase can be part of the letting go, release, relief and unburdening process of dealing with trauma. Specific immersion ceremonies for Healing, Recovering from Abuse, Recovering from Sexual Assault, and Gratitude, to name a few, can help with this process. Even if the details of the trauma are not discussed, the ritual can bypass the rational mind and connect survivors to their inner awareness of being made in the divine's image.

3. *Reconnecting with Others*: This stage is marked by a new understanding of the effects of the traumatic events. Although the reality of the trauma remains, the traumatic impact becomes less disruptive and the survivor, knowing that healing will be ongoing, has more reliable coping strategies and more ability to expand to life and connect with others.

Individuals may return to using the mikveh for routine purposes, or for celebratory or healing times that are not focused on the events of the trauma, though they may still wish to acknowledge their trauma and its effects.

The power of the mikveh as a healing space is evident in the following words written by a survivor in the guest book at Mayyim Hayyim:

Thank you for having a place like this--where safety and warmth radiate from the moment the door is opened, where compassion, patience, and understanding reign, where we may come to be made whole, know that our style and healing are respected. Thank you also for the care that has been evident throughout; from the first contact to the last bite of strawberry. Leeann, Carrie, Anita--you are a blessing, and I hope the living waters will continue to strengthen you as you strengthen us.

Guidelines for Mikveh Guides

Mikveh Guides support the well-being of all of immersees; they also can provide support when a survivor discloses trauma or abuse, or if they have reasons to be concerned about an immersee's safety. It is important to note that Mikveh Guides are not mandated reporters, and that, regardless of their professional training or personal experience, they are present to provide support and information, not to offer advice or counseling.

Review and discuss the following guidelines:

Creating a Welcoming Atmosphere for All Survivors

Although stages of healing are common to most survivors, recovery is highly dependent on each person's unique background and occurs at their own pace. Many survivors who are trying to heal continue to be stalked or abused by the courts, finances, etc., and still lack a real sense of safety. Violation, violence, and disconnection are at the core of the trauma experience; the function of the mikveh experience is to restore a sense of caring and integrity to mind, body, heart, soul, community, and the divine.

- Keep in mind that coming to mikveh is a spiritual and courageous act. All immersees have a inner divine wholeness, whether they can access it at that moment or not. Coming to the mikveh is an affirmation of life.
- Tell all first-time users that the mikveh is a place of healing for people who have experienced all types of life milestones, illnesses and trauma; this helps to normalize the experience.
- Explain procedures at every step of the preparation and immersion process and repeatedly invite questions.
- Explain how the mikveh process protects privacy and modesty and respects boundaries.
- Do not touch without asking (unless safety is at risk).
- Do not comment on the appearance of the immersee's body, even if you see visible marks or bruises.
- Describe what to expect during immersion: temperature of the room and water, odors, other sensory experiences.
- Explain that unexpected emotions can emerge during the mikveh process and Mikveh Guides are present to offer help, support and resources if this happens.
- If someone becomes emotional or spacey, ask what would help her to calm down or be more present in the moment. Offer a private, comfortable place to talk. Offering tea, water, or a

cracker can convey support and help orient to the present, as can maintaining eye contact and asking the immersee to respond to you.

- Check in to be sure the immersee feels safe and sufficiently well to leave the mikveh.
- Thank the immersee for coming to the mikveh.
- If it is dark or the immersee seems hesitant to leave, offer to walk them out to their car.

If a Survivor Discloses

- Tell the person that you are glad that they have told you, that we want everyone to feel safe here and elsewhere, that they are not alone and you want to make sure they have ongoing support.
- If it seems appropriate, acknowledge that disclosure can be sometimes be difficult and takes courage.
- Provide helpline numbers and referral information.
- Offer the person a private space with a phone.
- Avoid asking “why questions” or asking for a lot of information.
- Do not promise to keep the information a secret; do promise that you will handle the information sensitively, and communicate what you plan to do with any information you feel compelled to share.

If Abuse is Suspected

- Never have conversations in the mikveh pool area; instead, find a separate, private space to talk.
- Use your judgment on whether to approach people. It is ok to ask questions like: Is everything OK? Is there anything that I can help you with? Are you OK or able to go home right now? One important role of the Mikveh Guide is to make sure people who come to the mikveh get the support they need.
- If you have immediate safety concerns based on a conversation with an immersee, you may tell that person that you are concerned about his or her safety. Do this carefully, so the person feels comfortable and unselfconscious about returning to the mikveh. It is generally helpful in such circumstances to consult with a supervisor about how to proceed.
- Offer but don't push support or information (it may not be safe for a survivor to take a brochure home or keep it in a purse or car).
- Point out the information in the preparation rooms as appropriate.

Follow Up

Mikveh Guides should never give out personal contact information or contact immersees after immersion; your role is to provide support during the immersion experience. If you have any concerns about an experience with an immersee, or feel uncomfortable yourself, or if you hand out any information about abuse, contact the mikveh director to review the situation. Community resources can also be a valuable source of guidance and support for Mikveh Guides.

Scenarios

Discuss how to handle the following scenarios:

- An immersee does not want to leave.
Possible responses:
 - “I’m going to put the pool cover back on and get things closed up. Would you like to walk out to the parking lot together?”
 - “Is there anything else that I can support or help you with while you are here?”
- An immersee tells you that her partner is waiting for her in the car and she doesn’t want to get that person mad.
Possible responses:
 - Since this is a vague statement, ask her what she means.
 - Follow up by asking her if she is getting the support she needs.
 - Offer to help brainstorm options for her immediate comfort and safety, such as calling a friend or a domestic violence resource.
- An immersee discloses abuse to you and asks you not to tell anyone, or asks you if their reactions are normal.
Possible responses:
 - Affirm: “I’m glad that you feel comfortable/safe enough to talk about this right now. Do you feel you’re getting the support that you need?”
 - Be clear about your boundaries, responsibilities, and sensitivity: “In my role as a volunteer here, I cannot promise to keep anything a secret, especially when it comes to safety, but I can promise to handle this with the utmost sensitivity and respect. We are not therapists or trained to offer help in the way that you deserve. We will respect your privacy, but also try to connect you with resources that might be helpful. People come to the mikveh for many different reasons including abuse and we understand that each person has different reactions. It is understandable why you would have such reactions. I just want to make sure that you have support from others and people who can help.”
- An immersee is taking a long time to prepare or to exit.
 - If an unusually long time has gone by AND you are concerned that something is wrong, it is okay to knock on the door and say, “I just want to make sure that you’re alright, please take your time.” In rare situations, an immersee can become too emotional or shut down to want to continue preparing or to immerse. Be reassuring, and encouraging to do what is most comfortable at the moment. Communicate the possibility to make another appointment when it feels right; or to modify the immersion experience (e.g. offer handwashing).

- Mikveh Guides should also use their good judgment. If it has been less than an hour but something tells you that there is reason to be concerned, it is okay to knock earlier.
 - Consult with a supervisor if a difficult situation arises.
- You are making an appointment on the phone and the caller is having difficulty telling you the nature of the immersion.
Possible responses:
 - “Is this a good time to talk? If you prefer to call back at another time when it would be easier to talk, that’s just fine.”
 - “We would like each guest to feel welcome and supported here at the mikveh. People come here for lots of reasons: ritual immersions, healing, life transitions. Is there anything that I can do now to help you feel comfortable with your immersion as you make an appointment?”
- Somebody tells you that his or her therapist or rabbi said it would be a good idea to come to the mikveh as part of healing from abuse, but the person is not sure it’s a good idea.
Possible response:
 - “People come to the mikveh for many different reasons and at all different stages of the healing process. It would be important to you to have a further discussion with your therapist or rabbi to be sure that you understand the recommendation. This should be your decision. We often tell people that you are ready to come to the mikveh when you are ready for any outcome. We can help you by explaining what the experience might be like should you choose to come here. We have a website that can offer you information and sample ceremonies. Some people choose to come here in person for a tour and to ask questions before making an appointment to immerse. This kind of orientation and planning is very common.”
- Helping an immersee reminds you of your own experiences of abuse. You wonder if you are the best guide for survivors.
 - Being a Mikveh Guide is about supporting another person, while ‘holding your own soup and not spilling it on them.’
 - Each guide comes to this work with his or her own background, experiences, etc. What’s most important is that you feel personally comfortable with guiding a particular immersion. Guides can choose which immersions to facilitate and excuse themselves from immersions where they feel they cannot be fully present for another person. You may also wish, however, to focus on ways that you can ‘check your own baggage at the door,’ including rituals for transitioning into your role as Mikveh Guide (such as a Mikveh Guide hand-washing ceremony).
 - Conversely, because you have your own experiences, you might also provide a unique sensitivity for the guest, even though you would not be disclosing the details of your own history.

Self Care

Boundaries and self-care are crucial to Mikveh Guides, especially when they are working with survivors of trauma and abuse, whose issues are often difficult, but who also may trigger issues and memories for the Mikveh Guide.

Brainstorm people you would turn to for support for yourself, both in thinking through challenging situations and processing your own emotions. Discuss how you would approach those people and what kind of support you would seek.

HOME REFLECTIONS

Suggested Readings

“No Ordinary Bath: The Use of the Mikvah in Healing From Incest” (Ritualwell.org)

Mayyim Hayyim ceremonies for Healing, Recovering from Abuse, Recovering from Sexual Assault, Gratitude

WRAP UP

Evaluation