

## EMBRACING WATERS

### IN COLLABORATION WITH JOURNEY TO SAFETY OF JF&CS

This curriculum is the result of a collaborative effort between Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh and Paula Brody & Family Education Center in Newton, Massachusetts and Journey to Safety, the domestic abuse program of Jewish Family & Children's Service in Waltham, Massachusetts. Through this partnership, we found many ways to support survivors of abuse and raise awareness about domestic abuse in the Jewish community. With generous support from the Boston Jewish Community Women's Fund, Mayyim Hayyim and Journey to Safety created Embracing Waters, an initiative to make the mikveh more welcoming for survivors of trauma and domestic abuse.

Please note that although it is helpful on its own, this document is meant to serve as an addendum to Mayyim Hayyim's "Guide My Steps" volunteer Mikveh Guide training, which is available for purchase at [www.mayyimhayyim.org](http://www.mayyimhayyim.org).

#### STEPS TO MAKING A MIKVEH SUPPORTIVE TO SURVIVORS OF ABUSE

**1. A partnership between the mikveh and a local domestic abuse program is essential.** If possible, try to work with a Jewish domestic abuse program. To see if there is a Jewish program in your area, go to <http://www.jwi.org/Page.aspx?pid=387>, select "all Jewish resources" in the first field and enter your state. To find a secular program, go to <http://www.ncadv.org/resources/StateCoalitionList.php> and click on the site for your state to get a listing of programs.

*Begin the process by building a relationship.*

The work that led to this curriculum began when Mayyim Hayyim developed a relationship with Journey to Safety even before the mikveh opened its doors. Together we have established best practices for welcoming survivors of abuse, developed immersion ceremonies, and made referrals to each other's organizations.

*Get to know each other's programs.*

We recommend that you schedule time for the domestic abuse program staff to tour the mikveh. During the tour, be sure to share any healing ceremonies that you might use, as well as other ceremonies that you think might be relevant. Find a way for mikveh staff and volunteers to learn about the domestic abuse program's services as well, either by visiting them or through a presentation at the mikveh.

**2. Work with the domestic abuse program's staff to develop mikveh policies and procedures related to domestic abuse and trauma.**

The policies and protocols that Mayyim Hayyim developed with input from Journey to Safety are included in the appendix. We encourage you look at them, and then to develop your own version in partnership with your local domestic abuse program.

Questions to consider include:

- What should a mikveh guide do if an immersee has visible bruises, burn marks or other injuries? How should that guide react (or not react)?
- How/where will you display helpline numbers and other resources for survivors? Will you do anything to call particular attention to that information?
- How should a guide react if an immersee discloses abuse? What if the immersee asks the guide to keep that information secret?
- What is the guide's role if someone discloses abuse? Does the role change if the guide is a trained professional (such as a therapist or social worker)?
- What can the mikveh offer a survivor who discloses abuse? For example, is there a private phone that the survivor can use to call a hotline right then and there? Can someone from the mikveh walk the survivor to the car after the appointment? Is there a less public door that the survivor may use if privacy, confidentiality or safety are issues?
- What will your policy be if the guide wants to follow up with an immersee that he or she is worried about?
- What should the guide do if an immersee asks to be left alone (or does not want a guide) and then remains in the pool area alone for a long period of time? What is the "check-in" policy?
- Take a look at property and parking lot lighting. How would it feel to walk out alone after dark? Is there anything you can do to make it feel safer?

Your local domestic abuse program may suggest other issues to consider as well.

### **3. Remember that not all survivors come to mikveh for a healing ceremony.**

It's easy to focus our attention on supporting survivors who come to the mikveh for healing rituals. This is vital work, but it's important not to lose sight of the fact that many survivors come for other reasons. Whether they are immersing for niddah, conversion, or any other ritual, immersees may be or may once have been in an abusive relationship, or may have experiences of violation and trauma in their pasts. Creating relevant immersion ceremonies and making helpline numbers available to anyone who visits, whether or not they have disclosed abuse, will communicate to Jewish survivors that help and support are available in the community and educate others about how to direct survivors to these resources.

### **4. Once your policies are in place and you are ready to train mikveh guides and staff, invite your local domestic abuse program to participate in the training.**

The overview of domestic abuse in the training should be presented by a staff person from your local domestic abuse program (ideally someone who worked with you to establish your policies and procedures). Information may include:

- Myths and facts about domestic abuse and its prevalence
- Dynamics of domestic abuse
- How to recognize abuse/warning signs
- Why it can be hard for survivors to leave an abusive relationship and what can make it easier to leave or to be safer at home
- How to respond effectively if someone discloses abuse
- What local services are available for survivors and how to access them

It is key that the presenter be affiliated with a local domestic abuse program. Private therapists and counselors may be knowledgeable about domestic abuse, but may not be able to speak to the range of local services available for survivors.

*Similarly, be sure to invite a domestic abuse-informed trauma specialist to present the trauma section.* The curriculum includes training on both domestic abuse and trauma. If the local domestic abuse program does not have a trauma specialist who can lead both these sections of the training, find a second presenter with a background in working with domestic violence and/or sexual assault survivors who can accurately discuss Judith Herman's Stages of Recovery model, which is one of the foundations of the curriculum.

### **5. Continue to collaborate!**

Look for ways to continue the collaboration for ongoing professional development, as well as mutual support. Collaboration is also an excellent opportunity for joint outreach in the Jewish community. Make sure to involve the domestic abuse program in future training as new board members, staff, and volunteers join the organization.