

When the mitzvah lost its meaning

Anonymous (Sh'ma, 11/205, January 9, 1980)

The day I was asked to write an article on the practice of mikveh happened to be my twentieth wedding anniversary. It was also approximately 13 years since I had last entered a mikveh. Thus, there were plenty of memories to sort through in reflecting on my experience and why I stopped observing this ritual.

The circumstance of being raised in an Orthodox European family is no guarantee of growing up an observant Jew. My older sister cared little for the traditions and let them slip by one by one. I on the other hand, had always been inclined to take Shabbat and Kashrut very seriously, and therefore more or less automatically accepted the idea that I would go to the mikveh before my marriage. I remember discussing it with my mother in a rather oblique fashion when we were making wedding plans (such matters were never discussed openly in my home). "Isn't it awfully hard to stay separated for so long every month?" I asked, and I remember her saying - "Daddy always hated it." The idea of my father, the strictest and most devout Jew I could ever imagine, hating any mitzvah seemed unbelievable to me. In truth, the whole notion embarrassed me and I was glad to change the subject.

The standard "pre-nuptial" meeting with Rabbi Jacobowitz, who was to perform the ceremony, still stands out in my mind. Neither my fiancée nor I were members of this rabbi's congregation and we were both apprehensive about this talk. We dutifully explained about our family backgrounds - mine "religious," his completely non-observant. In retrospect, we were both as naive and idealistic as only a young couple in love could be in those days. We were totally unrealistic when it came to delving into our expectations for each other and for our future relationship as a couple. Instead of dealing with serious issues, we just ignored them, assuming that "things would work themselves out." The rabbi, however, minced no words about the importance of "family purity", not only for our future happiness but for the assurance of succeeding generations. Furthermore, he asked to speak to me alone, and I felt further intimidated by his serious emphasis on the great responsibility I was taking on. "At first he'll do everything you ask out of love for you, but later on that won't be enough, " he said, urging me to see to it that my husband studied and learned to understand and love the mitzvot. I resented the implication that our blissful state would not endure. Still, his skillful talk had an impact, and we both inwardly resolved to live up to the high ideals he described.

The personal history of mikveh-goer

The first time I went to the mikveh was kind of exciting and strange. The building was dim and quiet, a world shut off from modern life. I don't recall seeing anyone other than the mikveh lady who discreetly "examined" me after my shower and

shampoo and plucked off imaginary loose hairs in preparation for the bath. I repeated the blessing after her, free floated, and when pronounced "finished" thought the whole experience was amusing and slightly overrated.

For a time my husband went along with the traditions, participating in Shabbat, learning the simple blessings, and refraining from eating meat out. However, the mikveh routine got short shrift almost from the start. My ardent groom rebelled from the denial of his instincts and his moods ranged from impatient to angry. Although part of me believed that the discipline was good for my marriage, on the other hand I seriously questioned this regular source of conflict and tension.

The problem disappeared when I became pregnant after a few months, and by the time it occurred again perhaps the urgency was no longer there. At that time the mikveh was not far from our West Side apartment, and though my enthusiasm had lessened, my commitment was firm. I even troubled to go to a lake or pool when we were on summer vacation.

I stopped going to the mikveh after our third child was born. It was not a sudden or impulsive decision, rather a gradual weakening of resolve. I began to find excuses to skip going when my husband was away on a business trip, or when we were out of the country on vacation, or when it was difficult to find a baby sitter. When we moved to the suburbs it became an outright chore. The nearest mikveh was unfamiliar and less tranquil than the one I had become accustomed to; neither were the facilities as modern and well cared for.

Sadly, over the years the changes that the Rabbi had predicted had come over our relationship. The added obligations of house and children and discord with difficult in-laws caused increasing pressure. I no longer had the determination to argue about the validity of a ritual I hardly believed in anymore.

Finally and perhaps most important of all, I had decided not to have any more children. In my mind, the practice of mikveh was bound up with having the practice children, and now that our family was not to increase, the ritual seemed meaningless.

How do I feel about mikveh today? Possibly, there is a twinge of regret for a time of innocence and idealism that evaporated over the years. Did I actually experience a special private feeling of "renewal" in my marriage or am I exaggerating a rosy picture of "the good old days?" Perhaps those young women who still observe the practice of mikveh are preserving an outdated and mystical ritual. But perhaps they still retain a secret quality of fulfillment in their lives...