

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School  
Section: Rhythms of Jewish Living  
<http://mcohen02.tripod.com/rhythms.html>  
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### Topic: *Mikveh*

**Key Idea:** It is difficult to think of any Jewish belief or practice that divides orthodox from non-orthodox more than adherence to the laws of *Taharat ha-mishpacha* (“family purity”). Observance of these precepts require a menstruating woman (*niddah*) to separate herself from her husband during her menstrual period, and for an additional seven days when no blood can be discerned. At the end of the seven days she immerses in a *mikveh* (*tevillah*) and is once again permitted to him. During menstruation and the subsequent week, the couple may not have any physical contact. Regardless of the cessation of menstrual flow, a woman remains *niddah* until she has immersed in the *mikveh*. Prior to immersing, she must bathe and clean herself thoroughly, removing jewelry, nail polish, knots in her hair, etc. so that nothing comes between her body and the purifying waters. Her three descents into the waters of the mikveh are supervised by a mikveh attendant, who makes sure she is thoroughly clean, that the immersion is total, and that she recites the *berakha* “...al tevillah.”

A bride goes to the *mikveh* for the first time just prior to her wedding (which should be scheduled to accommodate her menstrual cycle). Most Orthodox rabbis require converts and couples who wish to adopt a non-Jewish child to commit themselves to observing the laws of family purity.

As discussed in our session on Conversion, both male and female converts are required to undergo immersion in a *mikveh* for a conversion to be valid according to Orthodox law. Conservative rabbis also require immersion, and some Reform rabbis either recommend or make it available. However, many *mikvaot* will not permit a convert of either gender to use the *mikveh* if her/his conversion is being supervised by a non-Orthodox rabbi.

#### **Our discussion of the texts:**

**Text 1: *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 15: 19-24.** The central biblical passage dealing with the laws of *niddah* describes the various types of ritual impurity (*tumah*) that result from emissions from the genitals of men as well as women.

**Text 3: *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 18:19 .** The *niddah* is included on the list of those with whom sexual relations are prohibited.

**Text 3: Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Law of *Mikveh* 1:1-2, 4:1. *Niddah* 31b.** The *halakhic* requirement of submerging people and objects into a natural body of water or into a *mikveh* to remove various types of *tumah*.

**Text 4: Rivkah Slonim, *Understanding Mikveh*.** A spiritual chronology of *mikveh* from ancient times to the present.

**Text 5: Norman Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses*.** This interpretation of the laws of family purity insists that no association of ritual impurity with hygienic uncleanness should be inferred. Rather, all forms of purification deal with demarcating contact with the sacred. Furthermore, the laws of family purity represent constant reaffirmation of life through ritual renewal by means of immersion of “living waters.”

**Text 6: Elyse M. Goldstein, *Take Back the Waters*.** Reclaiming the ancient practice of *mikveh* and infusing it with creative modern insights.