

## Baptism and the Mikvah

The Greek word *baptizó* takes the place of the Hebrew word *tevilah* (to totally immerse).

This ritual immersion in water is carried out in a *mikvah*, which is a Hebrew word meaning "gathering of waters." Jewish tradition says that all waters originated in the Garden of Eden, so immersion in a *mikvah* takes us back to that place of innocence.

"A river went out from Eden to water the garden." (**Genesis 2:10**)

In the language of the Kabbalah, this river is identified with the sefirah of Yesod, the channel that brings Divine blessing into the world. Sefirah means "expression, to communicate" and they are the medium through which specific qualities and attributes can be ascribed to God in the mystical imagery of the Kabbalah.

The submerging in the mikvah must be total, without even a single hair remaining above the water.

Maimonides writes in his code of Jewish Law, the Mishneh Torah, that this immersion is not just a ritual, but requires the intent of the heart.

Once immersed, we're not going anywhere - just floating. We're temporarily in a place of "not breathing." Jews regarded breath as the token of life, not breathing as death.

"...The Hebrew word "*kever*," which usually means a "grave" is used for the womb in the Talmud tract Niddah ("to be separated"), which discusses the most common use of the *mikvah* - purification by women after their menstrual period. A woman's menses signals the "death" of a potential life, and therefore it is defiling.

### First, It's a Burial

**Romans 6:3-11** - "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection:"

The *mikvah* concept is also the focal point of the *taharah*, the purification rite of a Jew before the person is laid to rest and the soul ascends on high. The manual pouring of water in a highly specific manner over the entire body of the deceased serves this purpose.

### Also, Destruction - Adam Immersed in the River

The Midrash relates that after being banished from Eden, Adam repented and spent 130 years immersing himself in the waters of the river that watered the Garden. This river,

which is never mentioned again, is the spiritual source of all waters on earth. Immersion / baptism in the *mikvah* reestablishes us with the innocence of Eden. (See Or HaChaim on Genesis 3:22)

**Genesis 2:10** - "And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads."

This river is mentioned at the same time as the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is not a coincidence. Repentance and immersion was the remedy to Adam's eating of the fruit of that tree.

### **Noah's Flood**

Noah's flood, according to tradition, was sent to "cleanse" the world, like a *mikvah*.

**1 Peter 3:18-21** - "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:"

Why did the rain last 40 days and 40 nights? The rabbis say the flood completely enveloped the earth, and its forty days and forty nights correspond to the measure of forty *se'ah* of water required to make a ritually fit *mikvah*.

### **Then, it's Creation and Birth**

The rabbis saw the word *mikvah* (gathered waters) as a combination of waters (*mayim*) and gathered (*kavah*). In the story of Creation, the world was in an original state of water. The word used to convey the gathering of the waters into seas is *mikvah* or (*mayim kavah*). Thus, the water of the *mikvah* represents the womb of Creation.

**Genesis 1:10** - " And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters (*mayim kavah*) called he Seas: and God saw that it was good."

When a person immerses in the *Mikvah*, he is placing himself in the state of the world yet unborn, subjecting himself totally to God's creative power.

At birth, the mother's water breaks. The baby has been floating in it, waiting to emerge as a new person. Rising from baptism, we break the water for a second time.

### **Also, a Change of Status - From Unclean to Clean**

The *mikvah* immersion doesn't "wash away" uncleanness. *Tevilah* (full-body immersion)

marks a change of status from being *tamay* to *tahor* — ritually unclean (impure or unfit for the presence of God) to ritually clean.

Anthropologists refer to this threshold of higher social status in a rite of passage as “liminality.” The person at this moment of transition is a “liminal” or “threshold” person.

The womb is a place that is completely divorced from all concepts of uncleanness. A baby enters the world in complete purity, and there is no way in which he can be defiled while in the womb.

### **The Dying Seed and the New Growth**

An analogy can be made between death and resurrection, being buried in baptism and rising up out of the water and Jesus’ parable of a seed falling into the ground.

**John 12:24-25** - “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.”

The sages liken a person who immerses in the *Mikvah* to seeds planted in the ground. — see Yom Tov Shel Rosh HaShanah 5666, Discourse 2 (beginning Zeh HaYom).

When a seed is planted in the ground, it must first disintegrate, lose its first existence, in order to be able to flower. To reach a higher state, one must first lose or nullify his previous state. - *Waters of Eden*

Even though such seeds may be ritually unclean, “*tameh*,” the plants that grow from them have a new status, and are clean. (See Terumos 9:7, Maasros 5:2, Pesachim 34a, Yerushalmi Maasros 5:1 (22b), Sifra on Leviticus 11:38, Yad, Tumas Ochlin 2:19, Kesef Mishneh ad loc.)

When the new seedlings emerge from the ground, they retain no element of their previous ritually unclean state. The same is true of man. For him, the waters of the *Mikvah* are his womb and source, and when he emerges, he too is like a new individual.

This is the inner purpose of the *mikvah*: to enable one to attain this state of *bittul*, “nullification,” the “nothingness in between” the two progressive levels. As chassidic teaching points out, (Likkutei Sichot, vol. 1, pp. 4–5; Siddur, Kavanot HaMikvah, end) the letters of the Hebrew word for *bittul*, when rearranged, spell *tevilah*—“immersion”—a further indication of their spiritual interconnection.

### **Dying and being Born Again**

Nicodemus was puzzled by Jesus’ talk of being born again, or “born from above.” (**John 3:1-21**) He understood this as referring to new converts to Judaism coming up out of the *mikvah*. Now Jesus was saying this kind of renewal was demanded of everyone.

Proselytes to Judaism were immersed before becoming full-fledged members of Israel.

The Talmud (oral law) states, "When he comes up after his immersion, he is deemed an Israelite in all respects." (Yevamot 47b)

Rabbi Yose says in the Talmud, "One who has become a proselyte is like a child newly born." (Yevamot 48b)

The *mikvah* represents the mother's womb, which is called in Hebrew *rechem*. This comes from the same root as the Hebrew word for mercy (*rahamah*).

The Midrash even connects the name *Rivkah* (Rebekah/RVKH) - one of the founding "mothers" of Israel - with *hakever*(*hkvr*), literally "the grave," which is *Rivkah* spelled backwards. Why? It points to the deathbed of Jacob, where he singles out Judah in a blessing concerning the Messiah:

"The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. " (Genesis 49:10)

**Jeremiah 17:13** - "O LORD, the hope (*mikvah*) of Israel, all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living waters."

**2 Corinthians 5:17** -- "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

### **Aaron and his Sons Were Immersed in Preparation for Priesthood**

"And this is what you shall do to them to hallow them for ministering to Me as priests... And Aaron and his sons you shall bring to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and you shall wash them with water." (**Exodus 29:1; 4**).

**1 Peter 2:9** - "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light:"

### **Immersion of a Bride Before Her Wedding**

Jewish brides must go to the *mikveh* before their wedding.- agains, a change of status.

The church is the Bride of Christ

"For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Messiah." (**2 Corinthians 11:2**)

Pentecost's baptism in the Holy Spirit was the Bride's *mikvah* and each of our experiences of water baptism also points to that idea

## A Two-fold Baptism - Fire and Spirit

**Matthew 3:11** - "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire."

To understand this better we need to look at a provision for cleansing captured plunder in Israel's war against Midian.

Chassidic thought sees the war with Midian described in **Numbers 31** as reflecting the ongoing struggle within each believer. The Hebrew word *midian* means "strife." So the war with Midian was a war on war and strife itself - on the battle to restore wholeness from the splintered discord within each of us, the fragmentation of the human soul that happened at the Fall of man.

Significantly, the Levites were specifically called on to join in this battle - representing the singular element within us that can approach the Holy and re-establish unity and harmony within us. The action of the priests and Levites point to Christ as mediator.

After the war with Midian, any plunder that was captured was considered unclean, and had to go through a Baptism of fire and water.

**Numbers 31:22-24** - "Only the gold, and the silver, the brass, the iron, the tin, and the lead, every thing that may abide the fire, ye shall make it go through the fire, and it shall be clean: nevertheless it shall be purified with the water of separation: and all that abideth not the fire ye shall make go through the water.

The "waters of separation" designated the term for a *mikvah* immersion like those used to end the time of separation (*niddah*) after a woman's menstrual period.

The metal vessels were originally made, sold and purchased in a society based on harlotry and idolatry, so they are emblematic of mankind's fallen state. Thus they required a baptism in the *mikvah* to make them fit for use.

### References:

See "Waters of Eden: The Mystery of the Mikvah" by Aryeh Kaplan and "The Inside Story: A Chassidic Perspective on Biblical Events, Laws, and Personalities" by Yanki Tauber