



Waters of Hope

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Throughout our history, one of the central institutions of a Jewish community has been the *mikveh*. Immersion in this ritual bath was required in Temple times in order to purify oneself after coming into contact with various types of *tumah* (ritual impurity). Since then, the practical need for a *mikveh* has been relegated primarily to the laws of sex and conversion.

Yet the *mikveh* has taken on a greater significance in Jewish life than its specific halakhic applications would suggest. Over time, many customs have developed for using the *mikveh* for various elective spiritual needs. My father went to the *mikveh* every Erev Shabbat. Some have the custom to go to the *mikveh* only once a year, on Erev Yom Kippur. Many Hassidim try to go every day. Modern *mikveh* rituals have developed to mark all manner of life cycle events. All these practices reflect a sense that the *mikveh* is more than just a technical feature of the priestly purity system; it has become a place that offers the possibility of spiritual transformation. How did the *mikveh* come to take on this greater symbolic quality?



It is in Parashat Shemini that we come upon the first usage of the word *mikveh* that reminds us of the *mikveh* we are familiar with today.¹ The Book of Leviticus makes frequent reference to the need to wash oneself in water (רחץ במים). Yet the word, *mikveh* (מקוה), only appears once in the entire book, toward the end of the kosher laws in chapter 11.

The Torah gives us various qualifications for kosher mammals and fish, and then begins naming specific animals—types of birds, rodents and reptiles—which are off-limits because they are impure (טמאים). Having established these animals as forbidden to eat, the Torah then adds that even contact with their carcasses (נבילות) can transfer impurity:

ויקרא יא:לה-לו

וְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִפֹּל מִנִּבְלָתָם עָלָיו יִטְמָא תַנּוּר וְכִירִים יִתֵּץ טִמְאִים הֵם וְטִמְאִים יִהְיוּ לָכֶם. אֲךָ מַעַיִן וּבֹר מִקְוֵה מִיִּם יִהְיֶה טָהוֹר וְנִגְעַ בְּנִבְלָתָם יִטְמָא.

Leviticus 11:35-36

Everything on which the carcass of any of them falls shall be impure: an oven or stove shall be smashed. They are impure—and impure they shall remain for you. However, a spring or cistern, a *mikveh* of water, will remain pure, but whoever touches such a carcass in it shall be impure.

The word *mikveh* is based on the root ק.ו.ה, which forms the verb לקוות (*likvot*): “to collect,” or “gather”—so the spring or the cistern can be called a *mikveh mayyim* because they are

¹ The word appears twice before this in the Torah. The first usage comes very early on, on the third day of Creation: “God said, ‘Let the water below the sky be gathered (*yikavu*) into one area, so that the dry land may appear.’ And it was so. God called the dry land Earth and called the gathering of waters (*mikveh ha-mayyim*), ‘Seas.’ And God saw that this was good” (Genesis 1:9-10). The seas are the first *mikveh ha-mayyim*, “the waters that have been gathered together.”

The Torah’s second mention of a *mikveh* comes in the Book of Exodus, in the description of the first plague: “And the Eternal said to Moshe, ‘Say to Aharon: Take your rod and stretch your arm out over the waters of Egypt—its rivers, its canals, its lakes, and all its bodies of water (*mikveh meimeihem*)—that they may turn to blood; there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone” (Exodus 7:19). It is now clear that any form of gathered water—rivers, lakes, and anything else—might be referred to as a *mikveh mayyim*.



“gatherings of water.” Here we have a discrete, roughly person-sized collection of water, and it is associated with purity. This is not yet a description of the ritual *mikveh*, but this is the first verse that will be central in the rabbinic discussion of its features (the spring, for example, will be considered a *mikveh* in which one can ritually immerse).²

When we turn to the later books of Tanakh, however, we find the word *mikveh* used in a very different way. After the Torah, it is the prophet Yirmiyahu who uses the term most frequently, three times in all. However, the word as Yirmiyahu uses it does not refer to water, but to “hope.”³ *Mikveh* here is a noun form not of the verb לִקְוֹת (*likvot*), “to gather,” but of another verb built on the same ה.ו.ק. root: לִקְוֹת (*lekavot*), meaning “to hope.” There is a more common noun for “hope”: *tikvah*, which is used dozens of times in Tanakh. Yirmiyahu himself uses the word *tikvah* in this way twice!⁴ Yet he reserves the word *mikveh* as “hope” for a particular kind of use:

ירמיה יד:ח

מִקְוֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל מוֹשִׁיעוֹ בַּעֲת צָרָה לָמָּה תִהְיֶה כְגֵר בְּאֶרֶץ וְכַאֲרֵחַ נָטָה לָלוֹן.

Jeremiah 14:8

Hope of Israel (*Mikveh Yisrael*), its deliverer in time of trouble: why are You like a stranger in the land, like a traveler who stops only for the night?

Here, too, *mikveh* means “hope,” but the particular phrase “*Mikveh Yisrael*” is, in this context, a reference to God. God is the ultimate Hope of Israel—or at least, Yirmiyahu insinuates, God should be, but instead is acting like a stranger to Israel.

² See Mishnah Mikva’ot 1:8.

³ This usage then appears two other times later in Tanakh: in Ezra 10:2, and 2 Chronicles 29:15.

⁴ In Jeremiah 29:11 and 31:17.



Yirmiyahu uses this term for God two more times, but it is the second usage that becomes especially significant in the development of the symbolism of the *mikveh*:

ירמיה יז:יג

מִקְוֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' כָּל עֹזְבֵיךָ יִבְשׁוּ [וְסוּרֵי] בְּאֶרֶץ יִכְתְּבוּ כִּי עֲזָבוּ מְקוֹר מַיִם חַיִּים אֶת־ה'.

Jeremiah 17:13

Hope of Israel—the Eternal! All who forsake You will be ashamed. Those in the land who turn from You will be recorded, for they have forsaken the Eternal, the Source of Living Waters.

Here, once again, God is the *Mikveh*, the Hope of Israel. And, once again, Yirmiyahu's expression of Israel's ideal relationship to God only serves to highlight the estrangement that has taken place between them.

But centuries later, R. Akiva finds a more optimistic reading of this verse and, in doing so, also suggests a connection between the two uses of the word, *mikveh*. We find his reading in the last *mishnah* in Massekhet Yoma:

משנה יומא ח:ט

אמר רבי עקיבא, אשריכם ישראל, לפני מי אתם מטהרין, ומי מטהר אתכם, אביכם שבשמים, שנאמר (יחזקאל לו), וזרקתי עליכם מים טהורים וטהרתם. ואומר (ירמיה יז), מִקְוֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל ה', מה מִקְוֵה מְטֵהר את הטמאים, אף הקדוש ברוך הוא מטהר את ישראל.

Mishnah Yoma 8:9

R. Akiva said: Happy are you, Israel; before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? It is your Father in Heaven, as it says, “And I will throw pure water upon you, and you will be purified” (Ezekiel 36:25). And it says: “The ***Mikveh of Israel***—the Eternal!” Just as a



mikveh purifies the impure, so does the Holy Blessed One purify Israel.

R. Akiva is borrowing from the imagery we found in Leviticus, where water was an agent of purification—except that now he is speaking of a spiritual impurity that Israel bears, and God as the purifying agent. He brings two proof texts for that analogy. The first, from the prophet Yehezkel, is a verse that will become central to the Yom Kippur liturgy. Yehezkel is also borrowing from Leviticus’ pure/impure polarity, with God “throwing” pure water on Israel to purify them.

The second source R. Akiva brings—our verse from Yirmiyahu—pushes the metaphor a step further. Now God is not just throwing water upon Israel; God **is** the water. God has become the *Mikveh* of Israel. “Immersion” in God is cleansing, like dipping into water from a spring.

It appears at first to be R. Akiva who is playing with Yirmiyahu’s use of the word *mikveh* as a term for God. Where Yirmiyahu meant “hope,” R. Akiva reads in the other meaning of “*mikveh*,” and turns God into the Great Ritual Bath. What a metaphor! What an interpretive feat!

However, if we look again at the verse that R. Akiva quotes from the Book of Jeremiah, we find that the wordplay is already alluded to in the words of the prophet:

ירמיה יז:יג

מִקְוֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' כָּל עֹזְבֵיךָ יִבְשׁוּ [וְסוּרֵי] בְּאֶרֶץ יִכְתְּבוּ כִּי עָזְבוּ מִקְוֵה מַיִם חַיִּים אֶת־ה'.

Jeremiah 17:13

Hope of Israel—the Eternal! All who forsake You will be ashamed. Those in the land who turn from You will be recorded, for they have forsaken the Eternal, the **Source of Living Waters**.



Note that the verse begins with God as the *Mikveh Yisrael*, and then ends by calling God also the *Mekor Mayyim Hayyim*, the Source of Living Waters. More water imagery and more language from Leviticus, where one must “wash one’s body in living waters” (Leviticus 15:9). We can see that Yirmiyahu is already aware of the double meaning in the word. It is he who deliberately summons the image of the *mikveh* back in our *parashah* to suggest that God can serve the same function that once required a ritual bath. We purge ritual impurity by immersing in a designated measure of water. But God is the true *Mikveh* of Israel, Who can purge us of all of our impurities, and bring us back into a state of spiritual purity.

But of course, Yirmiyahu also intends the contextual meaning of the word. God is the Hope of Israel. Remember that Yirmiyahu summoned this image during “a time of trouble,” when God was like “a stranger in the land,” calling upon the Hope of Israel to once again be their deliverer.

To “immerse” in God, then, means to plunge ourselves into hopefulness, to sink into our faith, and to believe that we will be changed when we emerge from the Source of Living Waters.⁵

The prophet Yirmiyahu drew from the waters of Leviticus to give us powerful new metaphors for God. But let us not forget, the transference of meaning moves in both directions. Just as God becomes the *Mikveh* of Israel, so every communal *mikveh* becomes a place to experience contact with God. As we immerse in the living waters of the *mikveh*, we have an opportunity to imagine being totally immersed in the Holy One, surrounded by the cleansing, revitalizing force of the Ultimate *Mikveh*.

⁵ For a different sense of the way God acts like a “pool of water,” see my colleague R. Elie Kaunfer’s essay on Parashat VeZot HaBerkhah, “Blessing: A Purifying Pool of Water,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/blessing-purifying-pool-water>.

