
Reviewed by Sonia Smith Silva, McGill University, Montreal

This book is a compilation of fifty essays, stories and first-hand accounts about the experience, reasons, benefits, and philosophies behind the Jewish tradition of “Mikvah” and the centrality of it to Jewish life. A mikvah can be defined as a natural body of water or a gathering of water that has a designated connection to a natural source, such as fresh spring water, rainwater, or even melted snow. The pool is designed specifically for immersion, according to the rules and customs of Jewish law. The purpose of the mikvah is solely ritual purification, not physical cleanliness. One must thoroughly bathe before entering into and being purified by a mikvah.

The collection of laws described in Leviticus as "the laws of family purity," but more widely known as the "laws of mikvah" (Lev. 15:19-33) or Taharat Hamishpacha observance, introduces times of separation and reunion as part of a cycle in married life. Separation begins with the onset of the menstrual flow. It is a time when the depth of the husband-wife relationship is expressed without physical intimacy. It is a period of anticipation and preparation for mikvah immersion. The reunion, which follows, holds the highest potential for sanctity in marriage.

“The focus of the Mikvah laws is on establishing strong marriages by providing lifelong sexual satisfaction and excitement within the weeded union. Spiritually, the system is even more ambitious. It seeks to elevate every sexual act to the realm of holiness. There is a sexual ménage a trois at the heart of Judaism: husband, wife and God.” (p. 39)

The essay by Sarah Robinson: *Investigating the Biblical Roots of Niddah*, delves into the Bible and rabbinical commentaries to explain this term. “A woman who is menstruating is known as niddah, literally, separated temporally” (p. 89). This monthly suspension of intimacy for the duration of the women’s menstruation, in addition to seven days after the complete cessation of her menses, is a defining characteristic of a Jewish marriage. Husband and wife resume intimacy after she has immersed in the mikvah.

The editor, Rivkah Slonim, a Lubavitcher orthodox Jew well know for her speaking engagements around the country to woman from all levels of observance, speaks from her own experiences and feelings regarding this mitzvah, and the benefits that it bestows into the life of the married couple. She is the educational director of the Chabad House Jewish Student Center in Binghamton, New York, co founded with her husband in 1985, and which has gained recognition as one of the most successful campus outreach programs in the nation.

Slonim presents here a compilation of essays, some of them previously published in its original Hebrew, and translated here into English, emanating from different sources: books, magazines and public addresses. Some of the articles were contributed by very
well know personalities like Dr. Abraham Boyarski, Rabbi Reuven P. Bulka, Dr. Yaffa Eliach, Rabbi Manis Friedman, Dr. Tamar Frankiel, Rabbi Paysach J. Krohn, Rabbi Maurice Lamm, Rabbi Daniel Lapin, and many women who were willing to share their most intimate emotions and uplifting moments with the readers.

The book is divided in three parts: Part I, called In Theory and Practice, presents various essays that discuss Mikvah and the consequences of its use from the theological, philosophical, historical, mystical and practical perspectives. We also find here an interesting essay about the history and development of the Mikvah in America. In Part II, called Voices, we found stories and testimonies, mostly from women, but some men too, about the experience of mikvah in their lives. It presents some of the earliest prayers, speeches and writings on the subject as well as testimonies by women from all paths. Part III, called Memories and Tales, contains many Mikvah stories of altruism and faith on the part of women who observed the mikvah laws, from the former Soviet Union, to the ghetto, and even in modern-day America. These stories add a very inspirational side to this book.

There are very few books on the subject that are available for the everyday reader. There are even less titles that will include personal stories and testimonies. On one hand, this is a subject that for many generations was only talked in hushed tones. The old associations of Mikvah with physical dirt didn’t help to bring the subject to light either. Rarely, has the Mikvah been a subject for public discourses or the subject of editorials. In observant Jewish homes, Mikvah and the Laws of Family Purity are a fact of life closely associated with the sexual rhythm of a couple. But the natural modesty of a religious lifestyle precludes Mikvah from becoming a family term.

As the author explains in the preface, “this anthology grew out of my desire to bring the ritual of Mikvah out of the shadow and into the light”.

The importance of this book is that although some other English titles aboard the subject of marriage, sex, and family in Judaism, there are seldom any works where we can find personal testimonies, both from women and men, which speak to the heart. A similar book: Women and Water : Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law, edited by Rahel R. Wasserfall, (University Press of New England [for] Brandeis University Press, c1999.) also presents a compilation of numerous authors, but the approach, in contrast, is more of an historical, ethnographic, anthropological and sociological point of view instead of the personal stories presented here by Slonim.

Another classical book on the subject: Waters of Eden, the Mystery of the Mikvah, by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (NCSY/Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, 1976) answers many basic questions relating to the laws of family purity based on the teachings of the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, Kabbalah, Rashi, Ramban and many others. In this book, Kaplan explores the kabbalistic significance of the Mikvah which he considers the secret to Jewish survival.
Total Immersion includes a list of suggested readings and resources (all of them from and orthodox denomination) that could be useful to a person wanting to “dip in” to the subject.