

Mikveh – the last step

After a woman has waited her preliminary days, performed a valid hefsek taharah and successfully counted her 7 contiguous days of nekiim, she is now ready to go to the mikveh. We will discuss the timing of immersion in the mikveh, preparations for immersion and the immersion itself in this lecture.

When do you go to the mikveh?

1. As we said in the last lecture, the period of the 7 nekiim begins and ends at nightfall. Immersion in the mikveh will occur after nightfall of that 7th day (the beginning of the 8th day). For example, if a woman begins her 7 nekiim on Sunday night then she will conclude them at nightfall the following Sunday and will immerse **after** nightfall on that Sunday.
2. If a woman misses her mikveh night then her next opportunity to immerse in the mikveh is the following night. We generally do not go to the mikveh during the day with a few exceptions that I will note.
3. Why is mikveh immersion at night? The Rabbis in the Talmud tell us that the concern was that a woman's daughter might observe her going to the mikveh during the day and mistakenly think that her mother is immersing on day 7 and not day 8. The daughter might then come to erroneously immerse too early. [Immersing too early could lead to violation of the basic prohibition of sex while in niddah. For example, if a woman immersed on the 7th day, had sex, and then discovered she was bleeding again on that day.] Consequently, the Rabbis ruled that, with few exceptions, a woman should only immerse at night.
4. What are those exceptions?
 - i. A bride is permitted to immerse during the day provided that the wedding will not take place until that night or a later date.
 - ii. If it is too dangerous to leave the house at night, one can go to the mikveh during the 8th day.

Mikveh on Shabbat and holidays

1. If the 7th day of nekiim is Friday, immersion in the mikveh will be on Friday night after Shabbat has begun. One is permitted to use the mikveh on Shabbat and holidays provided that no Shabbat prohibitions are violated. Any bathing and showering would be done before Shabbat begins, hair cannot be combed or wrung dry in accordance with the normal laws of Shabbat.
2. Immersion is permitted on the holidays even on the second or third day. Again, no violations of the holidays are permitted so any preparatory activity (we will discuss these in the next section) that would involve violation of the holiday must be done before the holiday begins.
3. In some communities, using the mikveh on Shabbat or the holidays is virtually impossible because the mikveh is not in walking distance. Some community rabbis will allow women to immerse in those situations on Friday right before Shabbat and then drive home arriving home before Shabbat. In such a case, husband and wife cannot be alone together until nightfall. [Normally, seclusion is permitted between husband and

Laws of Niddah
Lecture three - Mikveh

wife when the wife is a niddah because of the assumption that they will take the necessary precautions and wait to have sex until after niddah is over. In this special circumstance, we allow early immersion provided that this extra stringency of not being alone together is followed.]

4. The only nights that a woman may not use the mikveh are the night of Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av when sex is forbidden.

How?

1. Immersion in the mikveh requires that the entire body be in contact with the waters of the mikveh.
2. This means that you need to be sure that your body is free of any obstructions that may prevent the water from touching you. The term for such obstructions is hatzitzah.
3. Hatzitzot can fall into three halakhic categories:
 - i. Biblical – in order for an obstruction to create an invalid immersion, the majority of the body must be covered in something undesirable e.g. mud. I would assume that we rarely encounter this level of hatzitzah.
 - ii. Rabbinic – in order for an obstruction to create a rabbinically invalid immersion, **either** the majority of the body must be covered in something desired (or natural) **or** a minority of the body is covered with something undesired. An example of the first is being covered in powder and an example of the second is having mud on your arm.
 - iii. Customary – it is customary to remove all obstructions from the body before immersing. This will include loose fitting jewelry and contact lenses, for example.
 - iv. Some things are not considered obstructions because they are part of the body. Hair, hair dye, fillings, even nail polish if it is newly applied may not be considered hatzitzot.
4. While the inside of the body are not in contact with the water, the inside of the mouth, nose, ears and eyes are treated halakhically as if they were going to be in contact with the water and must be free of hatzitzot.
6. Preparations for the mikveh are known as hafifah. They involve the following:
 - i. Bathing in order to soak hard skin and calluses so they are more water soluble.
 - ii. Washing and combing hair (including all body hair) to get it knot-free.
 - iii. Cutting or cleaning finger and toe nails. Ashkenazim have the practice of cutting nails to ensure that there is no dirt embedded underneath them. Women for whom this is extremely troubling should consult a halakhic expert.
 - iv. Removing makeup, contact lenses and band aids
 - v. Cleaning eyes, ears and nose
 - vi. Brushing and flossing
 - vii. Using the toilet before immersion
 - viii. One showers at the mikveh after all the prior preparations are done.
 - ix. Performing a visual inspection of the entire body to make sure there is nothing adhering to the body.
7. Preparations for the mikveh are best performed as close as possible to actually immersing. This is to ensure that new hatzitzot do not form. There are times when hafifah will not be right before immersion such as when immersing on Shabbat or especially

Laws of Niddah
Lecture three - Mikveh

holidays. One should try and do some preparations during the day (such as cutting one's nails) in order to follow another opinion that maintained that hafifah should be done early so that it is done thoroughly.

Mikveh logistics

1. The mikveh generally consists of one or more bathrooms that act as preparation rooms plus the small pool which is the mikveh itself. [The actual cistern where the rain water collects is unseen and the pool where you immerse is attached to that cistern by a PVC pipe. The water in the immersion pool is chlorinated and regularly inspected.]
2. While one is not required to do the preparations at the mikveh, most are set up to accommodate this. If you are not doing your preparations at the mikveh, you should shower at the mikveh. There are usually two sets of prep rooms those that have tubs and those that have showers.
3. Many mikvaot (plural of mikveh) carry towels, robes, slippers, toothbrushes etc. for your use.
4. A woman known as the mikveh lady is there to observe your immersion and ensure that you immerse safely and that your entire body including all your hair goes below the water.
5. There is a charge for use of the mikveh and it is often customary to tip the mikveh attendant.
6. Large city mikvaot have hours where they are open and no appointment is needed. Appointments are used in smaller areas where there is no designated full time attendant. An appointment will always be necessary for use on Shabbat or the holidays. Just call beforehand and you will be told when to arrive.
7. Many mikvaot are wheelchair accessible.

The mikveh lady

1. The job of the mikveh attendant is to watch you immerse safely and completely. Often she will say "kosher" if you have immersed fully.
2. Some mikveh attendants might do a fuller inspection of you to make sure you are free of hatzitzot. She might look at your hands, feet and back. She may ask questions.

Immersion

1. When you are ready to immerse, you summon the mikveh attendant (usually by intercom). She will arrive, ask some questions, may check your feet or hands and then take you to the mikveh itself. Hand her your robe and walk down the steps into the water.
2. Ashkenazic women immerse first and then say the brachah. The brachah is Baruch Atah Melech Haolam asher kidishanu bimitzvotav vitzivanu al hatevillah.
3. Sefardic women make the brachah before disrobing and immersing.
4. It is customary to then immerse a second and third time.
5. One may not immerse in a man-made lake. One may immerse in the ocean.