

# Reclaiming Mikvah

MELISSA SCHOLTEN-GUTIERREZ

Rabba Melissa Scholten-Gutierrez, before coming to Yeshivat Maharat, worked as a social worker, Jewish communal professional, writer, and social media consultant. She combined these skill sets in her internships at JCC Manhattan, Hillel International, Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, and Global Day of Jewish Learning. Rabba Scholten-Gutierrez earned a Masters in Social Work from University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and completed her undergraduate education at University of California, Irvine. She received semikha from Maharat in 2018.

**M***ikvah* is a beautiful ritual with immense possibilities for spiritual enrichment; a monthly ritual for women which can be as powerful or monotonous as you choose to make it. Women singularly hold the power over this experience and what we share with one another can only help empower us to make it our own special moment. I believe that embracing *mikvah* as not only something we must do, but something we choose to do, is one of the most feminist things we have the opportunity to do as Jewish women. What follows is what works for me, and I encourage everyone to think about what ways they too can personally reclaim immersion as a powerful moment.

For me, it begins when I start my preparation. I choose to view the inherent possibilities in each step, rather than focus on the mundane counting, cleaning, and checking. Here are my personal intentions as I go through the process on *mikvah* night.

## **Chatzitza**

Remove all clothes and anything which could be considered a barrier  
— *I am created in God's image.*

## **Chafifa**

Wash body and hair thoroughly in shower, paying attention to folds, creases, and hidden places  
— *May goodness flow over me*  
Remove dead skin and shave if planning to do so

### *Keren III*

— *May I be exposed to the world around me*  
Brush hair well to ensure all knots and stray hairs are removed  
— *May I be untangled from that which restricts me*  
Brush teeth and floss, clean around ears gently, and wipe eyes  
— *May I speak, hear, and see goodness*  
Trim and clean nails, blow nose, and use the bathroom  
— *May I be free of what needs to leave me.*

#### ***Iyyun***

Do a final visual inspection of entire body  
— *I am enough.*

As someone with a long history of body image issues, having someone see me naked is no easy thing. I could be stalled there from the start, however I make the choice to mentally prepare myself for the *mikvah* attendant to see me and am always relieved when she does not examine me too closely and instead trusts my ability to follow the checklist and have appropriate preparation. Regardless, I find myself having to push aside my fears and issues and simply trust in the *tzniut*-ness of my *mikvah* attendant. I have to believe with all my being that she will not watch me as my naked back is turned to her, just as I avert my eyes when guiding an immersion. Normally, trust must be earned over time, but in these moments I have to get myself there without the gift of time. Once I slip out of my robe and begin to walk into the water, all else must be forgotten if I am to make this the meaningful experience I crave.

I focus on every step I take going into the water. They are each a step away from the rigors of daily life. A step into the calming natural waters of life. Being completely present as I descend into this sacred space is a blessing all its own.

There are seven steps into the *mikvah* waters — each step provides an opportunity to connect to tradition. Depending upon what is on my mind, I pick some set of seven to think about; days of creation, patriarchs and matriarchs, the wedding blessings, days of mourning, etc.

Once fully into the *mikvah* pool, I get myself situated into the middle, take a deep breath and allow myself to be absorbed by the water, exhaling as I go in. Exhaling all the negativity and stress. Holding in the beauty of the moment. Taking a moment to right myself before repeating not only the physical dip into the water, but the spiritual one as well.

After I have completed my immersions in a kosher manner, which often

*Melissa Scholten-Gutierrez*

requires several attempts to insure that my entire body is under water, I take a moment to just be in that space. I allow myself to reflect on the past month and the coming month; on the relationships which have grown or wavered; on those people in my life who need the healing embrace of these living waters. I allow myself a personal prayer to connect to these people and ask God for the strength to be what is needed in the coming month.

Before I exit the waters, I take the time to embrace my innermost spiritual self, really pushing my own comfort levels. I force myself to think of the women all over the world who are also in this space at this time, and for the times before. Connecting not only to my physical ancestors, but to all those who are my soul-sisters in this *mitzvah*. Sending them wishes for the healing and nurturing waters to provide for them in the month to come.

Ultimately, I find that embracing the deeply spiritual side of this ritual in a world where so many rituals feel monotonous is empowering. It allows my entire sense of who I am as a modern religious woman to be revived and renewed on a monthly basis.

You are likely asking a few key questions now, so let's just be blunt: Yes, it is an annoyance to have to reschedule other things to get to *mikvah* on the right night and time. Yes, I hate having to trek out in the cold, dark night to be scrutinized by a stranger. Yes, I dislike having to schedule an appointment in a small window of time and feel rushed to get through.

Yes, I have to focus hard to get into the space to make it a truly spiritual encounter.

Yes, it is worth it to know that I am fulfilling such a wonderful *mitzvah*.

Yes, it is powerful to step into my Jewish femininity every month.