



## JEWISHLIFETRENDS SPOTTING

### WHAT'S NEW?

A column spotting the latest trends in Jewish life, within our Reform Movement, and beyond. Trends that are welcome and trends that are worrisome. Trends that you bemoan and trends you want to make your own. Read on—and let us know what trends you're observing (by clicking on “submissions” at [www.reformjudaismmag.org](http://www.reformjudaismmag.org)).



## Reimagining the Mikveh by Sue Fishkoff

The day Jill Trapper was installed as president of Beth El Temple Center in Belmont, MA, she and her incoming executive board, along with the outgoing board, went to Mayyim Hayyim, a liberal *mikveh* in nearby Newton Centre. Privately, one at a time, each individual immersed three times in the ritual bath, saying blessings Beth El's rabbi had composed for the occasion.

“It was so moving; the water was so embracing,” says Trapper of her first *mikveh* experience (after which everyone celebrated with a picnic on that warm summer afternoon). “And it made me so hopeful for my term as president.”

Like *kashrut* (dietary laws) and *Shabbat*, *mikveh* is nowadays being reexamined by increasing numbers of Reform Jews. Long rejected by Reform Jewry as an outmoded ritual rife with sexism, this tradition is being mined—slowly, carefully—for its spiritual potential, in new as well as traditional ways.

In observant circles, *mikveh* is used most often as part of *niddah*, which requires married Jewish women to immerse monthly after menstruation; for conversion; and by brides and grooms before their wedding.

*Mikveh* made its first incursions back into Reform use about twenty-five years ago, when Reform clergy began bringing

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JOSEPH GINDI IMMERSSES IN THE MIKVEH OF MAYYIM HAYYIM, NEWTON CENTRE, MA.

more converts to the *mikveh*, partly to reconnect with tradition in the conversion ritual and partly out of a desire to sanctify the ritual aesthetically. By 2001, the Central Conference of American Rabbis' conversion committee had issued new guidelines for Reform conversion. Along with convening a *beit din* (an examining body of clergy and educators) and encouraging male converts to undergo *hakafat dam brit* (ritual circumcision, through the taking of a symbolic drop of blood from the penis), the guidelines recommended a *mikveh* ceremony. “*Mikveh* adds an emotional, physical, and ritual element to the conversion process which many Jews by choice find meaningful,” says Rabbi Steven Sirbu of Temple Emeth in Teaneck, New Jersey, who “strongly encourages” converts to immerse in the community *mikveh* (built on the synagogue's property by an Orthodox-controlled *mikveh* association with the stipulation that it remain accessible for Reform conversions).

Reform Jews are using *mikvaot* today in a wide variety of alternative ways: to mark life-cycle events or a change of personal status, to celebrate joy or sanctify grief. Immersions before a bat or bar mitzvah, to mark divorce or the death of a loved one, to celebrate graduation or a trip to Israel, as gratitude after recovery from a serious illness are increasingly common.

And while *mikveh* is traditionally practiced in privacy, some liberal *mikvaot* are hosting groups, including women marking the onset of menopause and men taking their sons before the High Holidays.

In the early 1990s, when Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Michigan became the first Reform synagogue to consider building a *mikveh*, the idea met with hostility from some in the congregation. “They considered *mikveh* to be sexist,” Rabbi Paul Yedwab recalls. “In their minds they were dealing only with *niddah*.” To change that perception the temple leadership held study sessions, introducing Bible texts and rabbinic commentaries on *mikveh* and discussing some of the new practices incorporated by liberal Jews around the country. In one such session a woman who had initially opposed the plan told the group she'd just had a double mastectomy and asked the rabbi whether she might be able to use the *mikveh* to mark her recovery. “I got a chill up my spine,” Rabbi Yedwab recalls.