
THE PHILOSOPHY OF TAHARAT HAMISHPACHAH & MIKVAH

The Hidden Mitzvot of Love, Joy and Renewal

The Morasha Syllabus recommends that this class be taught to men and women separately to allow the full expression and exchange of ideas.

After exploring marriage and love in the first two parts of this series, a critical question remains: How can a couple ensure that their marriage will remain strong, vibrant and special throughout their lifetime? We already addressed three essential aspects which will help spouses establish a solid marriage: (1) continually acting as an *ezer knegdo* (soul mate) to help their spouse reach their potential, (2) recognizing that the essence of love – *ahava* – is based on genuine concern, giving – *hav* – and hard work, and (3) strengthening, sharing and drawing nourishment from strong Jewish values in building a Jewish home together.

In this class, we introduce a fourth component – the powerful glue of the couple that is created by the mitzvot of *Taharat HaMishpachah* (family purity) and the *mikvah* (ritual bath). As discussed in the earlier classes, marriage is the only setting for “soul mates” to actually become one. As Jewish marriage is both a physical and spiritual union, the mitzvot of *Taharat HaMishpachah* and *mikvah* play a critical role in setting the conditions and atmosphere for actualizing and strengthening the marriage. As the couple learns how to give to one another, the *mikvah* cycle elevates them in their efforts and their desire to eternalize their bond of love and oneness.

The *mikvah* has been central to Jewish life from time immemorial. Indeed, so great is its importance that a community is required to build one even before they build a synagogue. Furthermore, even a Torah scroll may be sold to raise money for its construction (see *Meshiv Davar* 2:45).

This class will address the following questions:

- What is ritual purity and impurity? Does it have anything to do with physical cleanliness?
- How does the dynamic of the laws of family purity enhance married life?
- What are the basic requirements for building a *mikvah*?
- What is a *mikvah* used for? What is accomplished by immersing in its waters?

Class Outline:

- Section I. Understanding *Niddah*
 - Part A. What is a *Niddah*?
 - Part B. Understanding Spiritual Purity and Impurity

- Section II. Taharat HaMishpachah – Jewish Family Purity Laws
 - Part A. Holiness
 - Part B. Peace and Unity
 - Part C. Keeping the Spark Alive
 - Part D. Like a New Bride
 - Part E. A Note on Biological Changes

- Section III. The Mikvah
 - Part A. What is a Mikvah?
 - Part B. Purification – Spiritual Elevation
 - Part C. Symbolism of the Mikvah – The Waters of Rebirth and Transformation
 - Part D. Firsthand Accounts

SECTION I. UNDERSTANDING NIDDAH

After a certain woman in our community began observing Taharat Hamishpacha, her husband complained to me about it. Only half jokingly, he said: “Rabbi, this is ridiculous – it’s ruining our marriage.”

Six months later he confided to me, “This has been wonderful. It has brought a kind of excitement into our married lives. We were very bored with each other, tired of each other. Our physical relationship was becoming monotonous, with no excitement. This was like a magic potion. In all seriousness, Rabbi, this has saved our marriage. Not just the physical part. Everything.” (Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, One Plus One Equals One)

The laws of Taharat HaMishpachah are based on the concept that a husband and wife must abstain from physical contact during her menstruation, at which time she acquires the status of *niddah*, meaning “separate.” During this phase, the couple abstains from marital relations and focuses on the non-physical aspects of their relationship. They unite again after a period of purity has been observed which culminates in the wife immersing in a mikvah, a ritual bath.

In this section we will explore the basic laws and concepts that underlie the practice of Taharat HaMishpachah, such as *niddah* and the basic concept of ritual purity and impurity. Afterwards, in the next section, we will explore how this mitzvah elevates marriage and enhances the relationship between husband and wife.

PART A. WHAT IS A NIDDAH?

As mentioned above, *niddah* literally means “separate.” *Niddah* describes the time of physical separation of a woman from her husband at the onset her period or any other blood originating from the uterus. The reason for this “separation” is that the appearance of blood signals a woman’s shift from a state of *taharah*

(spiritual purity) to a state of *tumah* (spiritual impurity) [These concepts will be further explained]. Once her bleeding has ceased, she must count seven clean days before going to a mikvah to cleanse herself of the ritual impurity. During this time, physical contact and of course sexual intercourse between husband and wife are prohibited. Only by returning to a state of purity, which is achieved through a sort of rebirth by immersing in the waters of the mikvah, are husband and wife once again permitted to each other.

1. **Vayikra (Leviticus) 15:19 – Menstrual bleeding gives a woman ritual impurity, a status known as niddah.**

When a woman has a discharge of blood – her discharge from her flesh being blood – she shall be in her state of niddah for a seven-day period.

ואשה כי תהיה זבה דם יהיה זובה בבשרה שבעת ימים

In her niddah-state, it is forbidden for a man to have sexual relations with his wife.

2. **Ibid. 18:19, 20:18 – There is a proscription of intercourse at the time of niddah.**

You shall not come close to uncovering the nakedness of a woman who is impure as a niddah.

ואל אשה בנדת טמאתה לא תקרב לגלות ערותה:

[Note: The Torah regards the gravity of relations with a woman who is niddah equal to that of eating on Yom Kippur and eating bread on Passover. This stance may seem very strict, considering it refers to two consenting adults married to each other. We must understand, though, that the Torah considers intimacy in the state of niddah to be a kind of illicit relationship.]

3. **Rabbi Dr. Menachem Brayer, The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature, pg. 89 – The wide-ranging changes that a woman experiences at the onset of her menstrual cycle are not only due to hormones; they reflect a deep spiritual event that returns every month.**

During her menstrual flow, a woman is focused on re-preparing her body for a new cycle, a kind of healing process. Since her bodily energies are more focused on this, she is less available for the kind of holistic spiritual, intellectual and emotional unity which ought to accompany relations with her husband. As such, relations at this time would become more of a base, physical act. Hence the Torah prohibited it, as it did other forms of illicit unions.

Upon the cessation of bleeding, the wife counts a period of seven clean days and then immerses in a mikvah.

4. **Vayikra 15:28 – A niddah must count seven [clean] days, after which she is purified; this purification is achieved through immersion in the mikvah.**

She shall count seven days, and then she shall be pure.

וספרה לה שבעת ימים ואחר תטהר:

PART B. UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL PURITY AND IMPURITY

1. **Rabbi Shraga Simmons, Aish.com, based on “Eye of the Needle” by Rabbi Yitzchak Coopersmith – Taharah and tumah reflect spiritual realities of how present or hidden God is in the world.**

[Many] Hebrew words...have no precise English definition because they express spiritual ideas that have no parallel in English culture. The words taharah and tumah...are popularly translated as “purity” and “impurity.”

In English, the word “pure” implies something perfectly clean, flawless, unpolluted or innocent. Ivory Soap is advertised as “99.44% pure.”...“Impure” in your Thesaurus will yield synonyms such as contaminated, corrupt, tainted, and unclean. That is why so many people think that “tameh” means “dirty.”

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The central tenet of Judaism is that God is one. Absolutely one. There is no force that exists independent of Him. Man’s struggle in this world – the exercise of his free will – is in choosing either to move toward God and reality, or to move away from God, to illusion or nothingness.

We call these choices “good” and “evil.” When man makes a choice that moves him closer to God, he is choosing “good.” When he makes a choice that moves him away from God, he is choosing “evil” (see Maimonides, “Guide for the Perplexed” 3:23).

Evil has no intrinsic reality. It is the absence of good, or the absence of an open manifestation of God. God’s existence can be open and clear to us, or it can be hidden from us. The open presence of God is what we call “taharah.” A state of God’s hiddenness is what we call “tumah.” In other words, “tumah” is really a “taharah-vacuum.”

Because the human being, when it is alive and filled with a soul – the open manifestation of God’s presence – has a much greater condition of taharah...therefore, when the soul departs, it leaves behind a much greater vacuum of taharah, a much stronger tumah, than that of an animal...When a woman gives birth to a girl, her state of tumah is twice that of when she gives birth to a boy (Leviticus 12:5). That is because the presence of a female child within her gives her a greater state of “taharah.” The female bears within her the power to give life, a condition that is an open manifestation of Godliness, and a higher level of “taharah.” The departure of a female child, therefore, creates a greater spiritual vacuum. Hence, the woman is tameh for a longer period of time.

Tumah is [also] the loss of “potential life.”...Women incur this state of Tumah when they menstruate, because of the loss of potential life within them (Leviticus 15:19).

2. **Meira Svirsky, based on classes of Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, A Woman’s Mitzvah pp. 26–27. A human being is a vehicle to reveal Godliness in the world. The concepts of purity and impurity have to do with one’s potential to reveal this Godliness.**

The Hebrew noun taharah...has no English equivalent. “Spiritual Purity” may be the closest translation, but the concept means much more than those words convey. Taharah refers to a state of existence that is purely spiritual and totally non-physical. It is not a value judgment of good or bad; it is also not a judgment of a person’s worth...one can become tameh, spiritually impure, by fulfilling some of the greatest commandments, mitzvot, of the Torah...[such as] taking care of a dead body... Most sources of tumah result from death or the loss of potential life. Because death is the ultimate loss of the ability to exercise free will, it is also the ultimate loss of spiritual opportunity in this world.

Thus, the death of a human being represents the greatest amount of tumah, since, when alive, a human being possesses the greatest potential for manifestation of G-d's presence in the world...Hence, a person who comes in contact with death is enjoined to "process" this experience so that it can be used for his or her spiritual growth. *Halachically*, one of the ways G-d has chosen to do this is to distance us from certain activities, creating a type of "spiritual space" to foster this growth.

In as much as a woman was blessed with a body able to produce a living being made in G-d's image, her menstrual cycle is a symbol of this un-actualized potential.

The tumah state that menstrual blood represents is one of unrealized potential for life. It must be stressed that tumah is a spiritual reality having nothing to do with physical cleanliness.

3. **Ibid., pg. 29 – Mikvah is not for cleansing the body; its purpose is solely spiritual.**

One of the reasons the Hebrew word mikvah is translated as "ritual bath" is because mikvah has nothing to do with the usual bath we take when we are dirty. Indeed, Jewish law tells us a woman must be scrupulously clean before immersing...Rather the purpose of immersing in a mikvah is to change one's spiritual status. Although the medium...is water, the change occurs on a strictly spiritual level.

4. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, pp. 27-28 – The mikvah reconnects us to our spiritual source after a contaminating encounter with some form of death.**

We can gain some insight into the spiritual significance of the family purity laws if we consider the meaning of the concepts of purity and impurity in the Torah. The Hebrew word for impurity is tumah, which is related to the word *timtum*, confusion. Every time a person has an experience that appears to demonstrate that we are controlled by physical forces, and that we are not essentially spiritual beings, our souls are in a state of confusion and therefore impure, tameh.

Death is the ultimate illusion that a human being is purely physical and lacks moral freedom because all we see of the corpse is the mortal body without a hint of the immortal soul. This is why purity is always associated with life and impurity with death. In the case of the family purity laws, it is the loss of potential life (the egg that could have become a new life) indicated by the menstrual cycle that creates a state of impurity. A mikvah is always connected to a natural source of water (e.g., rainwater or a spring), which is as close to God's original creation as we can get. Immersion in the mikvah symbolically reconnects one to the infinite and reminds us of our essential moral freedom and transcendent spiritual nature. It is an act of rebirth into the natural state of purity and clarity.

As we see above, tumah is rooted in a state of mind formed by certain encounters we have with the physical world.

5. **Rabbi Norman Lamm, A Hedge of Roses, pg. 84 – Ritual impurity is commonly associated with death.**

An analysis of the various species of tumah reveals that what they have in common is the awareness of death. The most potent source of impurity is, indeed, a corpse or a part thereof. The other kinds of tumah imply, indirectly, the suggestion of death, even if only the loss of potential life...Semen...is the loss of potential life...A niddah...loses an unfertilized ovum...a whisper of death.

We see “purity” is a state where one is best able to manifest Godly life potential. “Family purity” lends to an atmosphere where a couple is best able to actualize their Godly potential of love, sharing, friendship, kindness, respect and patience, all key ingredients for building a home. The monthly niddah cycle, which climaxes with the purity of the mikvah, is symbolic of renewal and rejuvenation. From the partial “death” at the beginning of the menstrual cycle, the gift of renewed spiritual life comes with immersion in the mikvah.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I.

- ≈ Jewish law prescribes a period of physical separation between husband and wife during and immediately after the wife’s menstruation. Seven clean days after her cycle finishes, the wife immerses in a mikvah for ritual purity and spiritual rejuvenation.
- ≈ Menstruation renders a woman tameh or ritually impure, giving her the status of a niddah. During this period she and her husband abstain from physical contact.
- ≈ Despite the use of the mikvah waters in the cleansing process, ritual purity and impurity, taharah and tumah in Hebrew, have nothing to do with physical cleanliness. Tumah is a state that limits us spiritually, and the mikvah is its spiritual cure.
- ≈ The common denominator of many types of tumah is that they result from some form of contact with death or loss of life potential, either in the form of a corpse, carcass, or menstrual bleeding. Such contact can adversely influence our outlook on life, influencing us to perceive our existence as ephemeral rather than eternal.

SECTION II. TAHARAT HAMISHPACHAH – JEWISH FAMILY PURITY LAWS

For many women, the monthly immersion in the mikvah is an intensely spiritual experience, in which she feels a sense of spiritual rejuvenation. It is also comparable to a monthly wedding, and many couples affirm that the monthly cycle of separation and marital reunion is vital in keeping their marriage vibrant and fresh. In this section we will explain why Judaism requires purity as an essential element for building a joyful marriage and a loving home.

PART A. HOLINESS

Very often, couples hit a point where each one questions: “Are we really meant to be together? Maybe I made a mistake.” For marriage to last and build over time, the couple needs to trust that God will help make peace between them and create harmony at times of clashing wills. Observing the mikvah cycle is our expression of trust in this peace process. Taharat HaMishpachah is a spiritual path towards forging an eternal bond.

1. **Rebbetzin Tehilla Abramov, The Secret of Jewish Femininity, pp. 30-33 – Taharat HaMishpachah brings sanctity into the marriage.**

She should join him with holy and refined thoughts. Then their minds will be fused as one...and they will both be united at this time, and God’s presence will rest between them (Ramban, Iggeret HaKodesh).

[A woman] has been granted a natural ability to appreciate marital intimacy as holy and Divine.

Therefore, the merely physical is often not sufficient for her. In order to function as a total woman, she must feel that intimacy is more than a physical act. It must involve her soul and provide her with deep emotional fulfillment.

Rashi explains that women have a greater potential for sexual desire than men (Bereishit 3:16). This desire is not simply for physical activity, but for the act of holiness and love described above.

This recognition of woman's sexuality is the cornerstone of the system of values and laws referred to as Taharat HaMishpachah, the Godly system governing marital relations. The Torah describes the mitzvah of marital intimacy as *onah*, "a response to her," implying that a man must attune himself to his wife and her desire for holiness in the marriage.

The conception of sexuality as a holy function requires that it be carried out within the context of guidelines established by God... These guidelines... follow a woman's own natural rhythms and inclinations and reflect her desire for both privacy and individuality, closeness and love.

Taharat HaMishpachah is the secret of Jewish femininity. It provides a couple with a Divinely ordained framework showing them how to relate to each other and express and build their love and devotion. Taharat HaMishpachah is influential in molding the spiritual nature and wellbeing of our children. We all want the best for our offspring. Keeping Taharat HaMishpachah is something we can do for them even before conception.

2. Rabbi M. Shlanger, Ohel Rachel, pg. 40, Ch. 7 – Only God can create unity between man and woman (through following the mitzvahs that allows God's Presence to unite them).

A successful marriage depends on certain shared perceptions between husband and wife. First, the perception that they were initially created with one soul and one body. Second, the perception that God separated them and only He can reunite them... as it is written: "God settles individuals into homes." (Bereishit Rabbah 68:4)... God disclosed the task incumbent on every couple to Adam and Eve after He separated them and brought her back to him: *And he shall cling to his wife and they shall become one flesh* (Bereishit 2:24). Their purpose is then to return to the state of "being one" – the ideal form of existence.

PART B. PEACE AND UNITY

The deeper source of the couple's appreciation for the mikvah is that it creates a structured path for two souls to unite physically as one. As we mentioned in previous classes, in as much as man and wife are one in soul, the mikvah process reveals and builds this unity in the marriage gradually, one month at a time.

1. Rabbi M. Shlanger, Ohel Rachel, pg. 17-8, Ch. 1 – The mitzvah of mikvah allows a couple to feel they are one person (true soul connection).

The reason marital relations lead to peace is that they rejuvenate the marriage and cause the couple to feel that they are one person. In the words of the Gemara (Berachot 24a), "*Man's wife is like his own body.*" And this unity is the source of the entire relationship – love, joy and complete peace – between man and wife. This then is the power of *mitzvat onah* (the mitzvah of marital intimacy) – it concentrates all the love and every aspect of the marriage relationship into one moment.

2. **Rabbi M. Shlanger, Ohel Rachel, pg. 41, Ch. 7 – The mitzvah of mikvah allows a couple to fuse their one shared soul as well as their bodies.**

In the words of the Maharal: *“It is fitting that there be physical unity just as there is unity of soul. And that unity can only be attained through marital relations. As it is written, ‘And they shall become one flesh.’ When there is a unity and merging with one’s wife, then the soul – which is united – is at peace with the body. (Be’er HaGolah Derashot page 81) Food consumption sustains human existence by fusing the soul and the body. Similarly, marital relations sustain the existence of the couple by fusing their one soul to their bodies. And this brings peace to all areas of their lives.*

A couple in touch with the spirit of Judaism understands that God’s greatest desire is like that of a father who wants to see His children happy. Therefore, He blessed us with the gift of mikvah.

3. **Rabbi M. Shlanger, Ohel Rachel pg. 17, Ch. 1 – The mitzvah of mikvah allows a couple to use sexual relations to feel complete and perfect their marriage.**

This mitzvah [of onah] is called “joy” because it makes man complete – and this feeling of completion is what initially caused him joy at the wedding. As the Maharal states...*Because their joining together [in sexual relations as proscribed by Torah] is what makes man complete.* (Beer HaGolah Be’er Sheni) The joy that the couple experiences from all aspects of their relationship, and particularly from mitzvah onah, develops their love and brings them to a perfected marriage...

PART C. KEEPING THE SPARK ALIVE

The laws of Taharat HaMishpachah rejuvenate the marriage in an upward spiral of mutual appreciation, “romance,” and love. Some posit that the Torah’s boundaries correspond with professional advice given to people suffering from boredom and even sexual dysfunction in their marriages.

1. **Rabbi Manis Friedman, Doesn’t Anyone Blush Anymore pp. 103-104 – Mikvah helps us reclaim our sexuality.**

Most therapists who treat sexual dysfunction give their clients this advice at the beginning of their therapy: “Don’t touch each other for two weeks.” Ironically, this advice is given to us in the biblical book of Leviticus for free. Loosely translated it reads: “Don’t touch each other. Then with the right person, at the right time, and in the right place, you can be sexual” (Lev.15:19, 25, 28; 18:1-30 & 20:18)

2. **Rabbi Manis Friedman, Doesn’t Anyone Blush Anymore pp. 103-104 – When we lack sexual boundaries we deaden and confuse our sex drive.**

A man and a woman alone together is a sexual event...The fact that we find this so hard to believe is an indication of how dulled our sexual nature has become...It’s fashionable today to say, “There’s no difference between boys and girls,” as though that lack of difference is a virtue. It is a symptom... When we need to be sexual, when it is integral to the success of our marriage and to our lives, we need sex therapists to train us.

Our dysfunction certainly is not due to lack of practice...Something isn’t working...Kids pay a high price to maintain these “close” relationships. They kill their sexual personality in order to refrain... Sexuality is an ability. It must be protected and cultivated, not denied or exploited. If we [put ourselves in sexual situations only to] stifle it over and over again, we can’t retrieve it when we need it: in our marriages. No wonder sex therapists are making money.

The true source of “romance,” the thrill of encounter after separation, is rooted in the mikvah cycle. This dynamic mirrors a spiritual longing in which both male and female play unique roles.

3. **Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburg, *The Mystery of Marriage* pp. 244-247 – A couple’s love life spirals upward with every mikvah experience.**

... the husband’s dynamic in marriage is referred to as “touching and not touching.” This idiom is expressed in the Torah by the image of an eagle gently hovering over its nest, careful not to harm its young or disturb the nest’s delicate order. The desire to “touch”... indicates the husband’s desire to care for his wife and all her needs. At the same time, the restraint reflected in “not touching” indicates his willingness to allow his wife the space necessary to function independently. While not touching, the husband never distances himself to the extent that his wife feels abandoned. His love and concern continue to hover over her even as she tends to her own needs and the needs of her household.

This dynamic underlies the process of creation itself. In order to generate finite reality, G-d had to, figuratively speaking, remove His infinite “light” from the arena of creation.

By withdrawing, recognizing her independence, the husband inspires his wife to aspire (run) to a fuller degree of unity with him.

The mikvah cycle also brings out the passionate nature we search for in love.

4. **Rabbi Manis Friedman, *Doesn’t Anyone Blush Anymore* pp. 71-75 – The mikvah cycle of withdrawal and reunion brings out a fiery love in marriage.**

If a husband and wife develop a calm love for each other, the relationship will not thrive. If they are too familiar with each other...too much like brother and sister, their love will not flourish. True intimacy in marriage – fiery love – is created by constant withdrawal and reunion.

If a husband and wife are never separate, their love begins to sour...it’s not conducive to man-woman love; it’s the environment for brother-sister love or parent-child love.

That’s why the ideal blessing for a married couple is: “Your honeymoon should never end.” A honeymoon – when two people who were once separate come together for the first time – should never end, because that’s what a marriage thrives on. The only way to ...[do this] is to provide a separation...Often arguing isn’t for the sake of arguing, but for the sake of creating a distance so that husband and wife can feel like they’re coming together. That’s not a very happy solution... The physical separation given to us by G-d for that purpose is a much happier solution...“the laws of family purity”...For those days the separation is total: no touching, no sitting on a swing, and even sleeping in separate beds...In order to nurture that stormy fiery love, our way of living has to correspond to the emotions we are trying to nurture and retain.

PART D. LIKE A NEW BRIDE

The freshness that Taharat HaMishpachah instills in a marriage is designed to recreate the wedding day itself.

1. **Talmud Bavli, Niddah 31b – The law of niddah keeps a husband from taking his wife for granted.**

It was taught that Rabbi Meir used to say: Why

תניא, היה ר' מ' אומר: מפני מה אמרה תורה נדה

does the Torah say that a woman in niddah must count seven days? Since a husband may grow accustomed to being with his wife whenever he wants, she may become uninviting to him. Therefore, the Torah says she should be impure for seven days in order that she will become as precious to her husband as the day he married her.

לשבעה- מפני שרגיל בה (כל שעה שירצה), וקץ בה (מאוסה עליו), אמרה תורה: תהא טמאה שבעה ימים, כדי שתהא חביבה על בעלה כשעת כניסתה לחופה.

2. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, pg. 27 – Taharat HaMishpachah maintains the element of excitement in a marriage.**

The Sages of the Talmud discuss some of the effects of the family purity laws in direct, pragmatic terms. Thousands of years ago, they commented on factors in human nature that are only now being confirmed by social scientists. A number of recent studies have found that one of the most common problems experienced by married couples is that of boredom, a lack of novelty in their intimate life. The desire for new and exciting experiences is a major factor in infidelity. The Sages explained that the laws of family purity are designed to provide a solution to this problem. The period of abstinence during and after the menstrual period makes the time that the couple is together again seem like a honeymoon. The joy, the newness and desire that existed at the beginning of the marriage are re-experienced every month after the wife has immersed in the mikvah and returned to her husband.

Even in marriage, a woman senses when she is being valued and when she is being used. The mikvah cycle helps elevate intimacy by bringing the couple together at the times when the woman is happy and ready to be with her husband.

Far from a burden, Jewish couples treasure the mikvah cycle as the greatest gift to keep love alive and growing in the marriage.

3. **Rabbi M. Shlanger, Ohel Rachel pp. 16-17, Ch. 1 – The mitzvah of mikvah was a gift to Jewish couples to help them continually experience the ecstasy of their honeymoon, and fill their whole lives with intensifying love.**

The sanctity and happiness that surrounded the wedding can return and manifest themselves in the home through proper performance of the mitzvah [of marital relations according to the laws of family purity, called onah]. In fact, regarding this ability of mitzvah onah to restore the love felt at the time of the wedding, Chazal say: “Why did the Torah say that a menstruating woman [is forbidden] to her husband for seven days? So she should be [as] precious to her husband [upon her purification] as she was when he brought her [under] the wedding canopy” (Niddah 31b). Clearly, the Torah intended the love between man and wife to constantly renew itself to the level of intensity of newlyweds through the mitzvah of onah.

Chazal call mitzvah onah “joy,” since the mitzvah renews the joy of the wedding ceremony. Indeed, they explain the verse “return to your tents” (Deuteronomy 5:27 after the giving the Torah) as a return to the “joy of onah” (Avodah Zarah 5a, see Rach).

PART E. A NOTE ON BIOLOGICAL CHANGES

Once a wife reaches menopause, she no longer requires the mikvah. At this stage, the couple has become “one” and has learned how to maintain the freshness of their relationship. Nevertheless, they must continue

to work on the other essential components of marriage we discussed in the earlier shiurim: 1) acting as an *ezer knegdo* (soul mate) to help each other reach their potential, 2) recognizing that the essence of love – *ahava* – is based on genuine concern, giving – *hav* – and hard work, and 3) strengthening, sharing and drawing nourishment from strong Jewish values in building a Jewish home.

1. **Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburg, *The Mystery of Marriage*, pp. 402-403 – Initially the “spark” of marriage is kept alive by periods of physically separating and merging. With time “the newness” of their love is kept alive by recognition of one another as “unknowable souls” always yearning for further closeness.**

If one assumes that he can “know” his spouse, then their relationship automatically becomes reduced to superficial and mundane familiarity. But if one realizes that as much as he knows his spouse, there will always remain aspects of her that he can never touch, that there are facets and depths of her soul that he has yet to plumb, their relationship stays eternally fresh and new. The sense of wonder in their marriage is never exhausted.

Although there is a rational side to marriage, it is its super rational aspect that affords its infinite depth.

The Torah teaches us that physical desire of husband and wife is rooted in a spiritual drive. The Godly drive of each to bestow good on the other grows over time, and actually fuels deeper intimacy. After years together, this deeper spiritual connection binds them much more closely than physical intimacy.

Tragically, often a man will marry a beautiful woman and leave her once her beauty fades. As seen above, the Torah approach is the opposite. A man can marry an average looking woman, and over time come to see her as the most beautiful woman in the world. This is because his investment in her “makes her beautiful.” His physical desire for closeness grows the more he invests in his wife. Any outside allure pales in comparison with the attraction and intimacy the couple feels for each other as they learn to invest in one another through the passing years.

2. **Rabbi David Fohrman, *Affairs of the Heart - Teacher's Guide: Class II – The love of later years is far better in quality. The spiritual connection the couple has created far surpasses any other relationship offering mere physical connection.***

[Rabbi M. C.] Luzzatto says, “*Chassidut* (piety based on loving-kindness) is about connecting to someone so deeply that you can anticipate their wants, needs and desires – and respond to these – without their having to even articulate those things to you...” With respect to God, such an attitude means that if I really love God immensely, I will try to “anticipate” His unarticulated Will... With respect to our fellow men, such an attitude means that if I truly am in love with someone, I will try to anticipate their will as well. I will be so attentive to their non-verbal cues, so in tune with them, that I will know their desires before they articulate them, and I will respond to those unarticulated desires... The bottom line is that *da'at* (knowledge) develops over time. There is a continuum of *da'at* that progresses naturally, and not all stages are immediately accessible. They become accessible over time.

While the euphoria of connection may seem greatest in moments when we first “fall in love,” in truth, successful couples tend to feel that they didn't really “know” each other until years later. The kind of love and intimacy which is built over time lends a richness and depth to the relationship which tends to be unimagined in one's younger years.

... *Da'at* also expresses itself as love on the physical level – and here, too, knowledge is built over time; it progresses in a kind of continuum. This is why sexuality can still be gratifying – perhaps even more gratifying – as we grow older. Couples later in life will often feel that this kind of knowledge, this kind of connection, would not really have been possible in the years just after they were married.

Note: for an extensive discussion of da'at and the building of an integrated couple in marriage see the series, *Affairs of the Heart* by Rabbi David Forhman.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II.

- ≈ Taharat HaMishpachah is the backbone of Jewish marital life. The mitzvah of mikvah allows the couple to unify their shared soul as well as their bodies. It infuses their home and children with Divine holiness. At the same time, the monthly cycle ensures that the husband-wife relationship does not lose its spark.
- ≈ Love between man and woman is built best in cycles of separation and passionate merging, bringing them ever closer to true unity, actualizing their soul connection here on earth.
- ≈ This has several benefits including: a) allowing each other space, b) allowing a couple to build their relationship in nonphysical ways, c) elevating the process of intimacy, d) saving the couple from over-familiarity, and e) focusing attraction towards one another at the ideal moments.
- ≈ The goal of marriage is to become like one. This ongoing building process which takes many years, will encounter menopause when the couple is in their fifties. At such a point, the couple, no longer needing to separate, have forged the spiritual connection that binds them to one another and have learned to continue a satisfying physical relationship. Moving forward, the couple is propelled to refresh and strengthen their relationship from their desire to continue building a deeply meaningful, fulfilling marriage.

SECTION III. THE MIKVAH

A friend of mine who has visited Russia many times tells of a secret meeting he had with a young Jewish family in a Russian city. After an involved discussion of the problems facing the community, my friend gained the confidence of the husband, a tall, sturdy man named Yaakov. As my friend was preparing to leave, Yaakov said, "Wait, I have something that I would like to show you."

He took my friend to the clothing closet. Before opening the door, almost instinctively, he looked over his shoulder, as if to make sure that no unwelcome eyes were watching. Satisfied that it was safe, Yaakov opened the closet, moved aside a number of boxes, and carefully lifted up a false floor. Under the floorboards there was a staircase, leading to a small pool. "This is the city's mikvah," he proudly announced. "Over forty families make use of it."

Yaakov then told my friend of the dangers involved in building the mikvah...subject to the direst penalties...When asked why he had undertaken all the expense and danger to build a mikvah, Yaakov explained, "Without it, I could not live as a Jew." (Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Waters of Eden, pp. 1-2)

While today the mikvah is mainly used for the mitzvah of Taharat HaMishpachah, historically speaking it had several functions – some of them related to ritual purity, and all of them related to spiritual elevation. While the Temple stood, the concept of ritual purity was central to everyday life, to all men and women alike. It was forbidden, under the severest penalty, to perform service in the Temple, to partake of sacrifices and of other consecrated foods (*terumah*), and to enter the Temple, in a state of ritual impurity. With regard to the Temple service, we also find that the mikvah was used for achieving spiritual elevation, even when no ritual impurity was involved.

PART A. WHAT IS A MIKVAH?

A mikvah is a pool of fresh, standing water taken from a natural source such as a flowing fresh spring or rainwater. Just as water is the paradigm of physical cleansing agents, so too immersion in a mikvah is the method by which a person or object attains “spiritual cleansing.”

An entire tractate of the Mishnah is devoted to expounding on the laws of mikvah. There are many legal intricacies involved, and only a knowledgeable and experienced authority may be relied on in overseeing the construction. Below is a general outline of the applicable laws. Mikvahs today are equipped with modern facilities, and the water is always clear and chlorinated.

1. **Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 201 – The elementary laws of mikvah spell out its size and the source of its water.**

1. The mikvah must consist of water. No other liquid can be used.
2. The mikvah must either be built into the ground, or be an integral part of a building attached to the ground. It cannot consist of any vessel that can be disconnected and carried away, such as a tub, vat, or barrel.
3. The water of a mikvah cannot be running or flowing. The only exception to this rule is a natural spring or a river whose water is derived mainly from springs (and not from rainwater).
4. The water of the mikvah cannot be drawn (*sha'uvim*). That is, it cannot be brought to the mikvah through direct human intervention.
5. The water cannot be channeled to the mikvah through anything that can become unclean (*tameh*). For this reason it cannot flow to the mikvah through pipes or vessels made of metal, clay, and wood.
6. The mikvah must contain at least 40 *se'ah* (approx. 200 gallons).

As the primary source of all living things, water has the power to purify, to restore and replenish life. A mikvah must be filled with fresh waters from a flowing source that has never been dormant, such as fresh spring water, rainwater, or even melted snow. The purity and elevation of the mikvah is thus achieved through a return to the original source of being, an elevated spiritual source that is always pure.

2. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Waters of Eden, pp. 56-57 – Many mikvahs are built by attaching a man-made pool of water to a kosher mikvah source.**

There is one final law that we can derive from this verse. Once a pool has the status of a mikvah, it does not lose this status, no matter what type or how much additional water is added to it.

The Torah says that a mikvah “shall be clean,” in the future tense (Lev. 11:36). This indicates that once a body of water has the status of a mikvah, there is no way it can become unclean. This is true no matter how much unclean water is poured into the mikvah.

Therefore, once a pool has the status of a mikvah, one can add to it as much water as one desires, in any manner whatsoever...

There is...another way in which we can add water to a valid mikvah. We can build a pool next to it, and leave an adequate hole connecting the two. As soon as the waters of the two pools intermingle, they are considered one, and the water in the second pool is considered to have been “added” to the

mikvah. The second pool, therefore, also becomes a mikvah. This is the process known as *hashakah*, which comes from the Hebrew word *nashak*, meaning “to kiss.”

This is the manner in which most mikvahs are made. The original mikvah is a small pool, which is referred to as the *bor* or “pit,” alluding to the “pit” mentioned in the Torah (ibid.). This is filled with rainwater, fulfilling the six conditions mentioned earlier in part A. Next to the *bor* is a larger pool, connected to the *bor* by an adequate-sized hole. This larger pool is filled with ordinary tap water, but as soon as the water covers the hole, the two pools “kiss” and are considered as one. This larger pool then also becomes a mikvah, and it is generally used for immersion.

PART B. PURIFICATION – SPIRITUAL ELEVATION

The main purpose of a mikvah is to cleanse a person or a utensil from tumah. Many items can be contaminated with tumah or transmit it to another item, such as a gravesite, the corpse of an animal, and specific bodily emissions. Certain acts are prohibited under Torah law depending on the varying levels of contamination. For example, in Temple times one who had become tameh could not enter the Temple grounds. The process of immersing in a mikvah was one of the steps required to become ritually pure, or tahor in Hebrew.

1. Vayikra 11:36 – The mikvah is for the cleansing of ritual impurity.

The only thing that shall [always] remain ritually clean is a mikvah of water, whether it is a [man-made] pit or a [natural] spring.

אך מעין ובור מקוה מים יהיה טהור.

2. Ibid. 14:8 – Immersing in water achieves ritual purity.

He shall immerse himself in water and become pure...

ורחץ במים וטהר.

Which forms of impurity does a mikvah serve to cleanse? Maimonides reveals that there is no ritual impurity whose remedy does not require immersion in a mikvah.

3. Maimonides, Laws of Mikvah 1:1-3 – All forms of ritual impurity require the purification of the mikvah.

All that are ritually impure, both people and utensils that became ritually impure – whether a Torah or a rabbinic defilement – can only become pure by means of immersion in water gathered upon the earth.

Whenever the Torah refers to cleansing of the flesh and of clothes from impurity, the reference is to immersion of the entire body in the mikvah... If one immersed his entire body except the tip of his little finger, he remains impure.

כל הטמאין בין אדם בין כלים בין שנטמאו טומאה חמורה של תורה בין שנטמאו בטומאה של דבריהן אין להן טהרה אלא בטבילה במים הנקוין בקרקע:

כל מקום שנאמר בתורה רחיצת בשר וכיבוס בגדים מן הטומאה אינו אלא טבילת כל הגוף במקוה... שאם טבל כולו חוץ מראש אצבע הקטנה עדיין הוא בטומאתו...

All utensils other than utensils made of clay or glass may be purified by means of the mikvah.

כל הכלים שנשמאו יש להן טהרה במקוה חוץ מכלי חרס וכלי זכוכית.

While it may seem logical for water to be used in the process of cleansing, we must realize that the laws of purity and impurity in Judaism are not directly related to physical cleanliness. A more in-depth discussion of these laws would make this point abundantly clear, but that would be beyond the scope of this class. We will suffice with the words of the Midrash:

4. Bamidbar Rabbah 19:8 – The laws of ritual impurity are a decree from God.

The dead body does not defile, and the water does not cleanse. Rather, God said, “I have issued an order, and made a decree – and no person may violate My decree,” as the verse states [Bamidbar/Numbers 19:2] (in reference to a law of ritual impurity), “This is the decree of the Torah...”

לא המת מטמא ולא המים מטהרין אלא אמר הקב"ה חוקה חקקתי גזירה גזרתי אי אתה רשאי לעבור על גזרתי דכתיב (במדבר יט:ב) "זאת חוקת התורה".

The mikvah is not exclusively for the impure. It not only elevates the impure to a state of purity, it is also used as a means to attain further spiritual elevations. We see this demonstrated in two places in the Torah: the induction of Aaron and his sons as the first *Kohanim* (priests) and the immersion of the *Kohen Gadol* (the High Priest) during his service on Yom Kippur. Even though the Kohen Gadol was already pure, he was still required to make additional immersions to reach even higher states of spiritual elevation.

5. Shemot (Exodus) 29:1, 4 – The original consecration of Aaron and his sons to minister in the Temple required immersion in the mikvah.

This is what you shall do for them to sanctify them to minister for Me... You shall bring Aaron and his sons near to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and you shall immerse them in water.

וזה הדבר אשר תעשה להם לקדש אתם לכהן לי... ואת אהרן ואת בניו תקריב אל פתח אהל מועד ורחצת אתם במים:

6. Vayikra 16:3-4 – Every time Aaron entered the Sanctuary during the Yom Kippur service, he would immerse himself in the mikvah and change into “sacred vestments.”

With this shall Aaron enter into the Sanctuary... He shall don a sacred linen tunic, linen breeches shall be upon his flesh, he shall gird himself with a linen sash, and cover his head with a linen turban; they are sacred vestments – he shall immerse himself in water and then don them.

בזאת יבא אהרן אל הקדש בפר בן בקר לחטאת ואיל לעלה: כתנת בד קדש ילבש ומכנס בד יהיו על בשרו ובאבנט בד יחגר ובמצנפת בד יצנף בגדי קדש הם ורחץ במים את בשרו ולבשם:

PART C. SYMBOLISM OF THE MIKVAH – THE WATERS OF REBIRTH AND TRANSFORMATION

The word mikvah means *gathered waters*, bringing to mind the first gathering of waters mentioned in the Torah. In a sense, the mikvah recalls the primordial waters of creation.

1. **Bereishit (Genesis) 1:2, 6, 9 – The word mikvah, which means “gathered,” is used by the Torah in reference to the original “gathered waters” of the world.**

The earth was formless and empty, with darkness on the face of the depths, but God's spirit moved on the water's surface... God said, “There shall be a firmament in the middle of the water, and it shall divide between water and water.”... God said, “The waters under the heaven shall be gathered to one place, and dry land shall be seen.” And so it was.

והארץ היתה תהו ובהו וחשך על פני תהום ורוח
א-להים מרחפת על פני המים... ויאמר א-להים יהי
רקיע בתוך המים ויהי מבדיל בין מים למים ויאמר
א-להים יקוו המים מתחת השמים אל מקום אחד
ותראה היבשה ויהי כן:

The connection between the gathered waters of the mikvah and the primordial waters of creation is no coincidence. The two have much in common.

2. **Rabbi Aharon HaLevi of Barcelona, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 173 – One who emerges from the mikvah is as if he was recreated out of the primordial water of creation.**

As for the reason that water purifies all [spiritual] defilement, I would suggest according to the basic level of understanding that a man should see himself after immersion in the mikvah as if he was created at that moment, just as the world was filled with water before man was created, as the verse states (Gen. 1:2), “and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.” He should place within his heart the image that just as his body is renewed, so his deeds will be rejuvenated for the good, and they will become worthy, and he will be meticulous in following the ways of God.

ובטעם המים שיטהרו כל טמא, אחשוב על צד הפשט
כי הענין הוא כדי שיראה האדם את עצמו אחר
הטבילה כאילו נברא באותה שעה, כמו שהיה העולם
כולו מים טרם היות בו אדם, וכמו שכתוב [בראשית
א', ב'] ורוח אלהים מרחפת על פני המים, ויתן אל לבו
בדמיון כי כמו שנתחדש בגופו יחדש גם כן פעולותיו
לטוב, ויכשיר מעשיו, וידקדק בדרכי השם ברוך הוא:

Emerging from a mikvah gives one the sense of rebirth, the feeling that a significant change has occurred. This is the power of the mikvah's waters. While water itself is amorphous, the process of immersing in a mikvah signals a movement toward change and metamorphosis. Nowhere is this idea more elegantly expressed than in the simple measurement of water required for a mikvah: forty *se'ah*.

3. **Rabbi Aaron L. Raskin, Letters of Light, Mem – There are many instances in the Torah where forty represents the process of metamorphosis.**

Forty is the number of days it rained upon the earth during the Flood. Forty is also the number of days Moses spent on Mount Sinai. Moses actually ascended the mountain three separate times. The first forty-day sojourn took place when he received the Torah. Then Moses descended with the Tablets, but shattered them when he saw the Golden Calf that the people had made in his absence. The following morning Moses returned to the mountain for another forty days to pray on behalf of the Jewish people. When Moses returned to the encampment, God called out for him to return to the mountain, this time, with his own tablets. So Moses dug under his tent and found two sapphire stones. He brought them up with him to Mount Sinai for the third and final forty days, and God engraved the Ten Commandments on them. It was the tenth of the month of Tishrei when Moses came down from the mountain with God's law after these final forty days. God declared, “I have forgiven [the Jewish people] as you have asked.” The culmination of these three forty-day periods, the tenth of Tishrei, Yom

Kippur, is thus the day we as the Jewish people fast and pray to atone for our sins.

There are other significant references to forty in the Torah: Moses' spies scouted the land for forty days. The Jews were in the desert for forty years. And a mikvah, a ritual bath, is made up of forty *se'ah* (about 200 gallons).

What is the concept of forty? Forty represents a metamorphosis, a transformation. After forty days, the embryo of a child begins to assume a recognizable form.

Additionally, a mikvah (with its forty *se'ah*) has the ability to change an individual from a state of impurity to purity. And if one wants to undertake a conversion, one must immerse in a mikvah, whereupon his or her Jewish soul is revealed.

G-d brought a flood upon this world for forty days and forty nights. The waters of the flood were not for revenge, as is commonly assumed, but for atonement, to purify and transform the world, in much the same way a mikvah purifies a person.

Each of Moses' forty-day sojourns in heaven signified a transformation. The first forty days was to receive the Torah, and when an individual learns Torah, he or she develops the ability to change for the better. The second trip was for prayer, *tefillah*. When a person prays, he or she can change an evil decree; in this case, God's intention to annihilate the Jewish people. Indeed, because of Moses' supplications, G-d was willing to bestow His mercy and once again offer them His Torah. The final ascent represented *teshuvah* (repentance) – also a transformation – because once a person has repented, he is no longer the same person he was when he sinned. When Moses finally returned to the Jewish people with God's law, they were at a level of atonement – and thus finally prepared to become God's nation.

The forty years that the Jews spent in the desert also constituted a transformation. The nation that had rebelled against G-d had metamorphosed into a nation that was ready to adhere to His word.

The fluidity of water itself also expresses the notion of change inherent in mikvah immersion.

4. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Waters of Eden*, pp. 56-57 – The fluidity of water epitomizes the change effected by immersion in the mikvah.**

One of the most obvious qualities of water is the fact that it is a liquid. Indeed, in a sense, water is the primary representation of the fluid state. In many instances, when we speak of “water” we are actually speaking of the fluid state in general. Therefore, the spiritual counterpart of water is very closely related to its property of being a fluid.

But what is the main difference between a fluid and a solid? What special property does a fluid have that does not exist in the solid state?

The main difference between them involves change. If only solids were to exist, there would be no change at all. The world would be a dead, airless body in an unchanging frozen state. For change to be possible, the fluid, as well as the solid state must exist...

[W]e see that water itself represents the change and flow toward God's goal. When a person immerses himself in a mikvah, he immerses himself spiritually in the basic concept of change itself. Man's ego represents the element of his permanence, and therefore, when he is totally immersed in the concept of change, his ego is nullified. Thus, when he emerges from the mikvah, he is in a total state of renewal and rebirth.

PART D. FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS

We can talk about the mikvah as much as we want, but as they say, the proof is in the pudding. Immersing in the mikvah is more than an idea; it is an experience – a powerfully inspirational one at that, filled with the loftiest aspirations for serenity, connection, and spirituality.

1. Prayer to recite after immersing in the mikvah – The mikvah immersion inspires a desire for purity and peace, in the home and in the world.

Master of the world, with an inspired heart, I approach the fulfillment of the immersion for the sake of purity... May it be Your will that our house be a house of peace, love and closeness. May Your grace never depart from us, and may I always be worthy of the purity appropriate to the women of Your nation, the House of Israel, Amen.

Below we will hear some firsthand accounts of the mikvah experience.

2. Heidi Hass, *Farbrengen Magazine* (Fall, 2001) – Going to the mikvah creates a bond with our ancestors.

I was very nervous about going, but she promised to meet me there. She brought me to the pool of rainwater, which is the mikvah, where I immersed myself in the waters and was left alone to pray.

I decided to ask God to help my family. And I had a sudden compulsion to cover my eyes during my prayer. I still don't understand why I felt this need so strongly; I've sometimes closed my eyes to pray, but never covered them. I finished my prayer, and got out to dry off.

Then it dawned on me. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Esther – all these women throughout our history had done what I had just done. I had made a connection to all the women before me, over thousands of years, who prayed in the mikvah. I suddenly realized that they prayed in the same way. At that time I did not yet know that covering your eyes to pray was something that Jewish people often do. As I left the mikvah, I felt such a deep connection with Jews all over the world - I felt that I have so many people to help me through this.

I'm not totally observant, but I look forward every month to going to the mikvah for a profoundly moving experience. It restores my spirituality, reconnecting me to Jews everywhere and throughout time. I believe the mikvah is one of the greatest gifts God has given the Jewish people.

3. Mikva.org – Comments written by brides on their first visit to the mikvah.

"This was a very enlightening experience. It was a sacred moment for me that I will cherish. I feel like my blessings were truly heard tonight and for that I am thankful!" *Dara*

"What a spiritually uplifting moment in my life! My first experience at the mikvah felt so 'natural.' I now feel ready to stand under the *chupah* (wedding canopy) and enter my new life as a married woman. With much gratitude and love to God..." *Rony*

"...This was a beautiful, spiritual and moving experience. I encourage every Jewish bride to participate in the mikvah preparations and then immersing in the mikvah. You need to do it yourself to experience this feeling. Thank you! This has made my wedding preparations that much more meaningful..." *Michell*

“...What a wonderful way to begin my new life. I thought I was going to the Four Seasons AFTER the wedding - it looks like I got an early start! Wow! It is beautiful! Thank you!” *Tammy*

“What a new and wonderful experience! It was so beautiful and peaceful. So memorable...” *Naomi*

“I came to the mikvah tonight, and it wasn’t scary! Don’t be nervous! I had a great time, and it was so special! Thank you!” *Melita*

“This moment will stay with me long after the wedding ceremony is over and the band has gone home. This is what it means to be a Jewish bride...” *Dani*

“This was a wonderful, peaceful experience. I will remember my first time in the mikvah always. It was so meaningful to come on the evening before my wedding...” *Michelle*

“This was an unforgettable experience! This will be an experience that I will remember forever! It made me feel like a real Jewish bride.” *Simone*

For those accustomed to going to the mikvah, these kinds of emotions can be experienced on a regular basis. As we saw above, one of the fringe benefits of going to the mikvah is that it makes a wife as precious to her husband as the day they got married. It can also make a wife feel like a bride again.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III.

- ≈ A mikvah is defined as a pool of naturally occurring water of a certain specified amount.
- ≈ During the Temple eras, the mikvah was a central part of life for anybody involved with consecrated items and ascending to the Temple grounds. The mikvah was always part of the process of cleansing oneself or one’s possessions of ritual impurity. It is also central to spiritual elevation, as can be seen by its role in the Temple proceedings.
- ≈ The power of the mikvah is the power of water. Water gives us life, and water gives us purity. Upon entering the waters of the mikvah we are reborn. We return to the waters from which the earth emerged, the waters that cradle an infant still in his mother’s womb. We are spiritually cleansed, invigorated and revitalized by the waters that envelop us.
- ≈ The mikvah is a mechanism of metamorphosis. The mikvah is filled with the waters of change. As symbolized by the amount of water required for a mikvah (forty *se’ah*).

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHAT IS RITUAL PURITY AND IMPURITY? DOES IT HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH PHYSICAL CLEANLINESS?

Despite the use of the mikvah waters in the cleansing process, ritual purity and impurity, taharah and tumah in Hebrew, have nothing to do with physical cleanliness. Tumah is a spiritual malady, and the mikvah is its spiritual cure.

The common denominator of many types of tumah is that it stems from some form of contact with death, either in the form of a corpse, carcass, or menstrual bleeding. Such contact can adversely influence our outlook on life, giving us the illusion that our existence is ephemeral rather than eternal.

HOW DO THE LAWS OF FAMILY PURITY ENHANCE MARRIED LIFE?

The laws of family purity schedule periods of abstinence into the life of a couple. Aside from serving as the prerequisite conditions for the Presence of G-d to dwell between them, this mandated distance helps “hearts grow fonder.” Far from being a nuisance, the rhythm of closeness and separation keeps the spark alive in a marriage.

The time of separation allows two “soul mates” who desire to build their deeper unifying “soul connection” to develop their relationship in a non-physical ways. This shared spiritual link deepens and elevates their bond during marital relationships as well.

The physical bond grows over the years as it gains deeper spiritual dimensions; this cannot be experience in any other relationship.

WHAT ARE THE BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR BUILDING A MIKVAH?

A mikvah is a gathering of water from a natural source, either from a spring or more commonly from rainwater. This water must not be drawn from its source. Rather, it is gathered naturally either in the ground or in something like a pool built into the ground. The minimum amount of water needed for a mikvah is forty *se'ah*, a Biblical measurement equivalent to around 200 gallons.

WHAT IS A MIKVAH USED FOR? WHAT IS ACCOMPLISHED BY IMMERSING IN ITS WATERS?

In Temple times, the mikvah was central to service of God, as one could not even enter the Temple grounds in a state of impurity. But the most common usage of the mikvah today is by women who keep the laws of family purity.

A mikvah is used for expunging a ritual impurity called tumah from people or their possessions, and it is also employed to raise them in spiritual standing.

FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING:

The Secret of Jewish Femininity, Rebbitzin Tehilla Abramov

Ohel Rachel: The Achievement of Oneness in Marriage, Rabbi M. Shlanger,

A Woman's Guide to the Laws of Niddah, by Rabbi Binyomin Forst, Artscroll

Waters of Eden, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan

A Hedge of Roses, Rabbi Norman Lamm