

## **Kol Nidrei 5779**

### **Mikveh of Israel**

If you look out of the windows to your left you will see a small patch of grass. It looks pretty unremarkable. We recently unearthed the initial blueprints for this building and discovered that it was originally intended for an extra storage space.

But if all goes well in the coming year, by next Yom Kippur we could be looking at the New Orleans Community Mikveh.

A mikveh is a ritual bath. Its name means 'concentration' or 'collection,' echoing the language used in the Creation narrative for God drawing the primordial waters together to create land between them. While any body of living water - the ocean, a river, even Lake Pontchartrain - constitutes a natural mikveh, to build one requires following an intricate and complex set of rules.

A mikveh performs a very special function in a community. While it's a public building, it's designed to house the most intimate of private ceremonies. Whether they witness family purity, conversion, immersion before a wedding for both bride and groom, or new ceremonies that are being created and enacted in our day - the walls and waters of a mikveh are testaments to profound mysteries.

According to one of our tradition's greatest teachers all of us are standing at the edge of a mikveh at this very moment: I quote:

**Rabbi Akiva taught: Happy are you, Israel! Who is it before whom you become pure? And who is it who purifies you? Your Father in heaven, as it is said: *And I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean* (Ezekiel 36:25). And it further says: *Mikveh Yisrael, O hope of Israel, O Lord* (Jeremiah 17:13)—just as a mikveh purifies the unclean, so too does the Holy Blessed One purify Israel.**

We learned in our Shabbat classes this year that Rabbi Akiva did not learn how to read until he was in his 40s. Perhaps this is why he misunderstands. The phrase *Mikveh Yisrael* is based on the use of *kavah* to mean 'hope,' like in Hatikvah. *Mikveh Yisrael* really means, *Hope of Israel* - but when Rabbi Akiva looks at those words he envisages an actual mikveh.

That mikveh is Yom Kippur.

To think about Yom Kippur as a mikveh adds new dimensions to what we will experience over the next 25 hours. I predict that the longer we ponder Rabbi Akiva's teaching, the more wisdom we will find in it. Just like every other piece of Jewish learning, his teaching belongs to each of us, to every person in this community. But to start the ball rolling for us, let me offer a few ideas.

The first dimension of the analogy between Yom Kippur and a mikveh is the most obvious one - cleanliness. To immerse in a mikveh is an act of profound cleaning, the removal of my colleague Rabbi Yael Saidoff refers to as 'schmutz.' If Yom Kippur works as it should, we can feel that schmutz loosening and being lifted away, rather like those advertisements for washing powder used to demonstrate.

A second dimension is that to be kosher, a mikveh must have a critical proportion of 'living water' - water that is connected to a natural spring, or has occurred naturally, like rain, or melted ice and snow. Mikveh water has not been interfered with or manufactured. And mikveh water is mobile. A lake with no egress to moving water cannot serve as a mikveh (Lake Pontchartrain is kosher because of its access to the Gulf). If Yom Kippur is a mikveh then it, too, must somehow have a dimension that reflects this dynamic, flowing quality. In human terms, to enter the mikveh that is Yom Kippur is to concretize our wishes to be in flow - to bring back warmth and movement to habits that have become rigid, to gently articulate aspects of our character that feel irredeemably stuck.

A third dimension, as taught by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, is that a mikveh is a full-body mitzvah. Every actual mikveh has a witness to tell us whether we immersed properly or whether a part of us, even a single hair on our head, was not submerged. We enter the waters of the mikveh entirely. And in the same way, Yom Kippur surrounds us and draws us deeply us into its holiness. We will be suspended in this day in the same way as we float in the waters of the mikveh - submerged, disembodied, cut off from all of the usual aspects of our physical life.

And in that place, there will be a sacred encounter. Rabbi Soloveitchik also teaches that Yom Kippur is the day that God 'comes forward to meet humanity.' For each of us, if this day does the work it is intended to do, there may be a moment when we hear a whisper, or have a feeling of moving deeper, or sense a

greater consciousness. We who might have felt isolated, or spiritually desolate, or disoriented, may sense the wholeness or the compassion that we have sought for so long.

And that moment means that we will not be the same again. Because a mikveh is not a bath; not even a beautiful bath, not even a unique bath. Rather, the mikveh is the place where transformation happens.

And this, I think, is the heart of Rabbi Akiva's analogy. If Yom Kippur is a mikveh, then it has the power to change us. When we rise from *this* mikveh, when we shake off the drops of our experience and ready ourselves to go back into the world, something will have shifted for us. Because what comes out of a mikveh is qualitatively different to what went in.

For each of us, the change will be different. Do we need to amend our character? our relationships? our values system? Do we need to get rid of a habit that has been plaguing us, a hurt that we cannot seem to put down and step away from? The mikveh that is Yom Kippur has the power to wash these things away, to bring us the change that we crave so deeply and need so badly that we cannot even find the words to express our desire.

The silent embrace of those sacred waters awaits us.

We are standing on the steps.

We are descending.

May we emerge transformed.

*Amen.*