

# *Ideas for Your Mikvah, From the Experiences of Others*

"Who is Wise? The person who Learns From Everyone."

(TALMUD - AVOT 4 : 1)

This booklet sets forth ideas received as a result of a letter sent to each Mikvah,  
in the U.S. and Canada, listed in the Mikvah Directory.  
It also contains a few ideas from other sources.

*Harry and Jane Fischel Foundation*  
*New York, NY*  
*1998*

Dedicated to the memory of

*Harry Fischel*

and

*Jane Fischel.*

(The Foundation is not responsible for statements of fact or opinion, herein.)

## INTRODUCTION

### Why This Report?

It is believed that, in many cases, people at a Mikvah have developed good ideas, which they use locally - but which they could not disseminate for others' benefit. This booklet is designed to accomplish that.

### Who is the Author?

The "Author", in a conventional sense, is one member of the Board of Directors of Harry and Jane Fischel Foundation. He designed the project, and donated the time required for telephone interviews with the people mentioned in this booklet, as well as for composing the first draft. He is referred to herein as "your Editor".

But, in a larger sense, the many individuals mentioned in the Acknowledgements have authored it far beyond the limited power of any one person.

It is a personal policy of "your Editor" that his name not be printed in publications made possible by funds from this Foundation. A major purpose of this is that, when, as a Director of the Foundation he urges use of its modest uncommitted resources for such projects, he is free of possible bias from the prospect of favorable personal publicity.

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Wickliffe, OH., Rabbi Aryei Towek - Mikvah: Telshe Yeshiva.

Woodridge, NY., Rabbi Goodman - Woodridge Mikvah.

Worcester, MA., Tamar Witkes - Worcester Mikvah.

## BRIDES

It is widely felt that the bride's visit to the Mikvah is a critical point, which could determine whether or not she will be going after she is married.

Considerable effort is therefore made to have this visit considered by her to be a "pleasant experience" and / or "positive experience".

In addition, one Mikvah, in Canada, uses a modern merchandising technique in giving the bride a coupon valid for a free visit to the Mikvah after she is married. Some also give a discount during the first year of marriage.

Among the methods used for a Mikvah to make a good impression on a bride are gifts of flowers, candy, a welcome basket, wine, a calendar, laminated Tefilah, checklist for preparation for Tevilah and printed materials about Mikvah.

In Binghamton, New York, the Mikvah is decorated in honor of the bride.

In some Sephardic communities the visit is marked by music, dance, etc..

A special bridal room may be provided with very attractive artificial flowers, terry cloth robes, special towels, etc..

In the Passaic-Clifton Mikvah, the bride is honored by being given a special robe of terry cloth and a gift bath ensemble, including pillow, brush, sponge, etc..

In some places, a package of "bed like cloths" is given to all brides or only to those who are expected to return.

Still another practice is giving the bride a tour of the Mikvah. In another Mikvah, an informal tutorial session is held to explain to, and teach, the bride the relevant laws.

In some places, the bride is given books such as "Hedge of Roses" or "Total Immersion". (See, Bibliography)

Married women, who are using the Mikvah for the first time are, in some communities, given similar treatment.

## CLEANLINESS IN THE MIKVAH

Keeping the Mikvah spotless is considered of utmost important by many, both as a matter of sanitation and also in order to make it attractive to users and potential users.

It has been suggested that the Mikvah have available cloth mats for the floor - ideally 2' x 3' - both for comfort and to keep the floor dry and clean.

In some cases the premises are cleaned every night. It is not uncommon for an outside person to be brought in for this purpose every week.

The Boca Raton Mikvah suggests that a Mikvah "have mops or brooms, static sponge or damp towel for constant ability to pick up hairs from the floor."

Other ideas offered include equipping cleaning personnel with a very light vacuum cleaner, primarily to pick up loose hair, and keeping disposable wash cloths in rooms, for drying counters and mirrors.

It is suggested that users be asked to keep the Mikvah at least as neat and clean as they would their own homes.

## COVER FOR THE MIKVAH

In several locations, the Mikvah personnel cover the actual Mikvah with styrofoam, bubble pack, or other plastic. The advantages of doing so are keeping the water clean, lowering the humidity in the rest of the facility and keeping the water warm, thereby both making it more comfortable, and saving fuel.

These covers can be obtained at establishments which cater to swimming pool owners, or packing or shipping concerns. In some cases, the vendor will cut the cover, if given specifications. In Baltimore, the Mikvah people save money by doing the cutting themselves and they suggest this to others. Mikvah personnel elsewhere, who utilize such covers and recommend them, include those in Ann Arbor, MI.

It should be noted, however, that, for the cover to be useful, someone must remove it each day (or each time the Mikvah is used, if it is used less frequently).

## ENERGY CONSERVATION

A simple, relatively inexpensive, form of energy conservation is a time clock, for heating the water and for heating the area. (This involves the same principle as a "Shabbos clock".) Programmable thermostats have also been found to be useful.

We are informed that it is possible to adjust the heat from a remote point (which is useful where the Mikvah is not utilized every day).

It has also been suggested that you consider using stainless steel or copper coils in the water, adjusted by probe in the water, connected to a Liquid Crystal Display (LCD) thermostat.

In considering whether it is worth while to make a substantial investment in energy conservation one should however, include, in the calculations, the number of hours during which there will be a saving.

A 72-page illustrated booklet, "How to Reduce Your Energy Costs", is available, free of charge, to any Mikvah, Day School, or

Synagogue, by writing to:

Harry and Jane Fischel Foundation  
60 East 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Suite 1419  
New York, NY 10165

Alternatively, it can be obtained via fax to: 212-867-8512. However, please do not telephone.

### FUND RAISING

Some Mikvahi personnel use fund raising techniques similar to those common among synagogues. These include annual membership, life membership, a dedication ceremony (not only after construction but also after renovation), annual dinners (including "honorees"), Chinese auctions, and raffles. In some cases, an appeal is made for the Mikvah at synagogue services.

The Mikvah of Washington Heights, in upper Manhattan, has a "mock tea", for which people pay as if they were going to a function, but no money is spent by the organization. Your editor suggests that, in this cybernetic era, it be called a "virtual tea".

Some Mikvah personnel raise funds by selling things. The Mikvah, in Ann Arbor, MI., buys blocks of cheese and sells them in smaller quantities.

The Mikvah, in Brighton, MA., offers for sale, on its premises, for a 10% commission, almost anything that others wish to sell. However, because of space limitations a time limit is set. Another Mikvah sells robes.

Still another Mikvah provides and delivers Purim baskets for a fee. Chevrat Nashim Mikvah in Sharon, MA. wrote as follows: "Another organization will make the packages for you if you want. We do the deliveries. To organize the packages, you prepare in advance grocery bags with peoples' names and addresses. People drop off their package, we sort the packages into the appropriate grocery bag. We divide them into routes. Each driver gets to deliver packages on 1 - 2 streets. This fund raiser is no loser. The local supermarket donates the bags. All the work and driving is done by volunteers. Last year we made \$1,300."

It has been suggested that you try a membership campaign at \$30. (or more) per family. Many who do not need or use a Mikvah recognize a duty to participate and would do so if asked.



In Tulsa, OK., sponsors of a new Mikvah building started construction without sufficient funds in hand to complete the job. The sight of work in progress brought forth more contributions. Many agree and note that this is the usual procedure with new synagogues and that "when people realize you are serious, money will be raised much easier." But, some feel that this is not a responsible practice for a community organization and / or may result in an uncompleted building.

We have also received reports that when people see decorating taking place in an existing Mikvah, contributions result.

A Canadian Mikvah sells advertising space in a wall calendar which it circulates.

Mikvas Chanah: Chabad, in Colorado Springs, Co, is planning a "shower". Those who attend will bring gifts of items for the Mikvah's operations, e.g. towels, soap, etc..

For a New Jersey Mikvah, a man in the construction business obtains donations of tile, plumbing supplies, etc., when needed for repairs.

A lady in Albany, NY was very depressed when, as a bride, she had to

use a dilapidated Mikvah. She telephoned people, as part of a fund raising campaign for a new Mikvah, and told them, from the bottom of her heart, how badly she had felt. The financial results were very gratifying.

The Sioux City, IO, Mikvah receives most of its income from the Jewish Federation of Sioux City. We are informed that there are other communities where the Federation gives some help. If yours is one of the many where this is not the case, persistence may produce results in the future.

In Tulsa, OK, sponsors of a new Mikvah building rented a backhoe and did the excavation work. They also installed the sheetrock, and did other low skilled construction work. They report that, because the men had invested so much time and energy, their wives were more willing to utilize it. It may be noted, however, that, in many places, this activity would have created a conflict with the labor unions. (Please see Section on Labor Unions.)

The Boca Raton Mikvah wrote "We held a community-wide Can Day in which volunteers went from house to house collecting full Mikvah pushkes and giving new pushkes back, or giving a pushke to those who never received

a pushke before.” Someone else observed, however, “Focus on large donations and people will start thinking big.”

### “WHAT’S IN A NAME?”

Shakespeare asked “What’s in a Name?” “Money!” is the answer discovered by many fund raisers. Numerous institutions, both religious and secular, have raised substantial sums by agreeing to name a building for a donor ( or for a person designated by a donor). At a few locations the Mikvah has done the same. Your Editor suggests that more go this route - both for new buildings and for existing ones. Admittedly, some well to do potential big donors do not appreciate the importance of the Mikvah in a Jewish religious life. But, all that you need is one large donor.

Your Editor suggests consideration of any type of name, or combination of names, regarded as appropriate for a yeshiva or Day School, if it will result in producing the required funds for the Mikvah (unless your rabbi decides that it is not proper).

Many universities have an endowment fund, which is invested, and

produces income that is used for their worthy purposes. A Mikvah with an existing building having a "generic" name might be able to obtain donations to such a fund in return for replacing the existing name with one specified by a donor.

Your Editor has heard of cases where an institution put in place material with the name of a "donor", before being paid, and then faced a default.

#### HALACHIC CONCERNS OF INDIVIDUALS

Many women have questions which bear upon their use of the Mikvah. Because of the very personal nature of these matters, some are reluctant to ask such questions directly of their rabbi. In some locations the Mikvah personnel act as intermediaries, with the Mikvah attendant telephoning the rabbi and transmitting the questions and the answers.

In a few cases, special telephone equipment has been installed so that the user can sit in a preparation room, and the attendant sit elsewhere and speak to the rabbi.

In Woodridge, NY, there is a list of rabbis to be called. The Baltimore Mikvah informs us that "we have a telephone jack in each room and will bring a phone when necessary." (Portable phones have problems with static.)

A problem exists in that rabbis, generally, especially those who are likely to be consulted by many users, are very busy people. It has been suggested - but not actually carried out - that each of various rabbis accept an assignment to be on call for a particular week (or other period), and wear a beeper during Mikvah hours. Use of call forwarding may also be helpful.

At one Mikvah it was suggested to us that Mikvah attendants should know the dinim. However, while this has obvious advantages, it may involve the problems inherent in lay persons giving advice on Halacha.

We are informed by the Mikvah of Baltimore, as follows: "Our Mikvah attendants always have contact with our rabbis. They will bring a list of common questions and write the answers. They are aware of many first hand problems and will quote what the rabbis have said. This will not take the place of a Rav's phone call if available."

The Mikvah of Baltimore uses a checklist, a copy can be found at the end of this book. It is also available in Hebrew, Yiddish, French, Spanish, Russian, Farsi, and German. A copy of any of the foreign language sheets can be obtained by writing and sending a self-addressed stamped envelope to:

Mikvah of Baltimore  
3207 Clarks Lane  
Baltimore, MD 21215

Substantially, the same information is on the wall of each preparation room, in the Riverdale Mikvah, Bronx, NY.

In the Boca Raton Mikvah, alongside the text of the Brachot for immersion, there is an English transliteration.

#### HANDICAPPED USERS

In some locations, the Mikvah has facilities for handicapped users.  
(This is, obviously, of considerable importance to those involved.)

The five individuals mentioned below have kindly authorized us to state, that those who are considering installing a hydraulic lift for handicapped persons in a Mikvah, may telephone them regarding their experience with same:

Mrs. Rachel Bomzer, Albany, NY (home) (518) 438-6509

David S. Hess, Esq., Baltimore, MD (home) (410) 578-8055

Mrs. Jennie Levovits, Pittsburgh, PA (home) (412) 521-9217

Mr. David Stein, Chicago, IL (773) - 539-1218

Venejia Zakheim, Brooklyn, NY (home) (718) 877-4349  
(work) (718) 253-8302

Many lifts from pool companies do not permit one to immerse in the water while in the lift. So, be careful about this. It would be out of place for us to recommend the product of any manufacturer. However, we are pleased to report that we received an enthusiastic recommendation of:

Arjo Hospital Equipment  
Box 61  
S-241  
21 Eslov, Sweden  
#46-413-64500

Their lift with a manual pulley system was said to be excellent.

Another idea is to visit a rehabilitation center and observe how they place people in a pool. However, for Mikvah use, one is to be totally immersed and that is not always done at rehab facilities.

We understand that facilities for the handicapped, in a Mikvah, are necessarily expensive. However, a separate appeal for funds for this purpose has been used successfully. Even non-religious people will give to assist the handicapped.

Of course, a Mikvah needs to comply with generally applicable laws including those regarding handicapped access.



## LOANS TO A MIKVAH

In some locations the Mikvah has financed a portion of its construction costs by interest-free loans from individuals in the community.

A Mikvah in Arizona and one in Long Island financed a portion of their construction by loans which a Young Israel synagogue in their area obtained from the Young Israel-Samuel Zucker Endowment Fund. We are informed that the Fund would be happy to consider more such loans. However, the fund was set up only for loans to Young Israel congregations. Also, because of the Fund's moderate capital, its loans are of moderate size.

We have not heard of any loan from a bank or other commercial source to a Mikvah, although it is possible that some have been made. In any event, your Editor suggests that, where needed, Mikvah personnel explore the possibility of such borrowing, perhaps with personal guarantees. Also one cannot assume that it is not available or that it would cost too much, until one has asked. Banks with which your members do business would probably be a good starting point.

## MIKVAH ATTENDANTS (A/K/A/ MIKVAH LADIES)

### I Small Communities

Some small communities encourage the development of a "buddy system", in which users act as a Mikvah attendant for other users.

The Mikvah personnel who told us about this have not expressed any reservations. In fact, one Far West community where an average of twelve ladies monthly use the Mikvah, reports that "Many women express their pleasure at being able to serve as a Mikvah lady, an experience they would not otherwise have."

However, the husband of a user in a suburban New York community told us of an undesirable factor. Some women who go to a Mikvah do not have sufficient commitment to do a conscientious job as a volunteer attendant conscientiously.

In any event this system requires that one or two persons do scheduling. An incidental advantage is this; The fact that two ladies go to and from the Mikvah simultaneously, adds to security.

In the Boca Raton Mikvah the attendant is known as a "Shomeret".

## II Larger Communities

Payment bases to the Mikvah attendant vary. Some receive a monthly salary. Others are given an apartment in the Mikvah building plus a cash payment. Tips are frequent, but apparently not universal. In some places tips are banned, to avoid favoritism to big tippers. Depending on the extent of compensation, the duties of the position may include washing robes, etc., and / or cleaning.

Provision of an apartment, while common, can lead to some problems. In some cases the attendant takes it for granted, and as its value increases does not feel that her compensation has gone up.

In some places payment is on an hourly basis, and in others according to the number of users assisted. In one mid-western community, the number of monthly users grew from an average of 50 to 200. The result is that the total income (including tips) is now four times what was anticipated when the attendant was hired.

One Mikvah attendant has induced the women to do their preparation at home in order to reduce their work. Whether you would want to permit that

is a question.

Mikvah attendants, like the rest of us, grow old (if we are blessed with years), and can then normally do less work - a problem in some places (which may well occur in the future elsewhere). If she is provided with an apartment, presumably the organization will not evict her, adding to the problem.

The Mikvah attendant can be tied in to one element of the security problem, if she can drive or be driven to the Mikvah along with one or more of the users.

In Boca Raton, when their shomeret had to be away for two months, women from the community filled in. A 2 - 3 hour training course was given to prepare them.

In some communities Mikvah attendants need the approval of Rabbis.

In Baltimore, attendants are dressed with a white coat / apron of same color to match the decor. There is a name tag on the uniform. This is done to add to the environment and increase respect.

## MISCELLANEOUS

In Baltimore the following is the case:

Liquid soap is used rather than bar soap, as the former is more sanitary and cleaner; Each room is wired for a telephone and the attendant brings the instrument; users have been trained to take their laundry out of the preparation room to deposit it at a specified place in the main room; Laundry is slipped through a drawer-top through which it goes down to a bucket on wheels in the basement (They suggested that a chute be made, where there is none, from the first floor to the basement, for laundry.); They have a portable hair drier; There is an intercom system, color coded, from each preparation room to the Mikvah attendant, for each lady to use when she is ready.

The Boca Raton Mikvah suggests the following: "If you are building a Mikvah for Keylim, have a line painted on the inside of the Mikvah to indicate a warning level. Water is often displaced or lost from the dishes, etc. that are immersed. If the result is that the water gets below the appropriate level you must wait until you have enough rainwater in order to refill it to a kosher level." Of course, this should be checked with your Rabbi. Also a