

Entering the House of Israel

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It is snowing heavily this morning in Boston, and I am suddenly afraid that the weather will keep me from becoming a Jew.

I have been studying for years, it seems. Now the time has come — I have passed the test and been invited to join the tribe of Israel at last. It feels like I am coming home from a long, long journey. As with all such journeys, once the end is in sight, the distance left to travel seems to double. And now it is snowing, it is pouring snow, the world is being blanketed in purity and whiteness.

It is six A.M., and I have been up all night. It was less a night of wakeful contemplation than a night of restless tossing and turning. I suspect it was the cup of coffee I ordered at the celebratory dinner we had with Theresa and Cal last night. I had hoped to face this day fresh and filled with the serene joy that I think I have earned — not with shadowed and gritty eyes. Now I am mindlessly flipping channels to distract myself into sleep, but all I see are school closings and traffic warnings from this winter storm. I am worried that my last step along this particular journey will lead to a shuttered door, that I will arrive at the gate after curfew.

A fall-back plan is not as easy as one might think. True, all I need is to go to a *mikvah*, a ritual bath, and have my immersion witnessed by a rabbi. The problem is that I want to use a particular mikvah, an egalitarian mikvah with a mission that I strongly want to support, and this mikvah is roughly one thousand miles from where I live most of the time. It requires a special trip and if I do not do it today, I will not have another chance for nearly a month. If this winter storm closes the roads, I will have to return home unsatisfied and try to maintain a state of ready awareness for another month.

I do not see how I can do this. This process has already been going on for far too long. It started with a ritual inquiry, a Bet Din, three weeks ago. I

understand ritual. I know that the results of a ritual depend on your state of mind, what you are willing to receive, and how much focused intent you bring to the table. My intent has been very focused lately, but it's also been the winter break between semesters. It is much harder to maintain focus when I am working fifty hours a week, besieged by administrative minutiae and student demands. This unfinished ritual is an itch between my shoulder blades, and both of us, the ritual and I, desire nothing more than it be completed.

So the morning progresses in an uneasy state. Marna, the local officiating rabbi, calls while I am at breakfast. She wants to know how the weather looks where I am, and whether I am up for traveling to the mikvah. I want to scream, YES, DO IT NOW! but settle for assurances that the plows have been out and the roads are passable. She, too, is worried that the mikvah will not open, that the gate-keepers will not be on shift when I arrive. She plans to call them and check, and says she will only call if there is a problem. No news being good news, I pray for silence.

Last night Theresa and Cal surprised me with a present — a silver butterfly pin and an embroidered velvet shoulder bag with the same motif. A symbol of transformation, they said, to honor my journey. Ellen, too, gave me a gift last week at dinner — a spectacular painted silk tallit in varying shades of peacock. I cried then. I have been uneasy with my fiancé Jeff's delight and desire to share this journey, but with these outpourings of unexpected generosity it dawns on me that there is a communal effect here, that the import of this experience goes beyond my individual self and touches those who are not even members of the Jewish community.

It is ten-fifteen and the rabbi has not called. We decide that this means good news, so we set out through the snow. Now that I am sure I will finish this journey I take a fierce joy in the falling snow. The roads are terrible, but Jeff does his best and we make it to the mikvah safely.

Mayyim Hayyim is a special mikvah, virtually unique, and just recently opened. It is a place that has been constructed with sacred intent, by women like myself who wished to reclaim, empower, and expand this ancient woman's ritual. It is open to men, to all who come with a need for transforma-

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tion and renewal. I found it by chance during a search for alternatives to the customary format of the conversion process. Every time I have considered this mikvah, my intuitive conviction has grown that I immerse here and nowhere else.

This conviction is justified as soon as we enter the gates. The gate itself is like a Moon Gate, a rounded gate, a woman-thing. It reminds me that in the process of this conversion I will also be participating in a ritual that has belonged to Jewish women from time out of mind. The path curves through what surely must be a meditation garden, and I vow to return during the green part of the year to sit in it. The building itself extends warm and welcoming arms, it has a velvet energy, it is the colors of light, and if it possessed a smell, would surely smell of baking cookies or fresh flowers.

We leave our icy shoes in the lobby and begin to shake the snow out of our hair. The rabbi and staff greet us upon our entrance, serene, warm, and welcoming. This is the best that feminism offers — a rich sense of a woman-self, confident enough to welcome men and men's needs, but without losing the female heart of things in the process.

The rabbi wants to visit so we adjourn to a nearby room. I say that my journey has not been that different from most, that while they all differ in the details, they probably share the same feeling of coming home, a sense of fittingness to adopting the tradition. I am glad to be here. I talk about Jeff, and how my interest coincided with his return to Judaism. I talk about my mother-in-law to be, Florence, who seems happy to be getting a new Jewish daughter. And I talk about the space, and how beautiful it is and how fortunate I feel to have access to something like this.

The rabbi pauses to consider the prospect — the high arching ceilings, the peaceful sense of the space, the windows that open onto a vista of silently falling snow. "I can't imagine a better place," she says, "in which to be midwived into Judaism."

This metaphor strikes hard at my core. I am profoundly affected by the notion of this rabbi as a midwife and the mikvah as a birthing pool. We rejoin the others, who are waiting for a lesbian couple to finish their pre-nuptial immersions. The mikvah guide assures me in the most soothing voice I have ever heard that she will tell me exactly what to do. I think that I am not the first over-anxious convert she has entertained.

Jeff, too, will immerse. When the other women complete their rituals and take their leave, we are brought back into the heart of this place.

There are two pools, separated by an atrium that gives an impression of the Orient, or of the South Pacific. Simple, but too warm to be austere. The mikvah guide tells Jeff that his immersion doesn't need to be witnessed, and instructs him to call when he is ready, and to call again when he has cleared the pool area and returned to the changing room.

Mine, as a halakhic requirement, must be witnessed — the guide will witness it and include the rabbi and the other attendant by proxy. She shows me where and how to get ready. She suggests to us that the ritual will benefit if we find a way to infuse the preparations with significance, and then takes her leave. Jeff kisses me and leaves for his own space.

Everything I need is laid out here, including a nice thick towel and washcloth. There is a list of seven kavannot for preparing for the mikvah — steps to follow to get clean and some thought-provoking quotations from the prayer book to accompany each as a guide to contemplation. Still feeling fragmented and anxious, I sit down on the carpet in the antechamber to compose myself with deep breathing and centering exercises.

At the right time, I return to the physical preparation. Contacts out, glasses on, I remove my earrings and turn my attention to getting clean. I become aware that I am continuously singing under my breath — *nishmat kol chai* — a favorite Hebrew chant about the sacredness of spirit and breath. I do not remember starting to do this. I grin, thinking this an excellent sign and a most appropriate chant for the occasion. I give myself over to the power of the chant and decide that a soaking bath will be relaxing and improve my focus.

In the tub, my mind wanders over many things. I am searching for something, a thought, a memory, a poem, an image — anything — that will provide an emotional connection to this ritual and bring it to the level of a transcendent experience. If any experience I ever had in my entire life deserves to be transcendent, surely it is this one!

Suddenly, I think of Jeff's story about falling into the Masada mikvah during a night-hike. I think about how the men of Masada, in the midst of building a fortress to defend their lives, took the time (as commanded) to build

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a mikvah for the women. I think about the women, besieged for three years, no doubt exhausted and hungry, yet still immersing themselves monthly, connecting with their history, their tradition, their spirit. I think of all of the women, who for thousands of years, have bathed and scrubbed and prepared themselves for immersion, and how I am now taking my place in their ranks. I think about the Russian woman in Leningrad, after Communists outlawed the mikvah, who paid visits to an old man who kept an illegal mikvah, at the peril of his freedom and life, beneath the floorboards of his kitchen. I think of the women who had no access to an illegal mikvah, who said the blessings while immersing themselves in the Caspian Sea. I think of all of the converts, for thousands of years, who shared my burning desire to join the Jewish people and also prepared themselves, scrubbing and bathing, for immersion.

I recognize then that, upon my emergence from the third immersion, I will be the newest Jew in the entire world, that the fragile ranks of people scattered all over the earth will be swollen by one, and that, me.

This thought stuns me, takes my breath away and fills me with a purposeful energy. I empty the tub and scrub myself clean in the shower in earnest. I have forgotten to remove my engagement ring. I think about waiting until I am out of the water to do so, because I am blind and do not want to lose it, but I do not wait. I feel that I should scrub my entire naked, created-in-the-image-of-God self, all at once. From top to bottom I scrub. Out of the shower, I scrub ears, comb hair, I am getting excited, I am feeling *nervous*. Comb every hair on my body, wishing I had waxed my armpits and legs. Brush teeth, brush the inside of the mouth, brush them some more. Look in the mirror at my glorious, naked, rounded, image-of-God body and realize that I truly am to be midwived, that I will arrive in the House of Israel in the same condition I arrived on the planet thirty-seven years, four months, and sixteen days ago. I say to my reflection, "You are about to DO this" and find there is a catch in my breath.

I wrap myself in the sheet and pick up the phone to call the mikvah attendant, who promises to be right there. I still have the catch in my breath, it is getting hard to breathe, so I close my eyes, draw down into my center, and there find the poem I wrote after the Bet Din. The whispering words remind me of who I am becoming, and why. And how. "Burning wings have brought me here," they say. "The gift of seeds has shown the way."

I take a deep breath. “The gift of water will open the door. And I will joyfully step through. *Mah tovu.*” And the mikvah lady is here.

She opens the door and I step through. She quietly reminds me of the blessings and order, and helps me unravel the sheet. She holds the sheet before her as she stands on the deck. I make my way to the edge — I am blind now and cannot see the steps, so I must feel my way down. Stepping forward is an act of trust. Into the water I go. It is over my ankles, and feels like a heated swimming pool. Down another step and it is up to my knees. Down to the bottom landing, where I make my way over to the cap for the rainwater collection pool. I open the cap to permit the rainwater to kiss the mikvah pool, then close it again and make my way to the deepest part of the pool.

The mikvah guide stands on the deck over my head, with the sheet held up in the air. I take a deep breath and plunge my head down. My feet fly off the floor, I shoot a stream of bubbles out of my nose and, too early, I surface.

“*Kasher!*” the mikvah guide cries out.

“*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu 'al ha-tevilah,* I say in ringing tones. I am commanded to immerse, and am grateful for that commandment. It is a proclamation. The train is leaving the station, and it is too late to change the ticket. I hear a chorus from behind the closed doors. “Amen!” the voices say.

I consider the water again, take a deep breath, and plunge down once more. My feet shoot off the ground, and as I exhale bubbles through my nose I think I am about to cry. My eyes are pricking, even under water. I surface, shaking my hair back from my face with an effort.

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I am a confusion. This ritual wants me to finish it, and to finish it now. The last weeks have piled up and are pushing us forward. It has been waiting for too long and now that the time is near, it does not want to wait for another second. I resist this pressure as well as I can, because it is passing too quickly — I am not noticing it as clearly as I can.

I stand on my feet and straighten up. I think of my poem. The door is open and I am on the threshold. One more step takes me into the house, and I want to know, really know, that step. I want that step to be engraved on my memory, to put a stamp on my spirit. I want to be transformed. I greet the ritual and its urgent desire for completion. I think of the mikvah guide telling me

that some people take the time in the water to offer prayers. I pray for only one thing, and that is for the ritual to fill my soul. I will accept anything it has to offer.

I invite the ritual into my heart and into my soul. It has been waiting for this invitation, and arrives with enthusiasm. I am transfixed by a ringing bolt of light, a glowing pillar of sound. I feel as though I have just plugged myself into God's own power jack. I am electrified, and terrified. Something is pouring into me and I do not know if I can hold it. Perhaps I will break into a million pieces, and mystics will instruct the Jews of future generations to find my shards and reassemble them. I lose my sense of self. I am a skin, holding emotion, and the emotion is too much. I will burst.

I draw two ragged breaths. The sound of them fills my ears, and I plunge back into the water and fight to stay immersed until my breath is gone. I stand again.

“*Kasher!*” the mikvah guide cries out for the third time.

I say the Shehechyanu. The chorus beyond the pocket doors erupts with a giant “AMEN” and sings out congratulations and welcome.

I stagger up the stairs, feeling the tears ready to explode. I face the mikvah guide, who holds the sheet to wrap me up. She offers a mazel tov and a welcome, and I laugh. An instant later I am in the dressing room with no memory of how I arrived there. I have let the ritual have its way with me, and it is filling me up and pouring out to surround me. I drag in great sobbing

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breaths and tense myself. I feel that I must, or I truly will shatter into a million shards. In an instant, the tears turn to laughter and I realize that I will be fine, that this too is the ritual.

Some time later, I am getting dressed and combing my hair. I do not see a hair dryer, but I wouldn't use it anyway. If this mikvah water never comes out of my hair at all, if it stays wet for the rest of my life, it will be dry too soon. I am dressing, the water is in my skin, and my eyes, and my nose. I am replacing my jewelry now, still laughing giddily. I cannot fasten my earrings, and wonder why until I realize that I am also shuddering. My hands are shaking. Never before has a ritual left me literally quaking in my boots. It is clear that I will not be going anywhere, any time soon.

I rejoin Jeff and the rabbi in the lounge. Jeff greets me with a kiss, and the mikvah attendants and rabbi launch a chorus of "Mazel tov." I have only heard this at bat mitzvahs and now gain a deeper appreciation of teenagers who stand respectfully while an entire congregation salutes them in this manner. I need to sit down. Jeff procures tea, and tells me that the rabbi and attendants invited him into the atrium to listen to my immersions and blessings. He, too, seems filled with a profound feeling and has shared the electrical experience of the pool.

Later, as we are sliding home on the turnpike, I am marveling once again at the power of this ritual. There is something about the water. I am thinking that my friends Roxanne and Catherine would appreciate this, that they would understand this jolt that washed through me. And then I am struck: I cannot recommend this to them, you cannot use the mikvah unless you are a Jew. A cascade of comprehension hits me. I think of the list I provided the Bet Din of reasons why I wanted to convert. The first item on the list is that I desired ownership of the beautiful rituals. And the mikvah, what I suspect is one of the most beautiful rituals of all, is now mine. As a Jew, I own it. As a Jewish woman, I own it. I have inherited it, the gift of water, and the moment of taking is what has made it mine. I have stretched out my hand in sincere invitation, and it has come to me, for now and for always. The mikvah, the candles, the chanukiah, the persecution, the history, the debates, the patriarchy, the traditions, the tallit, the Torah, they are all mine now. The water, still drying in my hair, bears witness to this. Your tents are indeed beautiful, O Israel. And now they are my tents as well.



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