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NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

Mikvah Musings

BY HANNA GRIFF-SLEVEN

The Friday before my wedding in November of 2007, I drove to Mayyim Hayyim, a new-style *mikvah*, or ritual bath, in Newton, Massachusetts. Accompanying me were my sister Lois and one of my oldest friends, Roz, who had flown in from Seattle for the event. Mayyim Hayyim (Living Waters) was founded by Anita Diamant of *Red Tent* fame. She had once visited a mikvah and been underwhelmed by the experience. She knew that there had to be a reason why this tradition of dunking oneself had persisted through the millennia. It couldn't just be about purifying oneself for one's husband. There had to be more.

The ancient custom is for brides to immerse themselves in a mikvah a day or two before a wedding. I had been under the misconception that this was to make the bride pure for the ceremony—and I had thought that men were never obliged to do it—but I learned otherwise. Scribes visit a mikvah before beginning to write a Torah scroll; men can go at any time, and more religious ones often do go before the Sabbath; and some people take a mikvah before Yom Kippur to welcome the New Year. Although I had never imagined myself taking a mikvah, I discovered that the ritual is actually a marvelous opportunity to encounter something very holy, to separate oneself from the mundane, and to experience an almost mystical phase of transition.

Mayyim Hayyim is located in a wooden Victorian house dating from the 1860s, with additions built over the years. It is on the grounds of a synagogue, but is separate from it. An archway welcomes visitors. As the three of us waited for my guide, we looked at each other and nodded: this was going to be a great experience. After a few moments, a guide came, introduced herself

to me, and ushered me back to the changing area. Lois and Roz were guided to an area outside the mikvah where they could witness my blessings.

Then the ritual began. In a strange way, it was all very familiar; it reminded me of when I lived in Japan a decade ago. There one always scrubbed good and hard and rinsed before taking a bath. The Japanese take this very seriously and take as much time as they need. Finally, I understood why. Before one immerses in the mikvah, one takes a shower and washes every part of the body. At each level of the cleansing and sanctifying, one focuses and prays for clarity. The process is not about purification, so much as transition: in my case, a meditation as I moved from my single state to a married one. The mikvah felt so natural—something that really had resonance for me. Like most brides, I had been so busy with the planning and family excitement that to think about myself or Paul or marriage was a luxury. During the ritual, I read the prayers and thought about the two of us and the weekend ahead, and how happy I was—if a little weepy, because my mother had passed away some years ago—that my father was still around and so pleased.

After the shower, when I felt I had the right head space, I entered the bath, which is tiled in brown and copper and Jerusalem tiles. It was beautiful and pristine. I was asked to shed my bathrobe, and the guide inspected my body, including my back, for any stray hairs. Fortunately, I had none, so I was permitted to enter the pool. I said my prayers, and Lois and Roz shouted back “amen” when required. Then it was over. The entire ceremony took perhaps twenty minutes. I again wrapped myself in the white robe. Doris, the guide, opened the door, and there to greet me were my sweet sisters

singing a *mazel tov* song. We linked arms and danced a bit. It felt biblical being with them.

For years I have studied other peoples' rituals and sometimes even participated in them. For me to put aside the scholarly self and thrust myself headlong into this tradition was more satisfying, uplifting, and transcendent than anything I had ever done—perhaps only to be rivaled by the ceremony that would shortly follow it. I felt altogether special and clean and good and was thrilled to be marrying Paul, my *besbert* (destiny). Still tingling with all this goodness and love, we decided to stop and visit our mother's grave.

The Jewish cemetery in Waltham is a small, simple meadow off a busy street, where all the headstones are brass and planted in the ground. It was the first time that Roz had seen my mother's grave, and she was moved—so quiet at first. Lois and I said, “Hi, Ma,” and we both stared at her headstone and cried a bit. We ignored the empty spot next to her, waiting to receive our eighty-eight-year-old father. Then Lois and I went to visit our grandparents, aunts, and cousins. It sounds odd to say that I love going to the cemetery, but I know so many of the people buried at this one, and I always enjoy communing with them.

Roz recovered and broke her silence by yelling, “Mrs. Griff, your daughter's getting married!” Roz was so joyful that Lois and I grinned for the first time since we entered the grounds. Before leaving, we both bent down, dusted off Ma's grave, and placed a stone on top.

But life in the Griff family is not only to be lived in the spiritual realm. We are down-to-earth, practical folk—very religious, but at the same time, very much in this world. So the three of us returned to the car and headed to our father's furniture store. We

planned to pick him up and go for a mani-pedi, something that he enjoys greatly—but only if one of his daughters comes along. When we arrived at the store, Don, Dad's manager and a one-time New Hampshire logger, told us that my father was next door at the bar having his morning drink.

"What?" Lois and I asked, quite puzzled.

"Oh yeah, Jimmy takes care of him. Go on over, he's waiting for you."

Lois, Roz, and I looked at each other, shrugged, and went next door. The place is an old-time, small-town, fernless tavern, with a long wooden bar at one end, some tables scattered around, and a big stage area. That stage has seen many a talented musician, generally the blues musicians Jimmy likes so much. No one was on stage now, but there—at 11:00 a.m.—perched my father on a stool, nursing what appeared to be a scotch and soda.

"Daddy," we said, "what are you doing?"

"Oh, it's my new routine," he told us. "My father would have a shot in the morning after *shul* and then go about his business. So I'm doing it, too."

"Okay," we said and nodded.

Jimmy said, "How about you girls? Do you want a shot? I hear one of you is getting married."

My father said, "Yes, come join me."

So we looked at each other, took the shots, toasted Jimmy, my father, and my upcoming nuptials. Most religious rituals end with a glass of wine and a prayer. In the *shul* where I grew up, daily prayers actually ended with *schnapps* for whomever wanted it. So, on a day when I reconnected to an ancient religious tradition, being toasted by my dear ones in the bar next to my father's store felt completely perfect.

L'Chaim. ▼

Hanna Griff-Sleven is the director of the Family History Center and cultural programming at the Museum at Eldridge Street. She teaches at the Eugene Lang College of the New School for Social Research, City College of New York, and New York University School of Continuing Education. A former program officer in the Folk Arts Program at the New York State Council on the Arts, she holds a Ph.D. in folklore and American studies from Indiana University.

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Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore is a membership magazine of the New York Folklore Society (www.nyfolklore.org).

The New York Folklore Society is a nonprofit, statewide organization dedicated to furthering cultural equity and cross-cultural understanding through programs that nurture folk cultural expressions within communities where they originate, share these traditions across cultural boundaries, and enhance the understanding and appreciation of folk culture. Through *Voices* the society communicates with professional folklorists and members of related fields, traditional artists, and a general public interested in folklore.

Voices is dedicated to publishing the content of folklore in the words and images of its creators and practitioners. The journal publishes research-based articles, written in an accessible style, on topics related to traditional art and life. It also features stories, interviews, reminiscences, essays, folk poetry and music, photographs, and artwork drawn from people in all parts of New York State. Columns on subjects such as photography, sound and video recording, legal and ethical issues, and the nature of traditional art and life appear in each issue.

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Authors are encouraged to include short personal reminiscences, anecdotes, isolated tales, narratives, songs, and other material that relates to and enhances their main article.

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