

Lecture 11

The Mikvah

In studying John the Baptist, the question must be asked “what is it that he was doing”? In Judea and Galilee, within the Jewish mindset, purity was a big issue. We find in archeological digs large number of ritual baths or mikvahs. The question that comes from this is why did they do it and what can they teach us today. Baptism as we see it and is practiced in Christianity bears no relationship at all to the practice of the Mikvah and what the early church would have practiced.

So what was it John did? Let us review the Torah commands surrounding immersions or baptism. Then we will get to how it relates to the text that is just before us. There are 46 verses that refer to the washing of the people and of the priest¹.

What do the texts in Torah teach us? The reality is that there is no clear direction in the Torah. Yet the Torah texts clearly that speak of the washing gives the ground rules for immersion or baptism? The first text that gives information regarding immersion is;

Lev 15:13 And when he who hath the issue is clean from his issue, then he hath numbered to himself seven days for his cleansing, and hath washed his garments, and hath bathed his flesh with running water, and been clean.

The important phrase *and hath bathed his flesh with running water, and been clean* this phrase in Hebrew is מִמַּיִם חַיִּים. The idea from this then is that it was water that had come from:

- moving clean and clear stream
- Rain water that had been gathered
- the ocean. A lake would not qualify.

The second verse that we draw information regarding the immersion comes from:

Lev 14:9 And it hath been, on the seventh day--he shaveth all his hair, his head, and his beard, and his eyebrows,

5 *even all his hair he doth shave, and he hath washed his garments, and hath bathed his flesh with water, and hath been clean.*

10 From the last phrase *and hath bathed his flesh with water, and hath been clean*; Rabbi understood this to mean his whole body. The phrase in Hebrew is as follows וְרָחַץ אֶת־בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם וְנָטְהַר and *wash on his flesh in water and be clean*. From this in particular בְּשָׂרוֹ the rabbis came to understand that it has to be all of his flesh because of the issue of leprosy. So the water had to be a type of moving water that covered all of the flesh. That other thing that scriptures show is that it is something that you do for yourself. In other words this business of some priest, reverend, pastor, etc doing it for you is not found in scriptures. So we must not imagine John the Baptist dipping people in the water. What he did do was witness their immersion and testify to it¹. The other thing that immersion was about was clean and unclean as found in discussion of the verse list in the first endnote. Immersion is also part of the Jewish conversion process².

25 The place of the ritual immersion in Judaism is called the mikvah. In the Torah we do not find the cleansing mentioned in conjunction with the word mikvah. In Hebrew it is מִקְוֵה which refers to gathering of waters in Gen 1:10, referring to reservoir to water in Ex 7:19 and Is 22:11. The other word that is used to represent the reservoir of water is בּוֹר as found in Lev 11:36. The word mikvah's root is קָוַר meaning to gather. The other place we find mikvah used in the Tanach is in Jer 14:8 and 17:13 meaning hope. Hegg explains it this way, "...may derive from the fact that those living in arid regions of the Middles East always considered places of abundant water (oasis) the anticipated intermediate resting place along a journey."³ So we see that the word Mikvah is used in different ways in the scripture. It is also clear that at that time, the Master and John used the Mikvahs or moving water which were well known.

40 The Challenge is then how do we apply this for today? First let's look at how the Jews applied baptism or immersion at the time of John the Baptist, Yeshua and the disciples. Does the Mikvah ceremony have anything in common with the Christian right of Baptism? The baptism that the Baptist church uses when a

¹ Hegg Matthew pg75ff I have taken part of his discussion and added to it.

² Aaron Eby Messiah Magazine B'reisheet 5767 (Issue 93) Baptism a Jewish Ritual pg10ff

³ Hegg 75

5 person is immersed underwater is as close as it comes. So what did they do and when did they use a mikvah? There were/are five reasons for using the mikvah; Women's cycle⁴, returning to state of ritual purity, Preparation for burial⁵, Repentance⁶ and conversion⁷. Let us look at each of these reasons.

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The first issue is that regarding women's menstrual cycle and birth cycle. Lev 12 outlines the issues surrounding birth, and the menstrual cycle in Lev 15;19. This does not apply today because there is no temple. It is custom of women both within the messianic community and within the greater Jewish community to attend a mikvah at the end of 7 days of uncleanness during their menstrual cycle. This does not mean that a woman in her own home makes anything unclean, that no one can touch nor can she participate in family. What it means is that the husband and her are not to be intimate during this period. Any woman will tell you makes perfect sense. It also means that during times of festival she would be excused from these things. This has nothing to do with sin.

25 (It should be noted that if a husband and wife were intimate during a festival this would give them 24 hours of time together apart from the community, meaning that extended family would support the marriages in the family by watching/caring for the little ones while mom and dad were "occupied" for that 24 hours. I also think that at time of the wandering that women would have had time off from the burden of the family that the women would have shared the care giving, and every woman during her menstrual cycle would have had time off.)

35 The second reason is ritual impurity. There are many things that would make one unclean. This is not sinful, as is commonly thought – it just had implications for temple worship.

- Touching something unclean,
- having a boil,

⁴ Eby pg 11

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

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- for a man an emission of semen whether during intimacy or during sleep,
 - Leprosy, or some other skin affliction,
 - a priest would wash before serving at the altar of going in to sanctuary itself.

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The list is extensive but the key idea is that as someone going to the temple you would use the mikvah at sunset the day before to be clean for the next day and the Temple service.

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In the preparation for burial the body is washed completely then either immersed or water is poured over it from head to toe. It is interesting to note that;

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1Co 15:29 Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?

This referring to;

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Num 19:12 He shall cleanse himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean. But if he does not cleanse himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not become clean.

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This nothing to do with proxy baptism: it has to do with being clean after burial.

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Repentance and Conversion are the last two issues in which one would use a mikvah. This is comes from nothing in the text itself. The one text that my point to it is;

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Eze 36:24-27 I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. (25) I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. (26) And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. (27) And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

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This is probably the one text and brings forth the idea that cleanness internally is derived from the commands to be washed

5 and be clean. The Rabbi's understood this very clearly as seen in discussion with Nicodemus

10 *John 3:4-10 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (5) Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (6) That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (7) Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' (8) The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (9) Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" (10) Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?*

25 In verse 9 and 10 makes this very clear that Yeshua was surprise that Nicodemus did not understand this. In a Jewish conversion the person is told much the same things about the change that takes place at immersion as does at the Christian baptism that you are reborn and that Abraham is your father.

30 *When he comes up after his ablution he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respect.⁸*

R. Jose said; One who has become a proselyte is like a child newly born

35 The issue of intention in performing a mitzvah was clearly taught by some of the Sages, and this pertains to the performance of a mikveh as well. Rambam wrote⁹:

40 *It is plain and manifest that the laws about uncleanness and cleanness are decrees laid down by Scripture and not matters about which human understanding is capable of forming a judgment; for behold, they are included among the divine statutes. So, too, immersion as a means of freeing oneself from uncleanness is included among the divine statutes. Now "uncleanness" is not mud or filth which water can remove, but is a matter of Scriptural decree and dependent on the intention of the heart. Therefore the sages have said, if a man immerses himself,*

⁸ B. Yevamot 47b

⁹ Hegg pg 79

5 *but without special intention, it is as though he has not immersed himself at all.*

10 *Nevertheless we may find some indication (for the moral basis) of this: just as one who sets his heart on becoming clean becomes clean as soon as he has immersed himself, although nothing new has befallen his body, so, too, one who sets his heart on cleansing himself from the uncleanness that besets men's souls—namely, wrongful thoughts and false convictions—becomes clean as soon as he consents in his heart to shun those counsels and brings his soul into the waters of pure reason. Behold, Scripture says, “And I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean; from all your uncleanness and from all your idols will I cleanse you” (Ezek. 36:25) May God, in His great mercy, cleanse us from every sin, iniquity, and guilt. Amen¹⁰.*

25 We can therefore understand that Paul's position would have been that maybe not Jewish but definitely Abraham's seed. That we are all now included in the covenant of Abraham.

 What are the Physical Requirements of the Mikvah: for that I am going use Tim Hegg's discussion;

30 *1. Ponds, pools, rivers, or larger bodies of water are valid (in most cases) because water is continually coming in and going out. Any natural body of water that contains less than 40 se'ahs (approx. 120 gallons) is invalid.*

35 *2. Water for a mikveh must flow from a natural source, and may not be “drawn.” “Drawn water” (שְׁאִיבִים מַיִם, mayim she'uvim), defined as water that does not flow, invalidates a mikveh. Rain water, however, if directed into a mikveh without being collected in a vessel (thus constituting drawn water) is valid for a mikveh. Once a mikveh has the minimum amount of water needed (40 se'ahs), adding drawn water does not invalidate the mikveh.*

40 *3. Water from a natural source must be pure, that is, not discolored by a mixture.*

45 *4. Water directed to a mikveh from a natural source may not flow through pipes made of materials susceptible to ritual impurities (metal, wood). Since clay was not susceptible to ritual impurity, this became the material*

¹⁰ *Yad haHazakah [Mishneh Torah], Mikvaot, 11:12 as cited by Hegg.*

5 *most often used for directing water to mikvaot. Additional rabbinic halachah ruled that pipes attached to the ground are not susceptible to ritual impurities.*

10 *5. Two mikvaot that utilize the same natural water source may not have water from one flowing to the other unless the upper one is able to maintain the minimum amount of water needed from the natural source. However, since the Sages ruled that once a mikveh has the minimum amount of water needed, adding “drawn water” does not invalidate it, sufficient water for a lower mikveh was virtually*

15 *assured.*
6. The minimum size of the mikveh must accommodate the needed water, and allow for a person to be fully immersed.¹¹

20 The performance of the Mikvah is as follows:

25 *1. Since a mikveh is not a washing for cleanliness but in order to fulfill a Torah commandment, the body must be entirely clean before descending into the mikveh. It became customary, then, to bathe before undergoing a mikveh, and to thoroughly clean oneself, including the finger nails and hair.*

30 *2. The person or object must be completely immersed in the water of the mikveh and the water must come into contact with the entire body or surface of the object. In order to assure that this requirement has been done, it became customary to immerse three times (though one immersion fulfills the halachah if done properly). It also became customary to have an attendant watch to make sure a complete immersion was done.*

35 *3. The question of “intention” (kavvanah) was debated among the Sages. Some ruled that a mikveh is invalid if the one immersing did not do so in regard to the specific commandment to bathe. Others disagreed, and ruled that the immersion was valid regardless of one’s intentions¹²*

40 It is very important to understand that this important to have a witness present 2 were sufficient but 3 was best. This makes this text in John even more significant;

45 *John 1:35-37 The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, (36) and he looked at Jesus as he*

¹¹ Hegg 76

¹² Hegg pg 76f

5 *walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" (37) The
two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.*

Notice that there are two disciples with John the best requirement,
when you understand the concept of the mikvah this makes much
10 more sense.

The Blessing that you would say;

15 *Bless are You Adonai our God King of the universe who
has sanctified us with His commandments and has
commanded us concerning immersion.*¹³

In conclusion let us understand the principles of baptism that
we see practiced in church is not what the disciples practiced.
20 What we see today is not what Yeshua or the disciples would have
understood to be immersions/baptism. In our journey back let us
remember that we are not to be angry with ignorance of the church
or with our own ignorance. With our practices of the past for we
are born anew. As we understand what to do we can do it as we are
25 able and the opportunity present itself. We should find a place that
is suitable and have those that are closest to you witness the act. It
is not something for anyone else to do for you but for you to do.
You need only Yeshua to mediate for you no clergy necessary.
Then recite the blessing.

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ⁱ List of verse Exo 19:10; Exo 29:4; Exo 30:18; Exo 30:19;
Exo 30:20; Exo 30:21; Exo 40:12; Exo 40:30; Lev 1:9;
Lev 6:27; Lev 11:25; Lev 11:28; Lev 11:40; Lev 13:6;
Lev 13:34; Lev 13:54; Lev 13:58; Lev 14:8; Lev 14:9;
Lev 14:47; Lev 15:5; Lev 15:6; Lev 15:7; Lev 15:8; Lev 15:10;
Lev 15:11; Lev 15:13; Lev 15:16; Lev 15:21; Lev 15:22;
Lev 15:27; Lev 16:4; Lev 16:24; Lev 16:26; Lev 16:28;
Lev 22:6; Num 8:7; Num 19:7; Num 19:8; Num 19:10;
Num 19:19; Num 19:21; Num 31:24; Deu 21:6; Deu 23:11;

¹³ Eby pg 31