

## **Mikvah: Coming Face to Face with G-d Five Levels of Understanding**

### **A Story**

One day, Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer, head of Eitz Chaim Yeshiva in Jerusalem, paid a visit to Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld. When Rabbi Meltzer arrived at the Rav's home, the Rav was not there. His family told Rabbi Meltzer that he had gone to immerse in the mikvah, and he'd be back shortly. When he returned, Rabbi Meltzer asked him, "Since when do you go to mikvah so often? You're not a chossid!" Rav Sonnenfeld replied, "In the Talmud, Tractate Brochos 47b, it says that if a convert is circumcised but has not yet immersed in a mikvah, he is not yet Jewish. It is the mikvah that makes him Jewish. If the mikvah is so powerful that it can make a non-Jew Jewish, imagine what it can do for someone who is already Jewish!"

### **Leviticus 15:16**

... וַרְחֵץ בַּמַּיִם אֶת כָּל בְּשָׂרוֹ ...

...And he shall immerse all his flesh in water...

### **Maimonides Positive Commandment # 109**

Rambam's 109<sup>th</sup> commandment is that we are commanded to immerse in the waters of a mikvah and thereby be purified from any impurities. The source of this commandment is the above verse, "He shall immerse all his flesh in water."

What is the secret of the mikvah's transformative power? We will explore the answer on five different levels of understanding.

### **Pshat – The Surface Level**

The Rambam rules that immersion in a mikvah *itself* is not an obligation; rather, one who wants to be purified has a mitzvah to immerse in a mikvah. The Chinuch, a commentary on the mitzvot, says that even though one doesn't *have* to immerse in mikvah, one who is pious, who has truly accepted the yoke of Heaven, will immerse. The mikvah purifies in two ways:

- 1) Just as water washes away stains on clothing, so too the waters of the mikvah wash away spiritual stains.
- 2) Before the world was created, it was submerged in water. The same is true of a child in the womb. When a person enters the mikvah, they enter a state of the world yet unborn. When they emerge, they experience a rebirth, rising from the waters pure as a newborn baby.

### **Remez – The Level of Hints**

At the end of his Laws of Mikvaos, Rambam says that if a person resolves in his heart to purify his soul,

as soon as he makes this resolution and brings his soul into pure waters, he becomes purified. The pure waters of the mikvah hint here at the pure waters of Torah. Just as one must immerse wholly in the waters of mikvah to become pure, so, too, when a person resolves to leave behind the foolishness of the world, he must immerse himself totally in the waters of Torah. The Rebbe teaches that, according to the Oral Law, a mikvah must measure 40 *se'ah*, which is the amount of water it takes to cover the entire body. Why 40 *se'ah*? Because 40 is the number of Torah: Moshe spent 40 days on the mountain receiving the Torah. When we enter into 40 *se'ah* of a mikvah, it reminds us to study Torah. The Rebbe also points out that the Oral law starts with the letter Mem and ends with the letter Mem, which has the numerical value of 40. When a person immerses fully in torah, he becomes pure.

A student of the Gaon, Reb Schachne of Lublin, came to him and told Reb Schachne that he'd been having problems concentrating on his Torah study. Reb Schachne told his student that he should be scrupulous about immersing in the mikvah, and it would make his mind sharp for Torah study and his heart open to the gateways of prayer. Mikvah represents knowledge of Torah.

### **Drush – The Homiletic Level**

Our verse says, “And he shall immerse in water his entire flesh” – a person must enter the mikvah so that their entire body is covered by its waters. The Talmud says that this amount is 1 cubit x 1 cubit x 3 cubits, or 40 *se'ah*. Tosafos in Tractate Ervin, however, says that this amount covers only up to a person's neck, not their head. The Torah says that the water must cover a person's entire body when they immerse. How can this be?

The answer is that we must make an effort in order to immerse our heads and become pure. The Rebbe Explains; the reason a person came to sin in the first place is because he “lost his head.” Otherwise, he would not have come to sin, to impurity. As the Talmud states, “A person doesn't commit a sin unless a spirit of folly enters him.” “Mitzvah” means “connection”; when we do a mitzvah, we connect to the Infinite G-d. When a person sins, G-d forbid, they cut off their G-dly connection in an infinite way. When one immerses their head in the mikvah, in purity, they re-establish their connection and will not do these foolish things anymore.

### **Sod – The Secret Level**

The Baal Shem Tov says that before immersing in mikvah, a person should meditate on the concept that his body is an earthenware vessel. The law states that immersion in a mikvah does not purify an earthenware vessel that has become impure; it can only regain its purity by being broken. Before we immerse, we first have to break our hearts, to realize we are unworthy of becoming pure. The Rebbe teaches that the Hebrew word for immersion, *tevilah*, is composed of the same letters as *ha'bittul*, to nullify ourselves.

The Baal Shem Tov further teaches that once a person is in the mikvah, he should meditate on the fact that the floor is the Divine name, Adnai, the four walls equal the Tetragrammaton, and the roof is the

name, Eh-yeh, "I will be where I will be," the highest of all names. According to kabballah, the mikvah does not just cleanse from sins; it has powers of purity to elevate a person to higher and higher levels of purity. The High Priest on Yom Kippur would go to mikvah five times over the course of the day – not because he was impure, but because each time he immersed, he ascended to a higher level of purity and holiness. The Rebbe says that this is why the Baal Shem Tov went to mikvah so often – it was in the merit of his meticulous immersions that he gained his tremendous *ruach ha'kodesh* and was allowed to enter the Supernal Chambers of Moshiach and the Upper Worlds.

### Chassidus – The Essential Level

The Talmud states, "Just like a mikvah makes someone impure become pure, so too G-d purifies the Jewish people." The Rebbe asks, "Why do we need proof from the concept of mikvah that G-d can purify Israel?" We should say the opposite: just like G-d purifies Israel, so too the waters of mikvah make an impure person pure." The Rebbe answers that when a person immerses, the waters must touch the flesh of the body with nothing intervening. If there's a substance or object between the person and the water, the person is not purified. Says the Talmud: like the mikvah waters, which purify with no intermediary, G-d himself, without intermediary, purifies the Jew. G-d, in His infinite love, wants us to be pure. Shouldn't He send an intermediary, an angel or a rabbi, to tell a person how terrible sin is and bring him to G-d? Therefore, the Talmud says that just like the water touches the body of the impure person, so too G-d Himself touches the body of the impure Jew and brings him to purity.

This explains an interesting phenomena pertaining to the law of purity: If you have an impure object the size of an egg, and it falls into a room of a million pounds of pure food, all the food in the room becomes impure. The large ratio of pure food does not nullify the impurity. (In contrast to the laws of Kosher, a ratio of 60:1 is enough to nullify milk that fell into meat, or vice versa.) Mikvah is the opposite – a million impure people can enter a mikvah and it remains pure. All the unholiness of the world cannot taint the mikvah because G-d himself is in the waters of the mikvah. G-d is infinite, and so the waters can never become impure. Because of His love for the Jewish people, He created a space for us that is beyond space. We can go to the mikvah and find sanctity and purity in a world that is full of the opposite, and nothing can defile you if you are surrounded by the four walls of the mikvah. When one enters the mikvah, he or she is coming face to face with G-d. Because of this, no impurity in the world can defile the purity of the mikvah.

The word *mikvah* means hope. The mikvah is a place of hope and healing. It brings about healthy children, livelihood, and purity to oneself and to the world.

In the merit of entering into mikvah, and by increasing building of mikvahs, we will bring the ultimate purity to the world, and the knowledge of G-d will fill the world like waters cover the sea, with the coming of Moshiach, may it be speedily in our days. Amen!