

## Conversion: Shiksa in the Mikveh

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Early on in my conversion study I remember sitting in bed reading one of many books on becoming a Jew-by-choice. I stopped mid-way through a passage and scanned back over the text once more. I turned to my husband and said, "Um, did you know that if I want to be Jewish I have to take a NAKED bath... IN FRONT OF PEOPLE!?" He laughed and said surely this was something only Orthodox women did, but the more I researched and spoke with my *beit*

*din* (rabbinic court), it was confirmed. I had to take a naked bath if I wanted to join The Tribe.

The photo in Mayim's recent post (which was wonderful, by the way) is what most literature will show you of a mikvah (ritual bath)—beautiful lighting, marble floors, and immaculate waters. A spa-like experience connecting you with your maker. The mikvah where I lived at the time came with an official rabbinical disclaimer of being "rough around the edges." The Midwestern city we lived in, like many in America, had succumbed to urban sprawl and what was once was a vibrant Jewish neighborhood was now plagued with one-way routed streets to prevent drug trafficking. The mikvah was a small ritual bath in the back of a weathered home.

It was still maintained to the best of everyone's abilities, but after-dark visits were discouraged unless halachically necessary. The morning we visited the mikvah

for my conversion I was incredibly nervous. Going over the prayers as I scrubbed my fingernails and removed my earrings, I knew that ghetto tub was the only one thing standing between me and my new faith. My *beit din* consisted of two rabbis (one male, one female) and our *Sh'liach Tzibbur* (service leader), also male. We all crammed into the small back room and my husband waited with the men by the cracked door (so they could hear and confirm my obligations) while our female rabbi accompanied me into the bathing area. I trembled as I stepped into the warm water, mortified that clergy would be seeing me stark naked and nervous about the prayers, but as she coached me through the words and the dipping, I felt a release. I felt new and tears began to fall into the waters that were welcoming me to Judaism.



*My rabbi handing over the official conversion papers!*

Although uncommon for Reform Jews, my husband and I both chose to visit the mikvah (separately, of course) the day before our wedding. Our female rabbi helped me prepare a beautiful bridal immersion ceremony and I asked that she, my husband's step-mother (a Methodist minister soon to be my mother-in-law), and my non-practicing Lutheran mother all accompany me. This unlikely trio of the dearest women in my life witnessed as those same waters that washed over me to bring me closer to Judaism, cleansed me and prepared me to become a bride. We were all in tears and this time my nakedness was forgotten and I was consumed with love, hope, and promise. As I spoke these words, I felt nothing in the world came closer to the truth:

*Immersion in water softens our form, making us malleable, dissolving some of the rigidity of who we are. This allows us to decide who we wish to be when we come out of the water.*

I had hoped to visit the mikvah during my ninth month of pregnancy the first time around but unfortunately, my body had other plans and the risk of infection was too high. It is again my intention to immerse myself in the mikvah before my second son is born. I feel like if I can make it to the ninth month, risk-free, I will welcome the waters to heal my soul and ready me again for motherhood.

Most Jewish women outside of the Orthodox movement don't think of the mikvah beyond niddah. My limited experience with the mikvah was empowering and I encourage any Jewish woman struggling, celebrating, or needing to connect with Judaism to visit one. Fancy marble floors are nice, but the waters all bring you to the same place. A place of peace, purity and personal worship. Who you wish to be—a Jew, a wife, a mother—when you come out of the waters is completely up to you.

Note: The city where I lived has since built two new beautiful mikvahs with generous donations from the local Jewish community. A local mikvah is a wonderful place for your tzedakah.

Mayyim Hayyim has been a great resource to me and the education center can connect you with a variety of immersion ceremonies, including one for the ninth month of pregnancy.

<http://www.kveller.com/shiksa-in-the-mikveh/>