

# Torah Observant “SHOMER MITZVOT”

שׁוֹמֵר מִצְוֹת

A Series on Practical Messianic Living and Apologetics (halakhah)  
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## *Tevilah and Mikveh*

(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted

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Tevilah is the Biblical act of immersing oneself in a natural water source. In ancient times a stream or river was used, but in modern times a specially constructed pool called a mikveh is normally used. Today, in Judaism, the terms are used somewhat interchangeably, with mikveh emerging as the more familiar term. As believers in Messiah Yeshua the term baptism plays a significant part of our walk with our Messiah. How can the tevilah and mikveh of Judaism become important concepts in our lives today? Let's examine the origins of the tevilah and mikveh and discover the rich symbolism that is available to us as Grafted-In believers.

Water baptism (immersion) was not originally a Christian act. All through the TaNaKH (Old Testament), the children of Isra'el, whenever they would have to come before God, would cleanse themselves. The priests had to cleanse themselves, and what they went through was the mikveh, or a cleansing. A woman went through a mikveh once a month. There are many reasons for a mikveh in Scripture. It was not uncommon for the people of Isra'el to be immersed in water.

The three types of ritual washing (ablution) mentioned in Biblical and Talmudic literature are: 1) complete immersion (tevilah) in a natural water-source or in a specially constructed mikveh, prescribed for married women following their periods of menstruation or after childbirth as well as for proselytes (gerim) on being accepted into Judaism; 2) washing of the feet and hands, prescribed for the priests in the Temple service at Yerushalayim; 3) washing of the hands (netilat yadayim) before sitting down to a meal and before prayer, upon rising from sleep and after the elimination of bodily wastes, also after being in proximity to a dead human body. Apart from ritual purification, the Jewish people have always regarded bathing and physical cleanliness as implicitly important because, as Hillel taught, the human body reflects the divine image of God.

Maimonides (an ancient rabbinical teacher) finds a symbolical significance in tevilah:

"The person who directs his heart to purify his soul from spiritual impurities, such as iniquitous thoughts and evil notions, becomes clean as soon as he determines in his heart to keep apart from these courses, and bathes his soul in the water of pure knowledge."

So when Yochanan the Immerser (John the Baptist) was down along the river of Jordan and there were multitudes that came down to him, it wasn't unusual that so many of those Judeans had come out of Yerushalayim and Judea.

Before you go into the water or mikveh, you should know why you go into the water. You don't go into the mikveh to join a church. You're not sprinkled to join a church. You go into the water as an outward manifestation of an inward work that's happened in your life, a change in your life. That day it was to be for repentance.

The book of Yochanan records that

**1:29 On the next day, he saw Yeshua coming to him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 1:30 This is he of whom I said, ' Behind me comes one who has passed ahead of me because he existed before me.' 1:31 I did not know him, but for this reason I came immersing in water: that he would be revealed to Yisra'el." 1:32 Yochanan testified, saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending like a dove out of heaven, and it remained on him. 1:33 I did not recognize him, but he who sent me to immerse in water, he said to me, 'On whoever you will see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he who immerses in the Holy Spirit.' 1:34 I have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God." (Yochanan 1:29-34, Online Kitvei Talmidei HaMashiach)**

We need to get the picture, almost 2,000 years ago, of Yochanan the Immerser, along the river of Jordan, a prophet, one who came in the spirit of Elijah. He was down along the hot desert area of the Jordan. It was a Jewish community that was coming out because only the Jewish community knew anything about a Messiah. It wasn't the Greeks, it wasn't the Romans, nor any other nation, because no other nation had been promised a Messiah. Isra'el was the chosen nation. Today, we can be thankful that His mercy and grace have been extended to all nations. But until that time, the only people who knew the God of Isra'el, outside of Isra'el, were those who had become converts or proselytes to Judaism. They were down along the river of Jordan because they knew the prophecies, saw the signs of the time, and recognized there was going to be a Messiah (and that he should come at that time).

Let us reflect why was Yochanan immersing? It was not just a mikveh for a woman at her season. It was not for a man with a skin disease or a running sore. It was not for the high priest at Yom Kippur. In fact it was for something different and special. It was for repentance! It was fulfilling the words of the prophet,

**"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"**

This was a mikveh for repentance.

According to history, in the first century, there were many men who were prophesying and many of those claimed to be the Messiah. Many prophets rose up talking about the coming of Messiah. When Yochanan was baptizing, he said,

**"The reason I came is that the Messiah might be revealed to Isra'el."**

You might think that if you were watching that mikveh along the river of Jordan, and the Messiah came out of the water, you would recognize him as the Messiah. But many did not recognize Yeshua as the Messiah. Many of Yochanan's disciples continued as his disciples, but a few of them left Yochanan and began to follow Yeshua. There was another baptism mikveh that followed and Yeshua and his disciples began to immerse and make more disciples than Yochanan. Yet Yochanan continued with his disciples; so, we see that not everyone recognizes when God makes a move. Even though the Messiah was before all the people who were there, and these were sincere people, honest people who were looking for Messiah, they still didn't see or recognize him.

Then Yochanan gave this testimony,

**"I saw the spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I would not have known him except that the one who sent me to immerse with water told me the man on whom you see the Spirit (Ruach) come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (Ruach HaKodesh). I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."**

Yochanan was testifying and telling that this was the Son of God, this was Yeshua, the Emmanuel (God with us).

In the third chapter, continuing on the theme of water, after Yeshua had entered into his ministry, and he had changed the water into wine, Yeshua began to tell them something strange again and he said,

**"You must be born again."**

And Nicodemus questioned him. Yeshua replied,

**"I tell you the truth -- no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."**

Something has to really happen to a person to see what God is doing. It takes something on the inside to change a person's life, to want to live a life that's holy and pure and righteous and reject the world. In the book of Hebrews, it says that Moses "chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time." He made a choice to follow in the righteous way that God showed him to lead the people, and we also have to walk in the righteous way God shows us.

**"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born." Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit."**

Actually going into the water (tevilah) does not give you birth. But what happens, is something takes place before you go into the water. It's an outward manifestation of something that has taken place in your life. Repentance must take place and an acknowledgement that you need God and are a sinner must be realized. We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God.

**"Flesh gives birth to flesh, and spirit gives birth to spirit."**

Part of receiving the Spirit of the Lord (Ruach HaKodesh) into your life comes with repentance, acknowledging our sins, changing our ways, and beginning to walk in the ways of righteousness.

In the Encyclopedia Judaica listed under sin, we find over 70 word references, but only three major categories for sin: the words "Het", "Pesha", and "Awon" (Avon).

"In the Tanach the word "Het" (Hata) is found 59 times. "Hata" means to fail. The word "Pesha" is found 136 times. "Psh" means breach. This refers to breaking a covenant, a criminal law, to break peaceful relations between two parties or as sinful behavior between man towards God. Then there is "Awah" which is found 17 times, or the root "Awon" - "To wrong", found 229 times, which infers "crookedness"; not upright in conduct, dishonest, as swindler, a deceiver.

So, sin is an act or deed against God and His Torah, (1) by failure, (2) the breaking of a covenant with God or fellow man, or (3) being crooked by cheating, swindling, dishonesty or being a deceiver in general.

For these transgressions we must repent. The same Encyclopedia Judaica describes repentance as such:

"Repentance is a prerequisite for divine forgiveness: God will not pardon man unconditionally but waits for him to repent. In repentance, man must experience genuine remorse for the wrong he has committed and then convert his penitential energy into concrete acts. Two sub-stages are discernable in the latter process: first the negative one of ceasing to do evil and then the second, the positive step of doing good. It is a call to return to God, or "t'shuvah" (to return). The motion of turning (or returning) implies that sin is not an ineradicable stain but a straying from the path, and that by the effort of turning, (a power God has given to all men) the sinner can redirect his (or her) destiny."

The Great King of Isra'el, Dah-vid HaMelekh, cried to God for mercy and said,

**"Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;... Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me."**

This is all a part of being born again. Changing our sinful ways and turning or returning to a righteous God with righteous deeds. First we must acknowledge our sins and second, repent and turn from our evil ways and deeds. After that, going through the mikveh or water of separates us from our past. Only then is new birth or rebirth evident by our deeds and actions.

**"You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again. The wind blows wither it pleases, you hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."**

Just as with the wind, you can't see where the Holy Spirit comes from, but you can see the effects of the Holy Spirit in peoples' lives; you can tell if a person really is born of the Spirit by the type of life he or she is living. Therefore, let us press our way forward for the kingdom of heaven is very near.

### **When does tevilah take place?**

When a Jew goes into the mikveh tank he or she is symbolically starting afresh, hence the parable used by Yeshua as he conversed with Nak'dimon (Nicodemus). The symbolism is surprisingly similar to being baptized where the convert identifies publicly with the death and burial of Yeshua. Various life cycles

in the life of the Jew are marked by such an immersion, to include marriage and conversion.

### **On conversion:**

Once a person has decided to convert, the proselyte must begin to learn Jewish religion, law and customs and begin to observe them. This teaching process generally takes at least one year, because the prospective convert must experience each of the Jewish holidays; however, the actual amount of study required will vary from person to person (a convert who was raised as a Jew might not need any further education, for example, while another person might need several years).

After the teaching is complete, the proselyte is brought before a Beit Din (rabbinical court) which examines the proselyte and determines whether he or she is ready to become a Jew. If the proselyte passes this oral examination, the rituals of conversion are performed. If the convert is male, he is circumcised (or, if he was already circumcised, a pinprick of blood is drawn for a symbolic circumcision). Both male and female converts are immersed in the mikveh (a ritual bath used for spiritual purification). The convert is given a Jewish name and is then introduced into the Jewish community.

### **On marriage:**

According to the Torah, a man is forbidden from having sexual intercourse with a niddah, that is, a menstruating woman. The law of niddah is the only law of ritual purity that continues to be observed today. At one time, a large portion of Jewish law revolved around questions of ritual purity and impurity. All of the other laws had significance in the time of the Temple, but because of the absence of the Temple many are not applicable today.

The time of separation begins at the first sign of blood and ends in the evening of the woman's seventh "clean day." This separation lasts a minimum of 12 days. The rabbis broadened this prohibition, maintaining that a man may not even touch his wife or sleep in the same bed as her during this time. Weddings must be scheduled carefully, so that the woman is not in a state of niddah on her wedding night.

At the end of the period of niddah, as soon as possible after nightfall after the seventh clean day, the woman must immerse herself in a kosher mikveh, a ritual pool. The mikveh was traditionally used to cleanse a person of various forms of ritual impurity. Today, it is used almost exclusively for this purpose and as part of the ritual of conversion. It is important to note that the purpose of the mikveh is solely ritual purification, not physical cleanliness; in fact, immersion in the mikveh is not valid unless the woman is thoroughly bathed before immersion. The

mikveh is such an important part of traditional Jewish ritual life that a new community will build a mikveh before they build a synagogue.

As with most things in Judaism, a standardized blessing is attached to the immersion process. Here is the blessing:

ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו על טבילה.

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam, asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav, v’tzivanu al-t’vilah.”***

**Blessed are you LORD, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with his commandments and [instructed] us concerning immersion.**

The Torah does not specify the reason for the laws of niddah, but this period of abstention has both physical and psychological benefits.

I have not heard of this ceremony being included during bar/bat mitzvah nor during entering yeshiva (Torah college), nor during ordination.

An entire web site devoted to this subject, from a traditional Jewish point of view can be found at [Mikvah.org](http://Mikvah.org).

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