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The Waters of Life Mikve

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‘God planted a garden in Eden, to the east, and there He placed man that He had formed. And God made the ground grow every tree that is pleasant to see and good to eat – and the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it split, and became four headwaters... And God took the man, and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and watch it. And God commanded the man saying, “From every tree in the Garden, you may eat. But from the Tree of Knowledge in the middle of the Garden, you may not eat – for on the day you eat from it, you will die.” Genesis 2:8-17.

In Judaism this story is understood as a myth of deep psychological intuition. What the Jewish sages teach is that God created man in order that man share with him in the on-going creation of the world. He also willed that man be free and to be like unto Himself but that to be free also meant that man had to be able to make choices. It has even been said that God Himself chose to assume the guise of a Serpent in order to tempt Eve and Adam so as to prompt them into disobedience. As he was in the Garden of Eden, and as long as he was faced with the command that he not eat from the Tree of Knowledge man was not free. It was only when he

rebelled that man became a free agent and hence capable of making a free choice in serving God. The Tree of Knowledge in this story is the world of relativity – the world of opposites, of good and evil, of life and of death. In eating from it man himself was to partake intimately in the world as it appears though still rooted in, and longing for the world of the Absolute which is Eden. Man is thus the link between God and Creation. Only through Man does God enter into the world.

But what of the River in the Garden and the headwaters that flow out of it? After having been driven from the Garden of Eden Adam immersed himself in one of the rivers, the river Jordan and there wept bitter tears though he was given solace by myriads of fish that gently swept his breast with their fins in compassion. We are also told that Eve sat herself upon a rock submerged in the River Euphrates and there wept bitter tears into its flowing waters. Both Adam and Eve had been in a state of Tumah or ritual separation from God but it was a state of their souls not of their bodies that made them tumah or un-clean. In order for Adam and Eve to reassociate themselves with Eden it was necessary to remove themselves from their state of rebellion and hence ‘uncleanliness’. Their purification took place through immersion in living water – in the mikveh provided by the Jordan and Euphrates rivers.

The rabbis in the Talmud teach us that all of the waters in the world have their origin in the River in the Garden of Eden and hence all contact with water is a connection to it and hence to our original

state. In Hebrew the word MiKVah has same letter as KoVMaH which is the word for ‘rising’ or standing tall. It is through the Mikveh, or ritual immersion in living water that man and woman can rise from their fallen state, and its consequences which are separation from God, and stand tall again rooted, as it were, in Eden itself.

The Prophet Isaiah in speaking of that time when men will have brought creation to its fulfillment in justice and righteousness tells us ‘They shall not hurt or destroy My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God , just like the waters that cover the sea...’ (Is. 11:9). The waters of the mikve are likened to the waters of knowledge that will return the earth from a state of being in Tumah or separation (defilement).

The MIKVAH

The Hebrew word mikvah means a pool or a gathering of water. The only time that the word is used in the Torah (Pentateuch) is in the Book of Leviticus (11:36) where it

Says –‘Only a spring and a pit, a gathering (mikveh) of water, shall be clean...’ IT is from this text and its either direct or indirect relation to other contexts that the Talmud (The Oral Law) draws all of the rules and regulations regarding the mikvah.

The laws governing the making of a mikvah are complex but the following are the main requirements:

- 1) The mikvah must consist only of water.
- 2) It must be built in the ground and cannot consist of any vessel that can be moved or disconnected from the building in which it is built. The mikvah is like a tomb into which we enter to die and then to rise into life again.
- 3) The waters in it cannot be running or flowing – unless they originate from either a river or a spring.
- 4) The water cannot be drawn and brought to it through human intervention.

- 5) The water cannot be channeled into it through any means that may become unclean.
- 6) The mikvah must contain at least 40 Sa’ah (200 gallons) of ritually clean water.

Immersion in the mikvah is dictated by a number of states of being in Tumah in order to set aside an object or person for holiness, i.e. for fulfilling man’s end which is to imbibe the world with righteousness and justice. A woman after her menstrual period is required to submerge herself in the mikvah as is bride to be on the eve of her marriage. Through this act she is set on the course of observing the first commandment which is to have children. A convert to Judaism must also submerge him/herself in the mikvah since they are thus set aside to be part of Israel as a Nation of Priests. It is interesting that the notion of holiness in Judaism is not about being good but about being in a state of readiness to do good – it is an act of intention or kavvanah. Many pious persons perform the mikveh on Fridays before Shabbath as do others should they commit a serious fault. It is a custom that Shofers – the Scribes who copy out the Scrolls of the Law, perform the mikveh as well prior to writing.

The influence of the mikveh on early Christianity is obvious. At the time of Jesus of Nazareth there was a quite prominent sect known as the Essenes who lived near the Dead Sea – not far in fact from the Jordan River. Most of the Essenes appear to have been members of priestly families and their communities incorporated mikvehs that were reserved so as to maintain and permanent state of ritual purity. John the Baptist was clearly a member of this sect. Baptism, as practiced by the early non-Jewish Christians was actually the performance of the mikve. However, as an act of initiation it was understood that it gave to the Christian a mark as indelible as that of the circumcision into the Covenant of Abraham.

THE MIKVAH AS THE

WOMB OF LIFE

WATER – Creation: life, death and resurrection.

Water, like air, is the most subtle and impermanent of the elements. However, in the myth of the creation of the Universe, water precedes air and all of the other elements. ‘The earth was formless and chaotic with darkness on the face of the deep, and God’s

Spirit causing motion on the face of the water.” (Gen. 1:2). Why was water and its connection with God’s spirit mentioned at all? Why is God’s spirit associated with water? Furthermore, the Hebrew word that is used, *MeRachefes*, ‘causing motion’ has the meaning of not only making something move but of caring for something. Even stranger is the fact that the word is used in the present tense whereas the rest of the passage is in the past.

Some of the Jewish sages have taught that the ‘water’ mentioned in the text refers to the fluid state of the universe that arose as a consequence of creation, as prior to it there was timelessness and hence no change. There are a number of interesting contrasts used in these passages about the creation of the universe – light and darkness, the upper waters from the lower waters which is understood in the Talmud as referring to male and female – elements of change and creation. It is only on the third day that Genesis (1:9) relates that the “waters under the heavens be gathered together to one place, and let the dry land appear.” It is on this day that we see the word ‘mikvah’ for the first time as a ‘mikveh mayim’ - a ‘gathering of waters, He called seas.” But this gathering is also the womb of life as it says in the Book of Job – ‘Out of whose womb came the ice...the waters that congealed into stone.” (39:29-30). Genesis goes on to describe a mysterious collusion of elements that go into the creation of man – ‘...then a mist arose from the earth, and watered the face of the ground. God then formed man out of the dust of the ground, and blew in his nostrils a soul of life.’ (Gen. 3:19). The earth as the female element produces life only through the action of water – but in the same manner death

is the fate of man when he returns to inert dust, when the fluidity of life and his spirit depart.

The ‘waters’ referred to in Genesis represent life, change, evolution and growth. It is these waters as well that permit a man to connect with his creator as the river of Eden spiritually feeds all rivers, all waters in the world. Water as the very sign of change is the means for us to touch upon our true purpose – to unite with God and to lose our ego-oriented selves. When a person immerses him/herself in a Mikvah, he enters into the realm of change itself. Ego is our false sense of permanence and it is through the practice of the mikveh that we are led to die to ourselves and to be re-born out of the primordial womb.

One of the teachings of Judaism is that only repentance can wash away sin but water represents the concept of spiritual cleansing “ We must die, and as waters spilt on the ground, we cannot be gathered up. God does not respect any person, but He devises means so that no one should be banished from before Him.” (2 Samuel 14:14) The mystery of the Mikveh is perhaps hidden in these words.