
האם המקווה נגיש לכולן? סקירה כללית של מקוואות בישראל מבחינת נגישות / Waters
of Purity: Accessible for All? An Overview of Mikvaot in Israel

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Waters of Purity: Accessible for All? An Overview of Mikvaot in Israel

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Abstract

This article depicts the world of mikvaot (ritual baths) from an accessibility point of view. According to a recent census taken from a mikvah directory, there are eight Israeli mikvaot that advertise that they are accessible to those with special needs. Mikvaot have been renovated to accommodate the physical needs of women, however sensory and mental health impairments have not typically been accommodated to date. Procedural changes need to be made, as well as other modifications, to accommodate those with sensory, cognitive, and mental health impairments. Recommendations are made to provide comprehensive service to the population of individuals with special needs. The importance of occupational therapy principles and intervention is highlighted as the spiritual, sensory, physical, and environmental activities of daily living are revealed through mikvah practice.

Introduction

Spirituality plays a vital role in the holistic make up of each person (Pedretti & Early, 2001). As a person engages in religious ritual, his or her spiritual essence comes to life. For a religious Jewish person, mikvah attendance plays a vital role in daily spiritual practice. Enabling a person to properly engage in religious ritual and practice addresses a central area of occupational performance. Moreover, religious practice is an important activity of daily living that contributes to a person's identity (AOTA, 2002). As occupational therapy modules seek to address all needs of an individual holistically, spirituality and religious practice must be addressed as well. The role of the occupational therapist is essential within the field of accessibility consulting and design. Occupational therapy modules can direct the building and reconstructing of facilities appropriately to ensure that activities of daily living can be executed by any and all individuals. Accessibility consulting can

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provide practical recommendations for each facility to be built under the rubric of "design for all" principles. Moreover, these two fields combined can address matters such as assistive device usage, procedural changes, and pre-arrival preparation before mikvah attendance.

Recent Law in Israel

According to recent legislation passed under Israel's Equal Rights for Individuals with Disabilities Law, *"There must be an accessible mikvah in a city that has more than 100,000 residents...within this mikvah there must be at least one attendee who will assist an individual with disabilities with all movements throughout the mikvah [process] in order to ensure safety and comfort...and house a hoist for the transfer of disabled persons...either a standing hoist or a ceiling lift"* (Equal Rights for Individuals with Disabilities Regulations, 2011).

The Israeli law allocates two specific categories of accessibility consulting: structural and service. The former addresses all the physical aspects of building and reconstruction (parking, doorways, ramps, bathrooms, elevators and stairs), while the latter addresses issues pertaining to obtaining and benefitting from services, (signage, lighting, assistive devices, equipment, etc.) in addition to procedures to increase accessibility for individuals with specific needs (Equal Rights for Individuals with Disabilities Law, 2005). Subject to these regulations, all new and existing facilities that service the public must gradually be made accessible from all structural and service aspects. This applies to government buildings, restaurants, educational institutions, medical buildings and all commercial facilities. Accordingly, these recent regulations apply to religious services as well. For example, in the mikvah, a new type of chair that accompanies a woman into the water and allows her to immerse safely is now the required chair within mikvaot. As the mikvah trainees undergo comprehensive training they are required to learn the safe and proper use of each lift and chair (Equal Rights for Individuals with Disabilities Regulations, 2013).

Mikvah Use as a Common Jewish Practice

The word 'mikvah' literally means a gathering of waters. The actual mikvah waters are natural waters that originate from a spring or cistern and are used for the act of purification (Shamberg & Barr, 2006). The mikvaot waters purifies one who become impure following menstrual flow, converts a non-

Jewish person into a Jew, and purifies a Jewish spirit in preparation for a holy Sabbath or holiday. It also prepares a bride for entering the holy covenant of marriage prior to her wedding. In addition to the personal use of a mikvah, the mikvah waters are commonly used to sanctify new dishes upon purchase and dishes purchased specifically for the holiday of Passover prior to use. No matter the reason or use, mikvah immersion is equated to spiritual enhancement.

The mikvaot worldwide play a pivotal role in Jewish communal life as they facilitate the immersion process of all those in need of purification. According to rabbinic authorities, a community is only established once a mikvah is built (Jachter, 2002). Individuals who contend with physical, sensory, mental health or other impairments have the same right to make use of these facilities as any other person in society. However, these facilities often lack the appropriate modifications for full functional use. Research has been done worldwide regarding the need for environmental modifications for mikvaot. The evidence points towards many facilities being equipped with electronic lifts, ramps, enhanced lighting, in addition to providing training to the mikvah attendees (Israeli Ministry of Justice, 2011). What still remains untouched within the field involves adaptations for individuals with visual and hearing impairment in addition to those who contend with mental health disorders (MayimHayim, n.d.). Regarding the latter, any woman who contends with post-traumatic stress disorder following a water incident, must undergo therapy, coaching, and assistance during the immersion process. Additionally those with hearing aids are required to remove hearing aids prior to mikvah use, and rely upon additional assistance or sensory replication during immersion. Anyone with a visual impairment would be uncertain about the obstacles in her path preceding and during the immersion (Access for All, n.d.).

Accessible Mikvaot in Israel

To date, there are eight mikvaot throughout the country that are listed as "accessible to individuals with disabilities" (Access for All, n.d.). Several city municipalities, such as Tel Aviv, Ramat Gan, Tzfat, and Jerusalem, have provided financial assistance to local mikvaot. In the neighborhood of Musrara, Jerusalem, there is a mikvah that has been renovated completely to appropriately accommodate individuals with disabilities. This mikvah can accommodate a broad range of impairments ranging from muscle weakness, paralysis, lack of sensation, deafness, and post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Close to 5 years ago the Jerusalem municipality financed this facility to implement environmental modifications specifically for the disabled population.

Disability advocacy groups, such as MILBAT and ZECHUT advocate on behalf of these populations to ensure cooperation from the municipalities. Currently the mikvah in Musrara offers the following accessibility features: accessible parking, an entrance ramp, a doorbell with braille, an automatic door opener, a clear passageway at the entrance, electronic lifts, ceiling lift, modified toileting and showering facilities, commode chair, and assistive devices to help with mikvah preparation. In addition, the mikvah attendees arrange pre-set appointments with women who have special needs. These attendees demonstrate empathy, support, respect and dignity as they walk each woman through the process of mikvah use, and listen to individual's needs and concerns. This facility offers several services to the individuals with disabilities. With respect to woman with PTSD, attendees sit with the woman and speak with her prior to the immersion. Upon immersion, they hold her hand and grant her extra time for the immersion. The attendees walk her through the immersion process at a slower pace so that she completes the mikvah immersion, as required, and does not experience any relapse. This allotted time is relevant as well to women who contend with physical and sensory impairments who require more time to go through the mikvah immersion.

The role played by the occupational therapist/accessibility consultant involves training mikvah attendees to assist women with disabilities starting from accessing the facility, undressing, preparing for mikvah immersion, immersion, and post-immersion dressing. Each step is an activity of daily living that could require assistance or assistive device usage, and must be addressed precisely (Pedretti & Early, 2011).

Other mikvaot in the country are advertised as partially accessible. These facilities may house lifts and commode chairs, but the preparation rooms are often not wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair. Moreover, often there is insufficient lighting throughout the facility, hampering the preparation process. Another obstacle is the hallway leading to the actual mikvah pool, which is frequently too narrow, too cluttered and not sufficiently lit. A predominant difficulty is that mikvah attendees generally lack the time and patience to truly address the needs of those with special needs. A mikvah must be comprehensively renovated to best accommodate those with special needs (Nishmat, n.d.).

Walking Through the Mikvah Experience: Step-By-Step Accessibility Features

Mikvah attendance involves sensory, mental, physical, and environmental activities of daily living. As such, the role of occupational therapy can be pivotal in promoting maximal participation in all mikvah activities. Each step must be understood and mastered by an individual so that the process is experienced safely and with personal satisfaction. Each of the following steps can allow for occupational therapy intervention.

Mikvah Attendance: When do I Go?

A 7-day counting period is associated with the mikvah immersion, during which time a woman checks that she no longer has any menstrual flow. At the end of these 7 days, she is able to immerse in the mikvah. However, an individual with a cognitive impairment may have difficulty remembering the day on which she is required to immerse. Recently, an inexpensive online program called the 'Mikvah Calendar' has become available. This is an invaluable resource for individuals with cognitive impairments who have difficulty remembering the actual dates of their expected immersions. With the help of the online mikvah calendar, a woman's expected date is calculated, and an email is sent to her reminding her of the accurate date and location of her upcoming immersion. This can assist any woman with memory, orientation and planning difficulties in preparing for the imminent immersion (www.mikvahcalendar.com).

Parking

More often or not, the accessible parking for any building is located in close proximity to the building's accessible entrance. Since the mikvah is only used after sunset, the parking for these facilities must be very close to the main entrance. Moreover, anyone who arrives at a mikvah via a special needs vehicle or transportation must have sufficient room to accommodate van lifts or car lifts. The parking lot should have adequate lighting to enable safe descent from a vehicle. If the individual is accompanied by an assistant, there should be enough room for him/her to help the woman as she exits the vehicle.

Entrance

The mikvah entrance must be labeled clearly and lit in such a way that the user can see the entrance, yet her required privacy is maintained. A bell with a

braille option should be installed. Upon arrival at the mikvah there should be a bell that signals the attendee to automatically open the door from within. An entrance ramp is also needed to enable safe entry into the area. Should there be any stairs within the entrance, they should be made according to the designated standards and be equipped with appropriate handles. The entrance way should be free of obstacles or objects both before and after the entry.

Payment

Payment at mikvaot is now completed through automated machines that stand at the entrance of the facility. Following payment, the door automatically opens and the individual enters through. If this payment machine cannot be modified, an attendee must greet an individual with special needs at the entrance and take payment without the use of the machine. Modifications made to the payment machine include: lowering the height of the machine, adding braille and voiceover to each button, applying large arrows to each button and placing a large sign over the machine that states the payment required prior to entering the mikvah. Moreover, an online payment method prior to arrival could be implemented.

Attendees

Each attendee should demonstrate dignity and respect; allowing an individual complete freedom to act independently while making use of special accommodations. If a pre-arranged meeting has been made, attendees should make note of the special needs of the woman to prepare the facility for her imminent arrival. Should the woman arrive at a facility spontaneously, she should be guided through the facility, and her special needs should be determined upon her arrival. As disabilities vary, the level of assistance varies as well. Some woman require assistive devices as they complete the preparation for mikvah, others require added light near the mikvah waters, while others need an attendee to hold their hand during the immersion process. In the Musrara facility, each woman with a disability is told that: "if you need us we are here, if you don't, we will grant you your space". Due to the intimacy and personal nature of the mikvah experience, this philosophy should be practiced by all mikvah attendees who assist woman with special needs.

Preparation Rooms

Prior to immersion, a woman must clean all areas of her body and check that she is ready for the mikvah immersion. Each room should be equipped with

modified showering and toilet facilities, including transfer boards, commode shower chairs and easy to use faucets. There should be enhanced lighting in each room, and assistive devices such as long handled combs, long handled tooth brushes, standing mirrors, a hands-free dryer and soap dispenser, and a wall mounted mirror. There should also be an appropriate intercom system within each preparation room. One button should be used to call mikvah attendees when a woman is in need of general assistance. The second should be used to signal an emergency, such as falls, medical problems, emergencies, and other serious predicaments. A third should be a call button to alert the mikvah attendee that a woman is ready and prepared for mikvah immersion. The mikvah attendee must explain the difference between these buttons and the appropriate use of each button. At the Musrara facility, a ceiling lift accompanies a woman from the preparation room directly to the water, and lowers her into the water for immersion. This creates a fluid path enabling her an obstacle free access to the mikvah and return to her room following immersion. The latter feature requires that mikvah attendees learn how to operate the ceiling lift, and if need be, obtain additional assistance so that the person can be transferred safely. Extra training is required for this process, but interviews with a number of women who used this ceiling lift indicated that they all felt that the ceiling lift created a less invasive mikvah experience since rather than being transferred to the mikvah by attendees, they were lifted by an electronic lift.

Immersion Into the Waters

An electronic lift should be placed next to the water in a safe and secure place. All obstacles in the mikvah waters should be removed and set aside. Sufficient lighting should be placed in this area ensuring that anyone can see it clearly. Attendees should be attentive when providing assistance during this process. The blessing recited upon immersion should be written in large bold print and placed in an accessible site. Assistance should be provided to recite the blessing, as needed or required. By implementing these modifications and procedural changes into the mikvah facility, a number of different impairments can be accommodated.

Conclusion

Mikvah attendance requires ample support and modification for those who contend with disabilities. In order to properly ensure maximal participation of

community members, modifications should be made so that these individuals can access these facilities with ease and comfort. Currently mikvaot are partially accessible, however, more accessible modifications should be implemented so that a broader range of disabilities can be accommodated. With more research and accessibility consultation, facilities can be renovated, and procedural changes can be implemented to create barrier-free environments. Through such changes, Jewish religious practice can be implemented with greater ease and comfort for all community members, regardless of ability or disability. With more knowledge and implementation of occupational therapy principles, mikvaot can accommodate a broader range of disabilities.

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