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## Orthodox Jewish Women and Ritual Purity During the Pandemic

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# Orthodox Jewish Women and Ritual Purity During the Pandemic:

This teaching module includes:

- A summary of main issues on the relationship between health, gender, and religion during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Articles from the Scholarworks Database discussing the main issues and case studies from the topic.
- Links to additional material related to the topic.



An old mikvah located in Rashi Shul, an 11<sup>th</sup> century synagogue located in Worms, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany. "File: Synagogue Worms-4125.jpg" by *Dietrich Krieger* is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

## Fact Page and Resources for Students:

### What is Ritual?

Ritual is typically viewed as complex and formal religious actions, such as prayers, ceremonies, and offerings. But a ritual encompasses much more than that. The simplest action can be considered a ritual action. For example, closing one's eyes before praying. Ritual includes outer actions and inner intentions. It is one's inner intentions that provide experiential meaning to the ritual action.<sup>1</sup> For more on ritual, see teaching module "Ritual During Covid-19".

### What is a Mikvah/Mikveh?

Jewish women, primarily from the orthodox denomination of Judaism, are required to immerse themselves into a pool known as mikvah/mikveh in order to obtain ritual purity after their menstrual cycle.<sup>2</sup> Before immersing oneself into a mikvah, a woman is in a state of *niddah*, or ritual impurity.<sup>3</sup> Despite synagogues being closed along with services and other ceremonies being performed virtually, some public mikvahs have remained open during the COVID-19 pandemic. Health concerns have arisen, in addition to doctrinal issues and debate around purity during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> The articles below give the perspective of Orthodox Jewish Women and their decisions to use/not use mikvahs/mikvehs in addition to the policies and regulations of individual communities who maintain and run the mikvahs/mikvehs.

An up-close image of a modern day mikvah. File: Mikveh naiad1.jpg by מקווה ניד ונטורה from מקווה ניד חוות סקאלי is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.



## SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES:

Issue 1: Depending on the religion, women are faced with different doctrinal and ritual obligations than men. For example, women in orthodox Judaism are required to bathe in a ritual pool in order to obtain purity. How do Orthodox Jews obtain purity during a pandemic? Additionally, what are the health concerns?

Issue 2: Many of these ritual pools, known as a *mikvah/mikveh*, are housed in public spaces, making them accessible to anyone. Should these pools remain open?

Issue 3: The use of mikvahs/mikvehs are required by Jewish law and are considered a *mitzvah* or commandment. Does the *mitzvah* or obligation still apply during a global pandemic? What options are available for women who have a religious obligation but are also concerned for their health? Do alternatives to the ritual exist?

<sup>1</sup> Smart, Ninian. *The Religious Experience*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Green, Emma. 2020. "Orthodox Jewish Women Are Facing an Impossible Choice Right Now." *The Atlantic*.

<sup>3</sup> Osgood, Kelsey. 2020. "Is the Mikveh Safe from COVID-19? Some Women Opt for the Ocean." *The Forward*.

<sup>4</sup> Weisberg, Chana. 2020. "Why I Decided to Immerse in the Mikvah During the Coronavirus Epidemic." *Chabad.org*.

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## ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS/CLASSROOM IMPLEMENTATION:

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This teaching module can be presented in two lectures/classes:

First Class: Present the background information and the main issues based on the provided case studies and links. The instructor will divide the class into groups (Number per group dependent on class size and instructor's preference).

Homework: Each group will select a case study and come prepared to present on selected case study. Each group will be tasked with providing their own solution to the presented problem found in Issue # 3. Please see below for presentation instructions. If class is in an online format, please see below for alternative assignment.

Second Class: Group Presentations on selected case study. If class is online, student led discussions on each issue will take place. See below for alternative assignment.

Homework: Response Paper

### **Presentation Instructions:**

Groups of students will select a case study based on the issues/articles provided and will present on their selected case study related to mikvah/mikveh use during the pandemic. Students will also be charged with forming a solution to Issue # 3 by answering the following questions:

1. Is there a safe way for Jewish women to use public Mikvahs/Mikvehs?
2. Are there alternatives to Mikvah/Mikveh use? Provide examples.

Other case studies/articles outside of the selected study may be used when forming a solution to Issue #3. The duration of each presentation will be determined by the instructor. If the instructor chooses, a response paper can be assigned requiring students to critically engage with one of the case studies. The response papers can be submitted to a dropbox provided by the instructor.

\*Alternative Assignment for Online Classes: For online classes, presentations may be switched to individual student papers around the topic. Additionally online student discussions may be used in an asynchronous setting to allow for students to share ideas with one another.

## Case Studies:

The following case studies/articles can be found on Western Michigan University's Scholarworks database found at link: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion-pandemic/>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/04/orthodox-jews-mikvah-immersion-covid-19/610204/>

This article details the difficult choices Orthodox Jewish women are having to make regarding sexual purity, use of mikvahs, their health, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

[https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/4702037/jewish/Why-I-Decided-to-Immerse-in-the-Mikvah-During-the-Coronavirus-Epidemic.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4702037/jewish/Why-I-Decided-to-Immerse-in-the-Mikvah-During-the-Coronavirus-Epidemic.htm)

This article documents one Orthodox Jewish woman and her decision to abide by the laws of mikvah during the pandemic.



A sign for a local mikvah located in Key West, Florida.  
File "1817241426\_7493d366eb\_o" by *Florence Gray* is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

## Resources for Instructors:

The following resources/articles can be found on Western Michigan University's Scholarworks database found here:

<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion-pandemic/>

The following resources and links are related to the topic of health, gender, and religion in the COVID-19 pandemic, but are separate from the case studies presented above. The following articles may be used by instructors who wish to include additional case studies/examples into their teaching:

### Religion, Gender, and Health:

<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/414015/2004-side-by-side-faith-gender-covid19-statement.pdf>

This statement from various religious organizations around the world calls for gender equality and sexual violence prevention amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.06.15.20125450v1>

This study analyses the relationship between gender, religion, and COVID-19 among healthcare workers.



## Case Studies:

[https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video\\_cdo/aid/4699851/jewish/Mikvah-During-Coronavirus.htm](https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/4699851/jewish/Mikvah-During-Coronavirus.htm)

This article and video by Rivkah Slonim features a message for Orthodox Jewish women who either wish to fulfill the mitzvah around mikvah use or those who are unable to, and how they can still follow Jewish Law without participating in ritual immersion during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/amid-coronavirus-crisis-religious-zionist-opinions-differ-over-mikveh-use-622150>

This article details the conflict in the Jewish community between arbiters of Jewish Law over whether or not mikvahs should be used during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://forward.com/life/442617/is-the-mikveh-safe-from-covid-19-some-women-opt-for-the-ocean/>

This article discusses the relationship between menstruation, ritual bathing, and intimacy, providing alternatives to all three during the pandemic for Orthodox Jewish women. Alternatives include the use of birth control, nonsexual touching, masturbation, and bathing in the ocean.

## Further Reading:

<https://www.kmsynagogue.org/covid-19-messages-from-the-kelim-mikvah-and-mikvah-emunah-society.html>

The webpage provides updates for the Mikvah Emunah Society of Greater Washington (MES) along with COVID-19 regulations for mikvah use during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://www.brsonline.org/communityresources>

The webpage of the Boca Raton Community Mikvah provides precautions along with anonymous questions and answers for any women wishing to use the mikvah during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<http://www.mikvahemunah.com/>

This webpage from the Mikvah Emunah Society (MES) of Greater Washington provides updates for the Yitzchak Wallerstein Mikvah, amidst COVID-19.



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## Resources for Instructors:

<https://www.deseret.com/indept/2020/6/13/21273906/coronavirus-faith-religion-health-science-link-prayer-study-longevity-covid-19-substance-use>

This article discusses the relationship between religion and health, with an in-depth discussion on the Coronavirus.

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/religion-and-science-in-a-time-of-covid-19-allies-or-adversaries/>

This article references past pandemics. Furthermore, it details how both religion and science can work together during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://religionanddiplomacy.org/2020/03/24/what-can-we-learn-about-religion-and-covid-19-from-the-pandemic-of-1616-an-interview-with-matthew-rowley/>

This interview details the Epidemic of 1616 that impacted Native Americans in addition to how Protestant settlers perceived the pandemic.