

Washington Jewish Week

Mikvah madness

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A young woman spent months studying. She learned about the Jewish holy days. She learned about kashrut, she learned how to observe the Sabbath and she learned that she would keep on learning about Judaism probably for the rest of her life. The rabbis said she was ready to convert. Her heart and soul told her she was ready to convert. Everything was in order, she called her local mikvah, and they flatly refused to allow her to have her ritual immersion. Her conversion process had been overseen by a rabbi outside the auspices of the governing body of the mikvah, and as such, they didn't recognize her legitimacy.

Jewish law and custom are fairly clear on requiring immersion in a mikvah to consecrate a conversion to Judaism. This immersion, *tevilah* in Hebrew, is a core component of the Jewish conversion process. It is required for all genders, ages and levels of understanding. Denying access to a Jew by choice is ethically troubling. A convert is choosing to be Jewish, has undergone a process of education and is an individual who truly believes that her soul is Jewish. A mikvah that turns away such a person is, in effect, saying that her choice is invalid, that the standing of the rabbis and community that is sponsoring her is invalid, and most troubling, that someone actually has the authority to make such a decision.

Religious legitimacy is a fraught topic. In Judaism, a decentralized religion, there is no central authority that dictates appropriate adherence to religious law. Over time throughout the Diaspora, various Jewish cultures and rabbinic traditions have evolved, and each claims authority over its adherents. In general, however, each sect, denomination and movement understands that interpretation of Jewish law is contextual. The trouble we find ourselves in today is that the number of authorities has expanded, and the establishment of the State of Israel with its own competing authorities has also added a level of complexity not seen in 2,000 years.

Modern American Jewry has seen the formation of various denominations and movements, the most recent of which is Jewish Universalism, as espoused by the Union for Jewish Universalist Communities.

This movement views Judaism as a holistic religion that allows for various forms of expression. UJUC requires immersion in a mikvah as part of its conversion process, as does the modern Orthodox and Conservative Jewish movements, among others. Any mikvah owner/operator is, of course, within its U.S. legal rights to deny entry to anyone it chooses to. The issue at hand is the moral and ethical one of elevating some Jewish denominations over others, and the negative impact such decisions make not only on Jewish converts denied legitimacy, but on Jewish communities evolving and adapting to the world as they see it.

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