

# Navigating Niddah in a Pandemic:

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Nishmat's Yoatzot Halacha  
Respond to Covid-19





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**Navigating Women's Halacha in a  
Pandemic:  
Nishmat's Yoatzot Halacha  
Respond to Covid-19**

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Based on Questions Received by

Nishmat's Golda Koschitzky Center

Via

Nishmat's Golda Koschitzky Hotline

and

[www.yoatzot.org](http://www.yoatzot.org)

in memory of Chaya Mirel bat R. Avraham

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Navigating Women's Halacha in a Pandemic: Nishmat's  
Yoatzot Halacha Respond to Covid-19.

Compiled by Yoetzet Halacha Michal Roness.  
Edited by Yoetzet Halacha Ilana Elzufon.

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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON MIKVEH

## **Machon Nishmat Habayit**

This booklet is published under the auspices of “Machon Nishmat Habayit” – Nishmat’s Yoatzot Halacha Research Institute. The Institute was established in 2012, with the aim to document the extensive experience of Yoatzot Halacha in responding to hundreds of thousands of halachic questions on the topic of Taharat Hamishpacha and women’s health and encourage and enhance the keeping of the laws of Taharat Hamishpacha.

Yoatzot Halacha are graduates of the Keren Ariel program at Midreshet Nishmat, a two-year fellowship program which includes in-depth study of Hilchot Niddah under the mentorship of outstanding scholars and poskim, as well as supplementary studies in women’s medicine and halacha. Applicants for Keren Ariel are selected on the basis of Talmudic scholarship, religious commitment, and demonstrated leadership potential. At the completion of the fellowship, each Keren Ariel fellow is tested orally by 4 leading rabbinic examiners. Upon qualifying, she becomes a certified Yoetzet Halacha.

To meet U.S. demand for Yoatzot Halacha, American Friends of Nishmat inaugurated the U.S. Yoatzot Halacha Fellows Program (YH-US) in September 2011, through Nishmat’s Miriam Glaubach Center.

Nishmat is committed to providing an address for women with halachic questions related to women’s health. Yoatzot Halacha provide medical and halachic information for women who are keeping Taharat Hamishpacha as well as a providing a female address for sensitive and intimate halachic issues.

The Yoatzot Halacha Initiatives include:

1. Nishmat's Golda Koschitzky Women's Halachic Hotline, which responds to thousands of halachic inquiries each year.
2. Nishmat's Yoatzot Halacha websites (yoatzot.org) in four languages: English, Hebrew, French and Spanish. The Hebrew and English websites include comprehensive articles and information regarding Taharat Hamishpacha, women's health and examples of hundreds of questions that have been answered by Yoatzot Halacha over the years.
3. Community Yoatzot Halacha: many Yoatzot Halacha serve as an address in their community and their geographical surroundings. There are many communities that now employ Yoatzot Halacha in their community in an official capacity.
4. Yoatzot Halacha give shiurim, seminars, refresher courses and present in conferences worldwide.

Under the supervision of Rabbi Yehuda Herzl Henkin and Rabbi Yaakov Varhaftig, Yoatzot Halacha provide professional female responses to thousands of couples who are dealing with halachic as well as health challenges in areas which include fertility, gynecological examinations and procedures, family planning, staining and menopause. Rabbi Kenneth Auman and Rabbi Gedlaya Berger are responsible for the training and halachic supervision of the work of the Yoatzot Halacha in North America.

A cadre of Yoatzot Halacha trained as Fertility Counselors offer face-to-face meetings with women and couples providing a female address for halachic questions that arise during the fertility journey. This service is in conjunction with the Gefen Fertility organization, headed by Dr. Karen Friedman, and with medical guidance from Fertility Specialist, Dr. Jordana Hyman.

The Machon Nishmat Habayit is another facet of Yoatzot Halacha's contribution to the community. The Machon publishes halachic discussions and materials for Torah scholars, community figures who serve as an address in this field and the wider public. The Machon's publications integrate intense study of the sources as well as up to date medical information and sensitivities to women's needs.

In Cheshvan 5777, (November 2017) the Machon published the first volume of Nishmat Habayit. The book was written by a group of Yoatzot Halacha, under the halachic supervision of Rabbi Yaakov Varhaftig (who heads the Yoetzet Halacha Initiatives) and was edited by Rabbi Yehuda Herzl Henkin and Rabbanit Chana Henkin (the founders and directors of Midreshet Nishmat and the Yoatzot Halacha Initiatives). The book includes 63 responsa based on questions that were asked Yoatzot Halacha over the years in the field of pregnancy, birth, nursing and contraception. Current, up to date medical appendices are attached as epilogue to the book. The book was widely acclaimed and includes approbations from leading rabbinical figures including Rabbi Aryeh Stern, Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem. The volume was published by Maggid and can be purchased from Midreshet Nishmat. Currently, the Machon is working on the second volume of Nishmat Habayit which will deal with diverse questions related to immersion.



## **FORWARD**

With the beginning of the Corona pandemic in March 2020, thousands of women turned to Yoatzot Halacha for information, halachic guidance and support as they navigated the challenges of Taharat Hamishpacha. Nishmat's Golda Koschitzky Hotline and website (yoatzot.org) were quickly inundated as anxious couples searched for reliable advice during an increasingly unstable time. Women across Israel, North America, and Europe consulted with Yoatzot in their communities and through the website and hotline. Anxious couples asked about the safety of mikvaot, and how to avoid exposure to coronavirus. Brides sought guidance as they prepared for rescheduled weddings, and kallah teachers turned to us in light of constantly changing regulations. Couples turned to Yoatzot Halacha Fertility Counselors as fertility treatments were temporarily halted.

In the hope that our experience can be helpful to others, we have collated the central and most common questions and issues. We pray that the Covid-19 pandemic is a temporary challenge. However, the questions regarding mikveh hygiene and safety will continue until a reliable vaccine and treatment are available, and

the questions regarding Taharat Hamishapacha at times of health challenges, intense family pressures and limitations of movement will continue to arise so long as this crisis continues. We hope this handbook will provide rabbis, mikveh attendants, kallah teachers, and the public with essential information and answers in one centralized location.

This booklet was prepared in accordance with Israel Ministry of Health guidelines, and last updated on November 1, 2020. Readers should check the Nishmat website for regular updates, as well as current guidelines of local health authorities for communities outside Israel. If you have any questions regarding the information in this booklet, please contact Nishmat's Golda Koschitzky Hotline at 972-2-6404343 or 1-877-963-8938, or [www.yoatzot.org](http://www.yoatzot.org).

The information provided in this handbook was written by the staff of Nishmat's website and approved by our rabbinic advisors. We thank Yoetzet Halacha Ilana Elzufon for editing this compilation. We thank Yoatzot Halacha Laurie Novick, Ilana Elzufon, Atara Eis, Fay Gersten and Dr. Deena Zimmerman for

their heroic efforts to provide women and couples with informed, reliable and sensitive answers to every possible question.

Halachic supervision for this guide was provided by Rabbi Yehuda Henkin, Rabbi Yaakov Warhaftig and Rabbi Kenneth Auman. Yoetzet Halacha Dr. Deena Zimmerman was consulted regarding health information that appears in this guide.

We hope that the information and questions and answers in this booklet help you formulate your questions for your local halachic and health authorities.

We turn to הקב"ה for a speedy recovery for those who are ill, and pray that in the merit of the women and couples who observe Taharat Hamishpacha despite the challenges, we will emerge into a world which is physically and spiritually healthier than it was before this pandemic.





## INTRODUCTION - THE MITZVAH TO PROTECT OUR OWN HEALTH AND PUBLIC HEALTH

As we face this pandemic together, essential mitzvot come into clearer focus. By vigilantly following the instructions of the health authorities, we fulfill the mitzvot of *v'nishmartem me'od l'nafshoteichem*, be most careful for your life (Devarim 4:15) and *v'ahavta l're'acha kamocho*, love your fellow as yourself (Vayikra 19:18), which is an overarching principle in the Torah (Bereishit Raba 24:7).

The Torah holds commands us: *Lo tasim damim b'veitecha*, do not bring blood upon your house, (Devarim 22:8) and *Lo ta'amod al dam re'echa*, do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow. (Vayikra 19:16). The obligation to protect the lives of others certainly extends to public health.

Official regulations of local health authorities are halachically binding. One should stay informed about local medical guidelines designed to prevent new cases of Coronavirus and follow them, even if the instructions sound overly cautious.



## **SECTION I: MIKVEH**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Mikveh immersion presents a very low risk of infection for most women during the pandemic, as long as appropriate health guidelines are in place.

1. A woman with symptoms of illness (e.g., fever, cough, difficulty breathing, vomiting, diarrhea) may not use the mikveh without consulting with a healthcare professional. A woman in quarantine may not use the mikveh.

2. A woman who is immunocompromised, or at high risk medically, should consult with her physician. If immersion is medically approved, she should arrange to be the first to use the mikveh that night and should not spend time in the waiting room.

3. Mikvaot should set up appointments in advance, to avoid crowding at the mikveh. Women should check that the mikveh is operating according to the legal requirements of the local authorities and that mikveh personnel are adhering strictly to

protocols set up by Israel's Health Ministry or guidelines of the relevant health authorities.

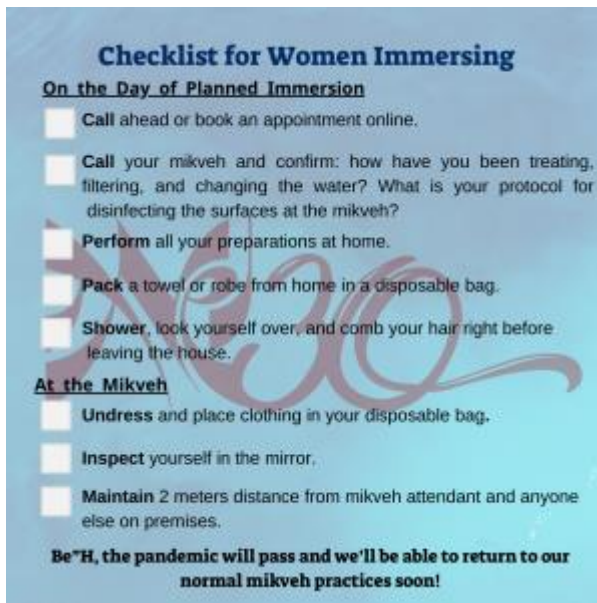
4. Until the Covid-19 outbreak subsides, all preparation for mikveh immersion should be done at home.

5. Mikveh policies may vary regarding bringing towels or robes from home. Women should bring their own supplies in a large disposable bag. In the preparation room, a woman should undress, place her clothing in her bag, and inspect herself in the mirror before immersion. Before using towels provided by the mikveh, one should confirm that they are washed at 65 degrees Celsius (150 degrees Fahrenheit) and that baskets are disinfected when emptied.

6. We encourage women to wear masks at the mikveh, except for when they are in the water.

7. A woman immersing should avoid any direct physical contact with the mikveh attendant. If a woman requires physical assistance (for example, with entering and exiting the mikveh), the attendant should wash her hands thoroughly with soap and

water for twenty seconds both before and after assisting her, and should wear gloves while assisting her. It is preferable not to have the mikveh attendant remove loose hairs from a woman's body, even if that is her usual custom. Such hairs are not a *chatzitzah*.



**Checklist for Women Immersing**

**On the Day of Planned Immersion**


- Call ahead or book an appointment online.
- Call your mikveh and confirm: how have you been treating, filtering, and changing the water? What is your protocol for disinfecting the surfaces at the mikveh?
- Perform all your preparations at home.
- Pack a towel or robe from home in a disposable bag.
- Shower, look yourself over, and comb your hair right before leaving the house.

**At the Mikveh**

- Undress and place clothing in your disposable bag.
- Inspect yourself in the mirror.
- Maintain 2 meters distance from mikveh attendant and anyone else on premises.

**Be"H, the pandemic will pass and we'll be able to return to our normal mikveh practices soon!**

## Q&A: MIKVEH SAFETY

 *I don't leave my home anymore, for anything. I am scheduled to go to the mikveh tomorrow night, and I'm terrified I will get Corona. What should I do?*

We are living through a frightening time. Many once-routine activities now present a risk of infection. It is permissible for a woman to choose to delay immersion given the current situation. However, if you have made a personal choice not to leave home during this time (i.e., you are not in quarantine, you have not been given specific medical instructions, and you have no symptoms of illness), you should be aware that a properly-maintained mikveh is considered safe, especially when precautions are taken.

The following precautions are being taken at this time:

### **Making an appointment**

Many mikvaot are now operating on an appointment system to avoid women congregating in the reception area. Call in advance to check.

## **Preparation**

All preparations should take place at home to minimize risk of infection or transmission. Even if you don't have a bathtub, it is sufficient to take a thorough shower. Pack a large disposable bag with a towel, and a robe if you will use one. If you did your preparations earlier in the day, shower and comb your hair again right before you leave for the mikveh.

## **Reception/Waiting Area**

When you get to the mikveh, make sure to wear a mask and maintain a distance of two meters (six feet) from any other women there, including the mikveh attendant.

## **Preparation Room**

Mikvaot have been instructed to clean and disinfect the rooms between women. In the preparation room, you should just undress — placing your clothes in the bag you brought from home — and inspect yourself in the mirror for possible barriers. Try to avoid touching surfaces or touching your face. Wear your mask except when actually immersing. This is your best assurance of preventing transmission of the virus and avoiding risk of infection.

## Physical Distance

Inspect yourself before calling the mikveh attendant. State that you do not wish to be touched and ask to maintain physical distance. You can rely on your own inspection, and the mikveh attendant need not touch you. Loose hairs on your back are not a *chatzitzah* (barrier). Thus, it is not crucial that they be removed, even if that is your usual custom. Try to maintain a distance of about two meters (six feet) from the attendant.

## Immersion

Chlorine kills the virus<sup>1</sup>, so a properly maintained and chlorinated mikveh pool should not present a significant risk of infection. If you wish, you may reduce your customary number of dips. Sephardi women should recite the bracha before immersing. Ashkenazi women should immerse once, recite the bracha, and immerse again. If an Ashkenazi woman wishes to dip only once, she should recite the bracha after immersing.

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<sup>1</sup> Environmental Health Services Water O.U. Advice note to EHS on COVID-19 in chlorinated drinking water supplies and chlorinated swimming pools. Prepared 3.03.20.

### **After Immersion**

Return to the preparation room, dry off, get dressed, and go home. Wash your hands well when you return home. You may shower immediately after arriving home and do not need to wait until after you have been with your husband.

### **In Summary**


The decision as to whether to immerse at this time, or to delay immersion and continue *niddah* status, is in your hands. If you choose to immerse now, your risk of contracting Corona at a properly maintained mikveh is very low. If you are immunocompromised or at high risk, please consult your physician.

## 2. PREPARATION

*For a Review on Preparation for Immersion, see Appendix 2.*

Preparing at home reduces time spent in the mikveh and the number of surfaces that need to be cleaned between users. **Therefore, it is strongly recommended that women prepare at home during the pandemic unless it is absolutely impossible to do so.** A thorough shower is sufficient if no bathtub is available. A woman who prepares earlier in the day should shower and comb her hair just before leaving home.

### Q&A: NO BATHTUB


 *I understand that in these times, preparation for mikveh should be done at home. I don't have a bathtub in my house, just a shower. Is there any way I can prepare without a bath?*

The usual custom is to soak in the bath. However, a shower is acceptable for mikveh preparation if there is a need or strong preference — as in your case, where a bathtub isn't readily available. You should take a long thorough shower, making sure

that water reaches all folds of the body. You can rely on this whenever a bath is unavailable, not just during the current situation.

There is no minimum duration for the bath or shower. You have to determine what is the normal time it takes for you to thoroughly clean yourself without feeling rushed. Fifteen or twenty minutes seems reasonable; however, it may take longer or shorter for you depending on whether you showered thoroughly the previous evening or that morning, how long it takes you to wash and comb your hair, whether you need to shave, how clean your nails and feet are, etc.


## Q&A: DURING AVEILUT (MOURNING)

 *Are there any special halachos regarding a person within the shloshim of avelus and preparing for the mikveh? For example, should she get someone else to cut her nails?*

Under normal circumstances, it is best to get a non-Jewish woman to cut your nails before mikveh. If this is not possible, then having a Jewish girl under 12 years old would be best. If that's also not possible, another Jewish woman should cut them.

Given the importance of physical distancing during the pandemic, only members of your household could assist you with this. If you have children at home and are comfortable asking one of them, that would be appropriate. But if there is no one who can cut your nails, or no one you can comfortably ask, you can cut them yourself. Other preparations should be unaffected by your *aveilut* status.

## Q&A: PREPARATION TIMING

 *I know I need to prepare at home for mikveh, but things are crazy here with the whole family in the house. Can I prepare in the morning (or even the night before) rather than just before leaving for the mikveh?*

There are two goals involved in mikveh preparation – one is to assure that you are clean, and the other is to meet the halachic requirements of **chafifah** (cleansing) and **iyun** (inspection).

*Chafifah* generally needs to be performed either on the night of immersion or earlier that day. You can do it any time during the


day or evening, and you can break up your preparations into a few smaller units. Try to choose a time that will allow you to prepare in the most relaxed way possible under the circumstances.

You can speed up the *chafifah* by taking care of longer-lasting preparations (e.g., cutting nails, shaving), a day in advance.

When there is a gap between preparation and going to mikveh, in normal times, you would take a quick shower and comb your hair again at the mikveh. During the pandemic, this should be done at home just before you leave for the mikveh.

At the mikveh, you should check yourself for possible *chatzitzot* (barriers), as there is a risk that a *chatzitzah* could adhere to the body or hair while one is dressing and traveling to the mikveh. Only after checking yourself should you immerse.

## Q&A: CONCEALING IMMERSION?

 *Everyone is confined to the house and I have no idea how I am going to prepare for the mikveh without my children realizing. And how am I going to justify leaving the house when there is a lockdown? Do you have any suggestions?*

There is a custom to keep mikveh immersion private but there is no actual prohibition involved in others realizing someone is immersing. Therefore, if needed, it is permissible to share information as necessary to facilitate immersion.

Since the trip to mikveh is typically much shorter now, with all preparations done in advance, this might proceed more smoothly than you think. Saying you are going out to take a walk might suffice.

Keep in mind that you can prepare any time on the day of immersion and break up your preparations at your convenience. These steps can help preserve privacy. If you prepare earlier in the day, shower quickly and comb your hair right before leaving for the mikveh.

Maintaining privacy is still a custom and, to many women, important emotionally. Therefore, it is permissible to use “white lies” as necessary if that will help preserve your sense of privacy. This may depend on the specific shelter-at-home rules in your community and individual family dynamics.

It is an interesting educational question whether daughters should know when their mother goes to the mikveh. Among North African Jews, it was common for mothers to take their daughters with them to the mikveh when the mother immersed, with the message of mikveh connected to purity following menstruation rather than to marital intimacy. In this way, daughters were initiated into the sanctity and importance of the mitzvah. On the whole, it is fair to say that many couples make every effort to keep their children from knowing when they are permitted to each other, while others give the children information on a level appropriate for them. We suggest that you and your husband discuss which is a better fit for you.

The more open approach assumes that, since Taharat Hamishpacha is a central foundation of the Jewish home, it can be constructive for children to have some awareness of it.

Following that approach, you can offer your children in a direct, factual, age-appropriate explanation – for example, that you immerse in the mikveh in order to be *tehorah* after getting your period or that mummies sometimes have a special mitzvah to visit the mikveh. You may feel more comfortable having this conversation at a different time than when you actually go to mikveh. You could also mention in the conversation that while it is private when you go to the mikveh, your children should feel comfortable to ask any questions they have about Taharat Hamishpacha.

### 3. CHATZITZOT (BARRIERS) AND COSMETICS

In general, foreign objects are considered barriers (*chatzitzot*) and should be removed before immersion.

Long-term cosmetics without independent substance, such as hair dye, are not considered a *chatzitzah*. Ideally, they should be well-maintained at the time of immersion. Some halachic authorities also permit immersion with a well-maintained manicure.

Hair is a natural part of the body, not a *chatzitzah*. However, a woman who normally removes body hair should ideally do so before mikveh.

For these reasons, many women schedule visits to hairdressers, manicurists, or cosmeticians shortly before mikveh immersion. Such services may be unavailable during the pandemic, or a woman may not feel safe using them. In these circumstances, it is generally possible to prepare adequately on one's own.

A woman who deviates from her usual custom due to extenuating circumstances, does not require *hatarat nedarim*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Hershel Schachter, <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/950102/rabbi-hershel-schachter/piskei-corona-4-customs-in-difficult-times/> accessed 27.04.20.

## **Manicures**

Although some halachic authorities permit immersion with a well-maintained manicure, this is not the prevailing custom. It is halachically preferable to immerse without any barrier on the nails (including polish, gel, shellac, acrylic/gel nails, etc.). A woman who plans to immerse with a manicure may wish to call the mikveh in advance to clarify its policy.

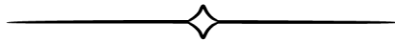
Regular nail polish can easily be removed at home. However, some manicures (e.g., fill-in types of manicures) can only be maintained or removed by a professional. During the Corona pandemic, it has not always been possible to visit a manicurist. In such cases, a woman may immerse without removing the manicure as long as there are no gaps or chips. She should do her best to fill it in or touch it up prior to immersion (preferably within three days of immersion) to conform to the category of a “well-maintained” manicure.

Q&A:

A. MANICURE

*✧ I normally remove my gel manicure before I immerse, but the health authorities have shut down the manicurists. I've tried removing the gel in the past on my own, but it is very difficult and inevitably I'll miss something. My current manicure is in pretty good condition. Can I immerse with it?*

Ideally, especially if this is your typical practice, you would remove the polish prior to immersion. In this case, though, where you can't do that well on your own and the manicure is in good shape, you should fill in and repair your manicure as well as possible, clean your nails very carefully, and immerse. If possible, you should check with your mikveh attendant in advance to ensure that mikveh policy will allow for immersion in line with this ruling.



✧✧ *In the past, my rabbi has allowed me to immerse with a gel manicure as long as I maintain it before immersion. Mikveh night is tomorrow and because of the new rules, I can't get a manicure to complete it. What should I do?*

In the present situation, if you would be comfortable being seen in public with your nails in this condition, given the extenuating circumstances of the Covid-19 outbreak, you need not remove the gel.

If not, be in touch with a cosmetologist, giving her a clear picture of what your nails look like now, to find out about the best methods to either remove the polish or make it look presentable. If you are unable to fix the manicure so that it looks presentable, we advise contacting your local Yoetzet or halachic authority.

## B. HAIR


✧✧ *I have a very short hairstyle and normally go to the hairdresser once every two months to have my hair cut. I haven't done so in three months and I really need a haircut. Must I have a haircut before I go to the mikveh? Is it considered a chatzitzah since I would normally cut it at this length? At the moment, hairdressers are closed and even if they were open I would be too scared to have someone cut my hair. Can my husband cut my hair before I go to the mikveh?*

You need not cut your hair before mikveh immersion, even if it is long enough that you feel it needs cutting. You should wait until after mikveh when it is permissible for your husband to cut your hair.

It is preferable not to schedule a haircut within a day of immersion. According to some halachic opinions, hair that a woman has immediate plans to remove (within a day) is considered something she is particular about (*makpidah*). When a woman is *makpidah* about something, it can be considered a

barrier to immersion (a *chatzitzah*). While this is **not the accepted opinion**, we generally do try to take it into account if possible.

### C. WAXING

 *I normally wax my legs every four weeks, and usually take care to do so a few days before mikveh. However, due to the current regulations I cannot go to get my legs waxed. The hair bothers me but I would like to wait until I can make an appointment with the cosmetician. Am I required to shave or wax my legs myself before immersion?*


Natural body hair does not generally constitute a *chatzitzah* unless it is matted or tangled. Leg hair is considered part of the body and does not need to be removed before mikveh immersion.

Thus, even a woman who usually removes body hair but for some reason cannot do so before mikveh is permitted to immerse.

Note: Some authorities maintain that an item that is about to be removed loses its halachic status as part of the body, and may

therefore be considered a *chatzitzah* (barrier to immersion). While this is **not the accepted opinion**, we generally do try to take it into account if possible. Therefore, you should try not to remove hair the day after immersion.

## D. EYEBROWS

 *Before mikveh, I always get my eyebrows done professionally. I can't do it at home and am actually really particular about it, and of course I can't get them done now because of Corona. Is this a chatzitzah? What am I supposed to do?*

Hair on the head, body, or face, as long as it is clean and untangled, is not considered a *chatzitzah*. This is true even if it is your usual custom to remove it. In this situation, you should do your best to make your brows look reasonably presentable from your perspective, and then immerse.

## 4. IMMERSION

### A. A KOSHER MIKVEH

A woman exits the state of niddah only after immersing in a halachically acceptable body of water – preferably a recognized and well-maintained man-made mikveh.

A natural spring, pool, lake, or river may be acceptable, but the laws governing them are quite complex. Immersion in the ocean may raise concerns of safety and privacy, which themselves bear halachic weight.

Bathtubs and swimming pools are not fit for kosher immersion.

The following are just a few of the requirements for a kosher mikveh:

- A mikveh must contain forty *se'ah* of water, 332 liters at absolute minimum (though mikvaot typically follow more stringent views requiring more). A woman needs to be able to completely submerge her entire body at once in the mikveh, with the mikveh retaining the minimum volume even if water splashes out. This is well beyond the capacity of bathtubs and of many indoor home jacuzzis.
- A *keli*, or vessel, cannot serve as a mikveh. A claw footed bath or above ground pool are definitely considered *kelim* that cannot work as mikvaot, regardless of the material of which


they are made. When a bath, jacuzzi, or pool is built into the floor of a building, there is debate as to whether it is considered a *keli*, depending on a number of specific factors concerning its construction.

- A mikveh cannot have any major leaks below water level. According to some opinions, even very small leaks can disqualify a mikveh, though this may depend on their location and whether they are recognizable.
- A filtration system needs to be made in a way that does not serve as a receptacle (*beit kibul*) for water. If water is taken out and returned, the pipes need to be embedded in the pool. Whether there is a *beit kibul* for water can also be of concern with water jets in a jacuzzi.
- When municipal tap water systems include tanks, pumps, or even water meters, their water is considered by many authorities *mayim she'uvim*, drawn water, which cannot serve as the basis for a mikveh.
- A mikveh must have less than a liter (*3 lugin*) of *mayim she'uvim* inside it before it first fills up with 40 *se'ah* of water. So even an outdoor, in-ground pool would have to be emptied before any possible use as a mikveh, and then filled in a halachically acceptable way with rain water (i.e., from the sky

or a direct pipe from the roof) or possibly with blocks of ice allowed to melt naturally into the mikveh.

An expert in mikvaot would have to evaluate and oversee any of the above.

## Q&A: IN THE OCEAN

 *I'm worried about getting Corona from the mikveh. I live in a warm climate near the ocean. Would it be safer to immerse in the ocean?*

We appreciate your concerns about mikveh safety during the pandemic.

Learning more about mikveh protocol at this time may address some of your worries. We hope you find the information in this booklet helpful.

We are in close contact with health professionals who have assured us that using a mikveh that adheres to health guidelines is safe at this time. The treatment of the water kills the virus.

Furthermore, immersion in the ocean presents its own dangers and also raises halachic complications. So even if dipping there is legal in your location, we still recommend immersion in a mikveh.

If a woman does use the ocean as a mikveh, she must first make sure that she is in a safe place, as safety is an important halachic consideration. The place that she selects for immersion also needs to be sufficiently well-lit for the person watching to see that all the woman's hair went under the water. In addition, the ocean floor may not be made of a substance such as thick mud that will adhere to the feet.


The time and place should allow for privacy, since a less private setting might lead to a rushed and imperfect immersion. It is permissible to immerse in a loose-fitting robe.

As with any *tevilah*, all preparations should be done in an unhurried manner, in a lit room where the woman can check herself properly, with a mirror to see her back.

Any Jewish woman over the age of twelve can serve as an attendant to ensure that all hair goes underwater.

If imperative for safety, then immersion on the eighth day during the daytime is permissible.

## Q&A: IN A KOSHER MIKVEH

 *I need to go to the Mikveh on Sunday night. The mikvehs, beaches, pools are all closed. What can I do?*

As long as there is no access to *mikvaot* or natural bodies of water, there is no way to immerse. (Swimming pools are not considered fit for halachic immersion.) You should finish counting your clean days as scheduled. After they are finished, on Sunday night, you perform no more *bedikot* and switch to colored undergarments. You will need to wait to immerse as soon as there is a place where you can do so. Until then, you are still considered *niddah* and all the laws of conduct during *niddah* still apply.

You may wish to contact your local mikveh attendant to determine if there is any sense of when the mikveh will reopen or if there is any mikveh open within a reasonable distance.

Waiting to immerse can be a challenge, especially with an open-ended time period. We wish you and your husband the resilience and faith to negotiate this challenge with love and *shalom bayit*.



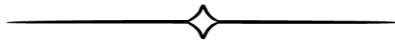
✧✧ *I know you say the mikvehs are safe, but wouldn't it be safer to allow women to immerse in an outdoor pool or even a bathtub? Aren't we in a situation of pikuach nefesh? Are there no safer solutions?*

Halacha certainly takes public health into account and obliges us to follow the recommendations of local health authorities. For that reason, if they were to determine that mikvaot are unsafe, communities would be obliged to close them and women would be instructed not to immerse. As long as they remain open in line with public health guidelines, halacha permits immersion.

If there is a specific *pikuach nefesh* situation for a given couple, then the woman may be instructed not to immerse. So, too, women who are nervous or scared to immerse at this time may choose to delay immersion indefinitely. Unfortunately, this can place a strain on a relationship because *harchakot* remain in place and relations remain prohibited until immersion.

As for the suggestions of immersing in a pool or tub, there are specific halachic requirements for the construction and set up of a mikveh, which even an outdoor swimming pool does not meet. For example, water that travels through pipes has the status of “*mayim she’uvim*” drawn waters, which are not valid for mikveh use.

Halachically, there is no substitute for immersion. Therefore, all efforts are being placed on keeping the mikvaot safe in order to enable women to continue immersing at this time.



✧✧ *My mikveh night was two nights ago. I was very nervous about going to the mikveh, especially since my husband is high risk. I had seen some articles online about a rabbi who permits using a bathtub for a mikveh during corona. It looked reliable and I felt it would be safer, so I decided to rely on that. I filled up the bathtub and immersed.*

*Then today I saw on a different website that this ruling about the bathtub is not accepted by most rabbis. Was my tevila valid? Do I need to go to the regular mikveh? I feel terrible because my husband and I were already together. What should we do?*

We appreciate the sensitive nature of this question. It's challenging to confront the possibility of having made a serious halachic error.

Unfortunately, much of the halachic information circulating on the internet has not been vetted. It is important to seek out local halachic authorities and to refer only to established and reliable internet resources.

As you now realize, immersion in a bathtub does not change a woman's *niddah* status. For this reason, you are still *niddah* and were *niddah* when you had relations. This is considered an unwitting transgression. Prayer and giving *tzedaka* are two classic acts of *teshuva* in this type of situation.

You should immerse at your earliest opportunity in a kosher mikveh. Be careful to follow mikveh protocols, in order to ensure that your immersion is as safe as possible. As an extra precaution, because your husband is high risk, you may wish to arrange to immerse first on a given night.

Since you did complete counting a full seven clean days, there is no further obligation to count clean days or to perform *bedikot*.

## **B. TIMING**

***Tevilah bizmanah:*** A woman should make every effort to go to mikveh on the appropriate night, even if it is inconvenient. In extenuating circumstances, both spouses can agree to delay immersion.

If a woman has finished counting the *shivah neki'im* but is immersion, it is no longer necessary to wear white underwear or do *bedikot*.

During the Corona pandemic, a woman who does not feel well or is in quarantine **must** refrain from immersing. All guidelines of local health officials are halachically binding.

**Nighttime *tevilah*:** *Halacha* requires that a woman immerse at night, after *tzet hakochavim* (nightfall). *Tevilah* may take place only after the seven clean days have been completely finished, so a woman may not immerse before nightfall on the seventh day.

The prohibition on daytime immersion on the eighth day or later is a rabbinic decree, lest the woman's daughter become aware of her mother's immersion and incorrectly conclude that daytime immersion is permitted on the seventh day. This decree applies to all women, whether or not they have daughters.


Convenience is not considered a valid reason to override this rabbinic decree. Many mitzvot involve some level of inconvenience or even difficulty. However, in extenuating circumstances (especially those that affect an entire community, such as when the mikveh is in an unsafe neighborhood or going

out after nightfall is against the law) there is room to permit daytime immersion on the eighth day or later.

If during lockdown, it is impossible to leave the house at night or it is against the law, daytime immersion on the eighth day or later is permitted. It is exceedingly rare to permit daytime immersion on the seventh day of the *shivah neki'im*, but in extreme situations a question can be asked.


When immersing during the day, it is preferable if possible to immerse after sunset (or shortly before sunrise). When immersion on the eighth day is permitted, there is a debate as to whether the wife may see her husband prior to nightfall. According to all positions in this debate, marital relations are not encouraged during the day and they should still wait until after nightfall, as they would on day seven. The reason a woman may be advised not to see her husband until nightfall is to prevent the temptation of intimacy when she has already immersed and as a way to prevent her making erroneous analogies to an immersion on day seven. Due to the unusual circumstances of the pandemic, a woman may immediately have contact with her husband after immersing on the eighth day.

## Q&A: POSTPONING IMMERSION

 *I am due to go to the mikveh on Friday night. Because of the health restrictions, we have been told not to leave the vicinity of our home. I am worried about taking a 20-minute walk to the mikveh. Is there a way to postpone mikveh night so that I can drive there after Shabbat?*

Walking outdoors is generally considered safe, especially if sidewalks are not very crowded in your area. However, if you are concerned, you may delay immersion till after Shabbat. You should discuss your options with your husband and make the decision together, as the consequences affect both of you. Keep in mind that the greatest concern at the mikveh is congregating with others, so be sure to make an appointment in advance.

## Q&A: ON THE EIGHTH DAY

 *In our community, public transportation has been shut down, and I can't get to the mikveh at night. Can I immerse during the day, on my eighth day?*


Yes, in this situation you are permitted to immerse during daytime of the eighth day (following what would have been your mikveh night), and there are no constraints on contact between you and your husband immediately afterwards.

If you have a daughter who indicates that she understands that you are going to the mikveh, you should explain before leaving that daytime immersion is only permissible now because it is a time of crisis.

Since mikvaot aren't usually open during the day, you will need to coordinate your request with your mikveh, and possibly with its rabbinic supervisor.

As the pandemic continues, some mikvaot may choose to create daytime hours for immersion on the eighth day, to accommodate women who can't get there at night, or to ensure that all the women of the community can be accommodated while limiting the number of women who can be at the mikveh at once.

## Q&A: ON SHABBAT


 *With the Coronavirus situation, is it safe for mikvaot to be open on Friday nights given that they can't be cleaned between women?*

We appreciate your concerns.

Mikvaot can, in fact, be cleaned on Friday night. The mikveh can be chlorinated as usual. Surfaces can be wiped down with bleach or alcohol wipes, or with bleach or alcohol solution and disposable rags.

If you have questions about your mikveh's practice, we suggest you call your mikveh attendant a few days earlier in order to clarify.

### C. MIKVEH SAFETY STANDARDS

 *How can I know that the mikveh is safe? What are practical guidelines to check whether the mikveh attendants are meeting the latest standards for hygiene and disinfection? I am sure the mikveh attendant is under a lot of stress and I don't wish to offend her. But I also want to make sure it's safe! What do you suggest?*

We suggest that you call your mikveh attendant directly.

Begin by expressing your appreciation for her hard work at a tough time.

Then explain that you have a few questions. These are our suggested key questions:


- Is the water being treated regularly with chlorine or bromine?
- Is the water being changed (or, if the mikveh uses a filter, is the filter cleaned) every day?
- Are they disinfecting the preparation rooms and mikveh rail between women?

- Is immersion by appointment, with care being taken to keep 2 meters distance between women (including from the attendant)?

If she answers in the negative or is unavailable to answer your questions, explain calmly that you are trying to help her keep women safe and ask her whom you can speak with to get answers or move things forward, and how else you can help. If you do not succeed in making an impact or reaching someone who can, perhaps get other women in your community involved to help. In Israel, you can contact the Religious Affairs Ministry with complaints.

If the mikveh is not maintaining basic standards of hygiene to prevent transmission of the coronavirus, you may need to delay immersion. If it is relevant, you could start looking into mikvaot in neighboring communities.

## Q&A: ELECTIVE IMMERSION

 *I'm pregnant and was planning, as a segulah, to go to the mikveh in my ninth month. Is it safe to go now because of the Coronavirus?*

Immersing in the mikveh during the ninth month of pregnancy is a *segulah*, a practice thought by some to be spiritually beneficial. It is not a halachic requirement.

At this time, immersing in a mikveh adhering to health guidelines is considered safe. However, to prevent unnecessary crowding at the mikveh, women should immerse only when it is halachically required.

Separating challah during the ninth month of pregnancy is an alternate *segulah* for an easy birth, and, as always, *tefillah* is the ultimate *segulah*. You can also include in your prayers wishes for the *refu'ah sheleimah* of those affected by the virus.

## Q&A: PHYSICAL DISTANCING



*mikveh attendant being with me in the room when I immerse. The way our mikveh is set up, there is no way we can maintain two meters distance. Can I immerse alone?*

The main role prescribed in *halacha* for the mikveh attendant is to assure that all hair is under the water. In general, mikveh attendants perform an additional service in double-checking the back and other hard-to-reach places. However, the final responsibility for *iyun* (inspection) rests with the woman herself.


You should inspect yourself carefully before immersion, ideally with a mirror. The mikveh attendant does not need to check you.

For halachic and water safety reasons, it is preferable for an attendant to observe your actual immersion. We suggest discussing with the attendant in advance how to do this while minimizing contact. One option would be as follows:

You can ask the attendant to allow you to enter the mikveh room on your own. Either bring your bag with you and put the towel down on it, or place the towel on a freshly disinfected surface. Enter the water, and then call to the attendant and ask her to

observe the immersion itself from the doorway. She can then leave until you are out of the room.

## Q&A: HIGH RISK

 *A year ago, I was sick with breast cancer and I underwent radiation. My immune system is low, which puts me in a high-risk group for infection. I am supposed to go to the mikveh on Monday night and, to be honest, I'm really scared because of the current Covid-19 outbreak. What should I do?*

We appreciate the sensitive nature of this question and the weight of your concerns.

You must discuss the possibility of mikveh immersion with your physician. Ask whether it would be safe for you to immerse, on condition that you can arrange to be the first to immerse after the water has been changed and treated.

If your physician approves immersion, call ahead to arrange a time when you can be first to immerse, and will not need to spend time in the waiting room. You should follow the current guidelines,

performing all your preparations at home. At the mikveh, you should just check yourself in the mirror and immerse.

Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before you leave home and when you get back. Avoid touching your face while you are at the mikveh, keep your mask on except for the actual immersion, and maintain a distance of two meters from the mikveh attendant and anyone else on the premises.


## Q&A: RECOVERED FROM CORONA

 *I seem to have recovered from Corona.*

*When can I go to mikveh?*

In general, you may immerse when your full recovery has been medically confirmed. Please check with your physician that there are no unique constraints before going ahead with immersion.

## Q&A: NUMBER OF DIPS

 *I normally immerse 3 times, but at the moment I would like to limit the amount of time I am in the water and exposed to Covid-19. Would it be okay to immerse only once during this time?*

While immersing once in the mikveh is halachically sufficient, there are various explanations for the practice to immerse three times. Some explain that multiple immersions ensure that at least one is valid. Other sources cite the fact that the root "tahor" is found three times in a verse in the Torah (Leviticus 15:13) that relates to the mitzvah of immersion. Immersing three times is one of a number of different customs.


When one accepts a custom upon oneself, it eventually becomes an obligation. Such an obligation is reversible by performing *hatarat nedarim*. This involves standing before a bet din, and reciting a formula expressing regret and asking to be relieved of this obligation. Only one of the three needs to know what the obligation was (there is no indication in the recitation).

However, if you have always performed the act because you were taught this way, and you thought that the act was obligatory halacha and not a personal stringency that you sought—then should you wish to stop observing the custom, it is not necessary to perform *hatarat nedarim*.

In addition, if you wish to stop observing the custom for a limited time due to extenuating circumstances such as fear of Corona, you may do so for as long as the circumstances prevail without performing *hatarat nedarim*. Therefore, you may immerse just once for the duration of the pandemic, without *hatarat nedarim*.

If you are Sephardi, you should recite the bracha before immersing, as usual. If you are Ashkenazi, you should recite the bracha after immersing.

## Q&A: SHOWERING AFTERWARDS

 *I learned that it's prohibited to shower at the mikveh following immersion. But, given the Coronavirus situation, I'd rather not wait until I get home to shower following immersion. Would that be permissible?*

One may not shower off at the mikveh following immersion, to prevent the erroneous belief that one becomes *tehorah* by taking a shower rather than by immersing in the mikveh. During these special times, it is recommended to shower upon returning home from the mikveh. You may do this even if your normal practice is to wait until after relations.

The chlorine in the mikveh pool provides effective protection against the virus, and therefore from a health perspective a shower after immersion is unlikely to have any effect on Coronavirus infection. Quite the reverse, use of the shower room by multiple individuals without proper disinfecting between women is more of a health concern at this point. Since showering at the mikveh would not create any health benefit, the halacha against it remains in force.


## SECTION II: *NIDDAH* DURING PANDEMIC

### 1. GUIDELINES

1. If a *bedikah* cloth or stain needs checking, a woman should lay it flat, allow it to dry, and place it flat in a clear plastic bag to facilitate safe evaluation. She should wash her hands and place the bag in an envelope with a note with her phone number and other relevant information.
2. A woman who has a questionable *bedikah* and cannot bring it for evaluation should call the halachic authority to whom she usually brings such questions to consult. (Yoatzot Halacha are also available for consultation through Nishmat's Golda Koschitzky Hotline, or in the community.) Alternatively, she can seek to have it evaluated by a rabbi online through Tahor App (available on iPhone and some models of Android phones), which uses special color calibration technology to ensure that the stain is photographed and transmitted accurately. While some borderline colors will require in-person evaluation, many questions can be accurately assessed through the app.

3. A woman who needs to delay immersion should count her seven clean days as usual. When her clean days are complete, she can change to colored underwear. No further *bedikot* are necessary prior to her delayed immersion.

## Q&A: SEVEN CLEAN DAYS

 *Is it permissible to do a hefsek taharah on day four? I am Ashkenazi and I usually do it on day five but I'm worried that they are going to close the mikveh because of the spreading Covid-19 outbreak. I want to get there as soon as possible.*

If there is good reason to suspect that local authorities are weighing closure of the mikveh, or that you or your husband are at risk of quarantine, then you should attempt to perform an early *hefsek taharah* on day four, and a thorough *bedikah* on day five. Should closure on short notice remain a concern, you will be able to immerse a night earlier than you ordinarily would, based on the early *hefsek taharah* (and counting the *bedikah* the next day as the first *bedikah* of the clean days). If the concern dissipates, then you will immerse on your usual schedule.

As you go through the clean days, you should keep two counts in mind: one based on the early *hefsek taharah* and one based on the regular schedule from day five.



*◆◆ If you are in your 7 days, and you think your neighborhood will be asked to self quarantine in the next few days, can you go to the mikveh early and just wait to be with your husband until after the full 7 days?*

Even in difficult times like these, the seven clean days cannot be shortened, as a matter of Torah law. In order to become *tehorah*, you need to immerse after you have finished counting the seven clean days. An earlier immersion would not be halachically valid. Let's hope and pray that you are able to immerse on time and that this crisis passes soon.



✧✧ *I'm not in quarantine. Because of the pandemic, we are supposed to be practicing social distancing. I'm normally very careful to do all of the required bedikot, but I often have questions on my first few bedikot. If I keep performing all of my bedikot, I am worried that I'll end up with many questions. Is it possible to perform fewer bedikot until this pandemic b'ezrat Hashem finishes?*

If you are concerned that performing your full usual set of *bedikot* may lead to extra halachic questions, you may perform fewer *bedikot* at this time.

Even now you must, at absolute minimum, perform a *hefsek taharah* and one *bedikah* each on days one and seven. If any of these three examinations are omitted, the seven clean days are not valid, so it's crucial to remember all of them.

If possible, you should also do a *bedikah* on at least one intermediate day. This helps ensure that you don't inadvertently go more than five days without a *bedikah*, which would invalidate the entire count and require you to start over.

In the event that you do nonetheless have a questionable *bedikah*, we recommend that you call the halachic authority to whom you usually bring such questions to consult. (You could also contact a Yoetzet Halacha through Nishmat's Golda Koschitzky hotline, or a local Yoetzet Halacha.) Explain that it is difficult to bring in the cloth because of physical distancing, and give as many details about it as possible.

Another possibility is to seek to have it evaluated by a rabbi online through Tahor App (available on iPhone and some models of Android phones), which uses special color calibration technology to ensure that the stain is photographed and transmitted accurately. While some borderline colors will require in-person evaluation, many questions can be accurately assessed through the app.

If you will need to drop the *bedikah* off for in-person evaluation, lay it flat to dry and then place it in a clear plastic bag. Wash your hands and place the bag in an envelope with a note with your phone number and other relevant information.

In this situation, you might try to perform another *bedikah* prior to sunset, to serve as a new *hefsek taharah* should one be necessary.

## Q&A: BODEKET TAHARA

✧✧ *In normal times, I would go to a bodeket tahara because I have a red spot on my bedikah cloth from day four. It looks like it is from a petza and I have had this type of thing before. Last month I went to a bodeket and she said that I have cervical atrophy which can cause bleeding when doing checks. Because of Covid-19, I would rather not be checked by a bodeket at this time. Is there any way to continue counting without going to a bodeket?*

A *bodeket taharah* typically performs a speculum exam to see if a woman has a vaginal or cervical lesion or other condition to which bleeding may be attributed. When there is a plausible non-uterine cause of bleeding, it can mean that a woman is not *niddah*. A *bodeket* does not usually make a halachic determination herself. Rather, she reports on what she observes (its location, size, and nature) as faithfully as possible to the referring halachic authority. **We must caution that at this time visits to a *bodeket* should be kept to an absolute minimum, for the safety of the women involved.**

A woman who suspects she has a non-uterine cause of bleeding in an area that is visible externally should try to use a hand mirror to see if she can spot something on her own. Even if she cannot see anything, she can perform a couple of *bedikot* and see if the blood is consistently confined to a specific spot. As much as possible, she should describe the details of whatever bleeding she has to a halachic authority.

In this climate, only in extreme cases if there is no alternative should visiting a *bodeket* be considered. A woman in quarantine or not feeling well definitely should not visit a *bodeket*. Many *poskim* have no need for a *bodeket*.

Because you were diagnosed with cervical atrophy last month and you currently have a known cause of cervical bleeding, you do not have to be checked by a *bodeket*. You can attribute the spot to the cervical atrophy and can continue counting.

## **2. HARCHAKOT (CONDUCT WHILE NIDDAH)**

Torah law prohibits intercourse while a woman is *niddah*. Other physical expressions of affection, such as hugging and kissing, or touching for purposes of pleasure, are also forbidden. All physical contact is prohibited on a rabbinic level. Because the *niddah* status is temporary, certain leniencies apply to a

married couple when the wife is *niddah* (for example, they are permitted to be alone together). On the other hand, since a husband and wife have a certain level of familiarity and routine, they must observe additional restrictions, known as *harchakot*, during this time.

The *harchakot* can present a particular challenge in cases of significant illness.

When one spouse needs to give care to the other, the couple can be lenient with *harchakot* that do not involve direct physical contact (e.g., passing objects directly, serving food, pushing a wheelchair, or putting on shoes).

A caregiving spouse still should not perform certain specific services that halacha views as conveying special affection. Thus, one should not wash one's spouse's face, hands or feet unless absolutely necessary. One should not make one's spouse's bed in his or her presence; if the spouse's presence in the room is unavoidable, the ill spouse should turn away if possible, so as not to see the bed being made.

Under normal circumstances, it is preferable for a relative, friend, or professional caregiver to provide assistance requiring direct physical contact in place of the spouse – especially when a husband is caring for his wife. During the pandemic, there are situations where both spouses contract Covid-19, but one has mild symptoms or recovers quickly, and needs to care for the other. In such cases, outside help is not an option and the healthier spouse may provide direct physical assistance as necessary. The couple should make every effort to minimize touch and, when touch is unavoidable, to touch only indirectly, as through a blanket or garment or while wearing gloves (preferably, gloves thicker than surgical gloves).


In the case of an emergency or a dangerous illness, *chas v'shalom*, saving a life (*pikuach nefesh*) takes precedence over other halachic considerations.

These are general guidelines. The halachot in this area are complex and depend on the precise situation and the nature and severity of the illness. Therefore, in times of this pandemic, a couple should ask specific halachic questions about their situation.

It is especially important to ask questions if the *harchakot* may exacerbate the discomfort or inconvenience caused by the illness,

or increase the risk of transmitting an infectious disease. A spouse who is ill and needs help should not be allowed to suffer needlessly. A halachically acceptable solution can usually be found.

## Q&A: HARCHAKOT LONGTERM

 *For Coronavirus-related reasons, I'm not going to be going to the mikveh for a while. Is there any way to relax the harchakot? It's becoming really difficult to keep this going. We did get through postpartum a couple of times, but this has been harder for us.*


We appreciate how difficult it can be to be *niddah* for an extended amount of time, especially when facing the uncertainties of the current pandemic.

In general, the *harchakot* remain in place. We suggest that this could be the time to review the *harchakot* to ensure that you are not being overly stringent.

When there are specific marital difficulties or mental health concerns during this pandemic and immersion has been delayed, if necessary, a couple can be lenient with *harchakot* that do not

involve direct physical contact, such as passing objects directly and serving food.

## Q&A: CARING FOR THE SICK


 *I have a question concerning physical contact during niddah. My husband and I both contracted Corona. I have recovered, but he is still sick. At the moment he is having difficulties with some of the daily tasks, e.g. drying himself after the shower or changing his clothes. Is it permitted for me to help him with these things during niddah?*

Many leniencies were instituted in the case of an ill husband. Halachically, you may serve him food and drink and hand things to him directly. You may help him stand, sit, lie down, walk, and even dress or lay tefillin, but only without direct physical contact, if possible. All the *harchakot* are relaxed, with the exception of affectionate touch, preparing his bed in his presence, or washing him, unless there is no alternative.

In general, you should make every effort to minimize direct physical contact. Where that is not feasible, or could cause him undue pain, you may help him, but should wear gloves (but not gloves as thin as surgical gloves, again, if possible).

May your husband have a refuah shleimah!



 *I am still recuperating from the Corona virus. I was in hospital and was only released from hospital a few days ago and am still very weak. I am niddah. My husband got Corona at the same time and is recovered. The two of us are in isolation together at home. Can my husband help me?*

As with any case of illness, your husband may hand you things directly and help you in any way that doesn't involve physical contact.

Under normal circumstances, it would be preferable to have a nurse or another female assist you in situations where physical contact is required. Since that's not possible here, your husband


may physically assist you with your needs while you recover, even though you are *niddah*.

You should try to minimize physical contact as much as possible, and he should wear gloves to avoid skin to skin contact. If possible, they should not be as thin as surgical gloves.

Refuah shleimah!

## **Q&A: DURING AVEILUT - MOURNING**

Marital relations are forbidden when either the wife or husband is sitting *shivah*. If the wife becomes *niddah* during *aveilut*, some halachic authorities would allow the minimum days to begin from the onset of *aveilut*, while others would not.

 *Unfortunately, my husband is sitting shiva for his father who passed away from the coronavirus. Do harchakot apply when in aveilut?*

We are sorry to hear of your loss.

Marital relations are forbidden when either the wife or husband is sitting *shivah*. If the wife is *niddah*, the *harchakot* still apply even immediately after a loss, *rachmana litzlan*.

If the husband or wife is sitting *shivah*, even when she is not *niddah*, they should not hug or kiss or sleep in the same bed. These restrictions are intended to clearly exclude any possibility of relations, which are not compatible with the intense mourning of *shivah*. Other *harchakot* (passing objects, etc.) do not apply during *shivah* when the wife is *tehorah*. Most important, a spouse can give comfort by adopting all the practices and strictures of mourning in the mourning spouse's presence.

### 3. EXTENDING CYCLES

Due to the challenge of getting to the mikveh during the pandemic, women who are already using combination hormonal contraceptives may be able to extend their cycles in order to become *niddah* less frequently.

Classic formulations of combination hormonal contraceptives create a 28-day cycle: 21 days of active hormones (pills, ring or patch) followed by 7 days of a break or placebo. Although convenient for medical calculations, this particular interval is simply a matter of convention. Therefore, a woman may consult with her health care provider about the possibility of lengthening her cycle by taking the active hormones

for more than 21 days. It may be possible to consult the health care provider by phone.

The likelihood of breakthrough bleeding increases the longer one continues to take hormones without interruption.

Some newer formulations of combination hormonal contraceptives are designed to allow the uterine lining to shed only four times a year, or eliminate menstruation altogether. In principle, this creates no halachic problems. In practice, there is anecdotal evidence that these formulations cause significant breakthrough bleeding that could make women *niddah*. Therefore, it may be more practical to extend one's cycle by combining packs of the standard 28-day pills, with a physician's approval and supervision.

Extending or manipulating cycles is fairly straightforward with monophasic pills, where all 21 active pills in a package have the same formulation. It is more complicated with triphasic pills, where the dosages of estrogen and progesterone vary over the course of each cycle. A woman taking triphasic pills would need to discuss any modifications with her physician, emphasizing the need to minimize breakthrough bleeding.

## Breakthrough bleeding

When combining packs and extending cycles, a woman may experience breakthrough bleeding. This may or may not make her *niddah*.

A flow of blood comparable to a period makes a woman *niddah*. It can be difficult to distinguish between heavy staining and a light flow. One rule of thumb is that if she needs to use a pad (as opposed to a light pantyliner) to contain the bleeding, she can assume she is experiencing a flow. Lighter than that would be staining.

If a woman has heavy staining, but not a full-fledged flow of blood, then her status depends on the color and size of her staining and the surfaces on which it has been found. She can take precautions against becoming *niddah* from staining by wearing colored underwear and waiting 15 seconds after urinating before wiping.

It can be unsettling to "ignore" stains that one knows are clearly blood. However, the actual Torah definition of *niddah* is a flow of blood, or blood accompanied by *hargashah*. The Rabbis added on

to these laws the stringencies of stains and when doing so included built-in leniencies so as not to overburden women and constantly cause them to be rendered *niddah*. Therefore, one can and should take advantage of these leniencies, and take appropriate halachic precautions.

If a woman has spotting that does not make her *niddah*, we usually recommend that the couple avoid relations until she has been clear of staining for about 24 hours. Other forms of physical affection continue as usual.


Refraining in this manner is a voluntary precaution against a flow beginning during relations, and also gives her time to evaluate the situation and determine whether the staining will develop into a real flow. It is not a halachic requirement, and does not indicate that she considers herself *niddah*.

If a woman becomes *niddah*, it makes sense to stop the active hormones (with the approval of her health care provider), begin the placebo/break week, and get her period.

## Vesatot

There are different halachic opinions about how to observe vesatot while using hormonal contraception. Our position is that once a woman has developed a pattern where bleeding begins a set day (or within a limited range of days) following her last pill (or removing the ring or patch), she observes that day(s) as a veset kavua and does not observe the other vesatot. Thus, a woman extending her cycle does not observe any onot until after she stops taking active hormones.

## Q&A: SKIPPING A PERIOD

 *After receiving a Rabbi's heter, I am currently on the pill. When looking into the way the pill works I discovered what may be common knowledge to many women already. The pill interrupts the woman's natural menstrual cycle, and the bleeding that occurs during the placebo week is in fact withdrawal bleeding.*

*I have read in a few articles that seeing as it is not a real period there is in fact no real medical*

*reason to take the placebo pills and allow the bleeding to happen. There are even pills that last 3 months before taking a placebo week, and for regular pills one can adjust their period as they need by avoiding the placebos and moving straight to the next pack of active pills.*

*My question is this: seeing as taking the placebo pills is the cause of this withdrawal bleeding that we call period, would it be halachically permissible for me to skip the placebos?*

*I would like to know basically if halachically it is okay for me to take three active packs skipping the placebos, and allow this withdrawal bleeding to occur only four times a year?*

*Due to all the fears of going to the mikveh during this time, it would be wonderful if I didn't have to worry about getting my period and going to the mikveh every month.*


There is no obligation to become *niddah* on a monthly basis. It is halachically permissible to extend your cycle by taking multiple

packs of pills back-to-back but please speak to your health care provider first.

You would only become *niddah* once you experience a flow of blood. Some women are able to successfully take three packs consecutively without a break, but other women begin experiencing breakthrough bleeding before getting through the full three months. If you start experiencing bleeding (or staining that doesn't subside after a few days), it usually makes sense to stop taking the active pills (even if you are mid-pack in the second or third pack) to allow your period to come. You would then restart the active pills after a seven-day break (either placebos or seven pill-free days).

You may have better success building up a tolerance to extended use of the pill by starting gradually, extending the weeks of active hormones over a few cycles until you find an arrangement that works well. B'hatzlacha!

## Q&A: STAINING

 *I have been extending my cycle and taking back-to-back packs in order to avoid becoming niddah. I have been having large stains on colored underwear. I have not wiped and seen blood or seen it on white fabric. I might be getting my period even though I am continuing to take the pill. Not sure what is happening. What is my status at this time?*

Based on what you write, that staining has been limited to colored undergarments, you are not currently considered to be *niddah*. In this situation, we would recommend abstaining from relations until about a day after the staining subsides. Please note that this is a precaution against a flow beginning during relations and not a strict halachic requirement.

Staining is fairly common when taking back-to-back hormonal contraception as well as for women who have changed pill-taking patterns (e.g., missing a pill or extending the length of the active pill cycle). Even so, you may wish to consult with your physician about the staining.

If the staining does not abate, you may wish to consider (in consultation with your health care provider) stopping the active pills to bring on withdrawal bleeding and *niddah* for this cycle.



*✧✧ I'm on the combined pill and have been off the active pills for a few days. I am expecting withdrawal bleeding. Sometimes I have only a little bit of staining but following that I have always considered myself niddah. Due to the current situation, if I do not have to go to the mikveh I would rather not. So far I have not had more than brown staining with a few red spots. Does the withdrawal bleeding have to make you a nidda, or is it possible that it will just continue for a few days as staining?*

Some women do not experience an actual flow of blood during withdrawal bleeding from the pill. There are even some formulations of pills that only cause light bleeding or staining. This type of withdrawal bleeding makes you *niddah* only if it meets the

usual conditions for stains, or if it is accompanied by a *hargashah*.

However, during your first cycle on the pill, or following pill cycles on which you have had a blood flow, you do need to observe *onot perishah* and the *bedikah* required on your *onah* may render you *niddah*. Red on a *bedikah* will generally make you *niddah*; if you find brown on a *bedikah* it should be evaluated by a halachic authority.

If your *bedikot* do not render you *niddah*, then you may take precautions against becoming *niddah* from the staining by wearing colored underwear and waiting 15 seconds after urinating before wiping in order to disregard stains on toilet paper. We also recommend abstaining from marital relations until 24 hours after the staining subsides so your status may be clarified.

If with subsequent cycles you have only staining but no flow of blood after stopping the active pills, then you probably will not have *onot perishah* to observe until you next have a blood flow. (There are exceptions, such as if you previously had a *veset kavua* on the pill).



## **SECTION III: SHALOM BAYIT**

The pandemic has created or exacerbated tension for many individuals, couples, and families. Stress on a relationship can be compounded by disagreement about how to observe Taharat Hamishpacha safely, or extended periods of niddah when the mikveh is inaccessible.

A couple will not always be able to solve every problem by themselves. There is no shame in asking others for help. (If tension between spouses ever reaches the level of threats or physical violence, it is essential to seek outside help.) A couple may want to seek advice from a trusted and competent friend or family member, rabbi, or mentor. If the problem remains unresolved, it may be appropriate to seek professional counseling - online or by phone if necessary. This does not mean that the marriage was a failure or a mistake. It rather indicates that the couple are mature and committed to each other enough to invest the effort in making it work.

✧✧ *I was supposed to go to the mikveh last night. I understand that immersing is safe (I'm perfectly healthy), but I still don't feel comfortable doing it. I want to wait until the pandemic situation improves. However, my husband disagrees, and he's been pressuring me to go. What do you suggest?*

We appreciate the sensitive nature of this question.

Given the situation, it is legitimate for you to make a personal decision not to immerse. Even if your husband insists that you go to mikveh, that does not halachically obligate you to do so.

However, not immersing means abstinence for an indefinite period of time, which requires both spouses working together to preserve shalom bayit.

It would be best if the two of you could come to a joint decision about mikveh, looking together at the relevant material in this booklet, inquiring about the precautions your local mikveh is taking, and talking out both of your concerns.

You may want to talk personally with a Yoetzet Halacha to discuss some of the halachic and practical aspects of working this out. As always, Yoatzot Halacha are available through our phone hotline

and website, and in many communities. If you and your husband need more assistance in building healthy communication around this decision, you may also find it helpful to consult with a counseling professional.



*✧✧ Unfortunately, my husband and I are going through a very difficult time. We are both unemployed and because we are stuck indoors with the children as well, there is a lot of tension in the house. I understand the importance Judaism and Halakha place on a wife being sexually available to her husband whenever he wants/needs it. If the husband has been physically or emotionally abusive, is the law still the same; must the wife still be there for him whenever he wants?*

We appreciate how much courage it must have taken to share this question with us and we hope we can be of some help. We are sorry to read about your difficult situation.

There is **no** halachic requirement to have relations whenever the husband wants to. Though relations are an essential component

of marriage, the wife has the right to say "no" to relations when she is not interested.

The Talmud<sup>3</sup> lists a set of situations in which the holiness of relations is compromised. These include when the couple is in the midst of an unresolved quarrel and when relations take place in an atmosphere of fear of one's partner. The implication is that issues within a relationship cannot be disconnected from the bedroom.

It is vital in difficult situations to seek support. For support in dealing with these matters, we suggest you contact the relevant community organization in your area. If you are in Israel or the US, we recommend the following two hotlines. Both are strictly confidential and specialize in providing emotional support and professional-level advice for women in abusive situations:

In Israel – **The Crisis Center for Religious Women**, <http://ccrw.1202.org.il> 02-673-0002; Whatsapp: 052-8361202.

In America – **The Shalom Task Force**, [www.shalomtaskforce.org](http://www.shalomtaskforce.org) 1-888-883-2323, 718-337-3700

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<sup>3</sup> Tractate Nedarim Daf 20b

## **SECTION IV: QUARANTINE**

### **1. GENERAL GUIDELINES**

1. A woman in quarantine may not have contact with her husband or use the mikveh until her quarantine is over. As difficult as it can be to delay mikveh immersion, the halachic imperative to prevent the spread of disease is greater than considerations of immersing on time.
2. A woman whose husband is in quarantine may immerse on time or delay immersion to a more convenient time. If they are not observing quarantine scrupulously within the home, she should delay mikveh until after quarantine. As long as her husband is in quarantine, physical contact between them is medically and halachically prohibited.
3. A woman with a household member in quarantine need not delay immersion. If they are not observing quarantine scrupulously within the home, she should delay mikveh until after quarantine.
4. A woman who immersed, and is later informed that she had previously been exposed to Corona and needs to enter quarantine, need not notify the mikveh at this point. If she is

tested and found to be positive, then she should notify the mikveh.

5. A woman in quarantine may dispose of *bedikah* cloths in the garbage, as usual. If she has a halachic question about a *bedikah* or stain, then she should not bring the cloth or garment to a halachic authority. Rather, she should call to consult. In cases that require visual evaluation, she can seek to have it evaluated online through Tahor App (available on iPhone and some models of Android phones), which uses special color calibration technology to ensure that the stain is photographed and transmitted accurately. If a woman in this situation cannot use the app, she can save the cloth or stain and have it evaluated following her quarantine. She should keep careful track of the dates of any cloths or stains that she saves for future evaluation.
6. In consultation with her physician, a woman in quarantine or with a husband in quarantine might consider manipulating her cycle hormonally so that quarantine overlaps with *niddah* as much as possible, or to push off *niddah* until after quarantine.

## Q&A: IMMERSION

✧✧ My husband was overseas for three weeks and was then in quarantine. I was supposed to go to the mikveh tomorrow but I just found out that someone at my work contracted corona and so now I am in quarantine for two weeks. In our home, we are not so strict about my quarantine. Now I have to wait to get out of quarantine to be able to go to the mikveh. We have been physically separated for over a month already. My husband says he is not coping and it's putting severe strain on our relationship. He wants me to go to the mikveh even though it is against the rules. Due to the issues of Shalom Bayit, can I go to the mikveh even though I am in quarantine? Or due to the extenuating circumstances, perhaps we can be more lenient regarding touch?

We are sorry to hear about your difficulties getting to the mikveh.

We understand that this is a difficult and frustrating situation. It is natural that over two months with no physical contact would put a strain on your relationship.

Resuming contact prior to mikveh immersion is prohibited. It is also forbidden to go to the mikveh when in quarantine. This is not only against the law but also potentially puts other women at the mikveh in danger. Halachically it is forbidden to break the law of the land and to endanger others, even if this puts pressure on your marriage.


It is necessary for you as a couple to find a way to cope with this additional delay.

You cannot control or take responsibility for your husband's reactions, but you can do your utmost to improve the atmosphere over the next few days. Be understanding of your husband's frustration and make sure to express that your actions are guided by halacha. Ask your husband or anticipate, based on experience, what steps you could take to help him manage the strain he is feeling. Although physical contact plays an important role in enhancing *shalom bayit* and improving our ability to handle strain,

there may be other resources in your relationship that you can draw on to improve matters. Instead of focusing on what you cannot do, work at doing whatever you can.

If you both feel that you are unable to find ways to deal with this pressure, we suggest consultation with a professional therapist online or by phone.

## Q&A: MIKVEH SAFETY

 *A woman who used our local mikveh last week was just diagnosed with Covid-19, and now all the women who went that night were quarantined! Is it safe to use the mikveh?*

Mikvaot that adhere scrupulously to current public health guidelines should be safe to use. If a woman who used the mikveh is later confirmed to have Covid-19, then the local health authorities will give specific guidance to the mikveh in advance of reopening the premises. Women who are immunocompromised or at high risk should consult their physicians before using the mikveh.


As with any public space, there is some risk of being quarantined if it turns out that a person later diagnosed with Covid-19 was there at the same time as you. This applies to locations such as stores, buses, and synagogues, as well as to the mikveh.

The mikveh pool itself is chlorinated, and the railings and preparation rooms are cleaned and disinfected between women. Therefore, a properly maintained mikveh does not present a unique risk of infection compared to other public spaces.

Women who were at the mikveh at the same time as an infected woman will be asked to go into quarantine because they may have been within two meters of the woman diagnosed or touched a non-disinfected surface that she also touched.

If you don't already have one, we recommend you work within your community to set up an appointment system. Depending on the specific situation, this could help determine which women were at the mikveh at the same time and minimize the number of women who need to enter quarantine.

## Q&A: ON MIKVEH NIGHT

 *My husband is in quarantine because of possible exposure to the Coronavirus. I am supposed to immerse in the mikveh tonight. Are we halachically required to have relations on mikveh night?*

According to Israel's Ministry of Health directives, a person in quarantine is to remain in a separate room and have no physical contact at all with other members of the family.


Halachically, you are required to adhere carefully to instructions like these, intended to prevent danger to others' lives. Accordingly, having relations with your husband in quarantine would be prohibited.

We do still recommend immersing on time, although if your scheduled night is particularly inconvenient you can put it off.

**Note:** Even if a couple are in quarantine together (because they were exposed at the same time or returned together from a trip abroad, or because one spouse joins the other by choice), intimate relations are not recommended during quarantine. This is because one person may become ill and the other not, and relations are a form of close contact that can easily spread Covid-

19. Of course, a woman in quarantine may not visit the mikveh, so this would be relevant only if she were already *tehorah*.

## Q&A: POSTPONING MIKVEH

 *How can you say that it's prohibited to immerse when in quarantine? Should Israel's Ministry of Health's overreactions get in the way of observing mitzvot?*

From a halachic perspective, everyone is obligated to follow health guidelines set by the local health authorities. Halacha recognizes health authorities' expertise to develop a response to the virus that safeguards public health.


Anyone who is in quarantine is absolutely forbidden to leave their house, except for cases which require medical intervention. Even then, they must notify the public health authorities. Additionally, family members may not come close to someone in quarantine, and certainly any physical and intimate contact is prohibited, even for a couple that is halachically permitted to each other.

It is important to understand that immersion of a potential carrier of the Coronavirus might endanger the health of other women at

the mikveh, especially those who are at high risk for complications.

For these reasons, it is critical to follow the instructions of Israel's Ministry of Health, and not to permit immersion for any woman who is obligated to remain in quarantine.




 *My husband is in quarantine. I'm supposed to immerse on Shabbat and have nobody to look after my children while I'm at the mikveh. May I postpone immersion?*

In this case, you may delay immersion. You should finish counting your seven clean days as planned. After completing the clean days, you do not perform any more *bedikot*, and you should switch to colored undergarments.

Keep in mind that even once you do immerse, you must follow the rules of Israel's Ministry of Health, which limit any physical contact with someone in quarantine.

## Q&A: SEVEN CLEAN DAYS

 *I am in quarantine because of possible exposure to the Coronavirus, and I am also in the middle of counting my clean days. I understand I am forbidden from immersing. Should I stop counting my clean days now?*

You are facing a number of challenges, and these questions only begin to touch on them.

Counting the seven clean days and immersing in the mikveh are distinct mitzvot. There is usually no break between them, but halacha does allow for one when necessary.

You are correct that you cannot immerse before your quarantine period finishes. However, it is important for you to finish your seven clean days as planned, even though you won't be able to immerse immediately upon their completion.

Between completing your count and immersion, no further *bedikot* are necessary, and you should switch to colored undergarments. You can immerse on the night immediately after the quarantine period finishes.

## **SECTION V: MIKVEH ATTENDANTS**

### **1. GUIDELINES**

It is a halachic requirement to follow Health Ministry/Department regulations. Mikvaot must be extra scrupulous at this time with keeping distance between women, hygiene, disinfecting, and keeping out women in quarantine or with symptoms of illness, all in strict compliance with the regulations of Israel's Ministry of Health or local health authorities. Women are not permitted to break quarantine to immerse, and Mikveh attendants must resist any pressure brought upon them to bend the rules. If a mikveh attendant or worker is herself not feeling well, she may not enter the mikveh at this time.

### **2. PROTOCOL**

1. Mikvaot should continue to operate, with some modifications. Women should complete their preparations at home. (A thorough shower is sufficient if no bathtub is available). They should shower and comb their hair immediately before leaving home, arriving at the mikveh just to inspect themselves and immerse. Preparation rooms and mikveh railings should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected between women.

2. Mikvaot must adhere scrupulously to current official protocols for filtration and chlorination of the mikveh pools. The room with the pool should be ventilated, either by opening windows or by opening the doors that connect it to better-ventilated rooms between immersions.
3. Israel's Ministry of Health recommends setting up appointments in advance, User-friendly online software can make this process fairly simple. We recommend that mikvaot in and out of Israel adopt this change, informing the community of the updated protocol. Mikvaot can further increase physical distancing by taking payment online or over the phone.
4. It is preferable to avoid having women spend time in the waiting room. If there are multiple women in the waiting room or any other part of the mikveh building, they must wear masks and maintain a distance of at least 2 meters (6 feet) between them.
5. If a woman who used the mikveh is later put in quarantine but is not sick, mikveh hygiene protocol remains unchanged.
6. If a woman who used the mikveh is later confirmed to have Covid-19, then the local health authorities will give specific guidance. Most likely they will advise cleaning the surfaces with bleach/alcohol, changing the water and contacting other women who were at the mikveh at the same time. Some of those

women may then be put in quarantine, depending the likelihood of contact with the woman who was diagnosed.


7. Mikvaot should make information about their compliance with health regulations readily available to the public.

### **3. IMMERSION**

1. As each woman enters the building, confirm she does not have symptoms of illness (e.g., fever, coughing, difficulty breathing, vomiting or diarrhea) and that she is not in quarantine. Questions about specific situations should be directed to the local health authorities.
2. Women must prepare at home.
3. Mikveh attendants must wear masks and avoid any direct physical contact with women immersing, maintaining a distance of two meters (six feet).
4. In addition, mikveh attendants must be careful to wash their hands frequently.
5. If a woman requires physical assistance (for example, assistance entering and exiting the pool), the attendant must wash her hands thoroughly with soap and water for twenty seconds both before and after assisting her, and wear gloves while assisting her.

6. A woman who is immunocompromised or at high risk medically should consult with her physician. If immersion is medically approved, she should arrange to be the first to use the mikveh that night and should not spend time in the waiting room.
7. A woman who needs to delay immersion, even for many days, should still immerse at night. If there are extenuating circumstances, a specific halachic question should be asked. If a strict curfew is in place, immersion during the daytime on day eight may be permissible.

## Q&A: CHLORINATION ON SHABBAT


 *I'm a mikveh attendant, and we're being careful to follow all the regulations for cleaning and chlorinating the mikveh to avoid any danger of Corona infection, chas veshalom. Can we follow the usual chlorination routine on Shabbat? What about disinfecting surfaces between women?*

You may add chlorine or bromine tablets to the water even on Shabbat. You may also use a pool tester or indicator strips to check chlorine levels as needed. Although indicators that involve

changing colors can raise halachic questions on Shabbat, their use is permissible under the current circumstances.

Mikveh surfaces should be cleaned using disinfectant wipes, and/or disposable rags with a bleach or alcohol liquid solution.

## Q&A: HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

 *I am a mikveh attendant and have received a request from a nurse who has worked in a hospital with Covid positive patients. Her last exposure was 2 days ago and she requests her appointment to be in 2 days. She uses personal protection at her job and has no symptoms of infection. I test our water daily. Is it safe to have her use our mikveh?*

In this case, it is safe to allow the nurse exposed to Covid-positive patients to use your mikveh, since she uses personal protection at work. As an additional precaution, she should take her temperature and check for any symptoms prior to arrival.

As an extra safety measure to prevent any potential asymptomatic spread, we recommend setting an appointment for her to be last

on a given night, when no one else will be present, even in other preparation rooms.

Assuming your community does not yet have specific mikveh protocols for Corona, you may want to consult with your rabbi and local authorities about establishing them.

## **APPENDIX 1**

**Transcript of Interview with Dr. Deena Zimmerman,  
Director of Israel's Ministry of Health's Maternal, Child and  
Adolescent Unit,  
and Director of [www.yoatzot.org](http://www.yoatzot.org)**

April 1, 2020

**Atara Eis (AE):** Many are wondering: if we're told to shelter in place, not to go to the supermarket, don't even go to the doctor unless absolutely necessary, then how are we keeping women's mikvaot open? So much of what we read seems to reinforce that there is more we don't know, even if we know a lot about Covid-19's cousin SARS, and distant cousin influenza, there's so much more we don't know about this virus than we do. If we have gone so far as to shut down all communal religious activity, given the sacrosanct value of protecting human life, why are we keeping our women's mikvaot open? To understand this more, I interviewed Dr. Deena Zimmerman. Dr. Zimmerman is a member of Israel's Ministry of Health's Public Health Service. What that means is she is intimately involved in the public health decisions that are being

made in the State of Israel. She is also a veteran Nishmat Yoetzet Halacha and runs [www.yoatzot.org](http://www.yoatzot.org).

**AE:** So Deena, welcome. Given the halachic imperative to protect lives at all costs, why are we keeping the mikvaot open?

**Deena Zimmerman (DZ):** The answer is very simple. Because it is safe to keep them open when they are maintained and operated under the proper conditions.

**AE:** Explain to us, please - why is it so important to work with experts in public health? Why shouldn't we just consult maybe a regular epidemiologist or virologist to make our decisions about the mikvaot?

**DZ:** Because public health is its own specialty that is designed for dealing with issues of populations, not just with individuals. Dealing with outbreaks, dealing with epidemics, is exactly what this specialty is trained to do. It's also a multidisciplinary specialty, which means that one has access to specialties in public health. Not only physicians, also people who are experts in environmental health, water safety, and other specialties that come in and can help answer our questions in the best possible way.

**AE:** So, talk to me about the different types of tools and techniques that public health experts use in containing any kind of outbreak, epidemic, pandemic.

**DZ:** So, many of these are probably words that you have heard before. The simplest one and the most basic one is hygiene. Most diseases are spread between people, and basic hygiene can make a difference in how it's spread. There is also the issue of containment, quarantine, and social distancing.

**AE:** And how would these different tools apply to a mikveh setting in a way that keeps mikvaot within the bounds of public health concerns?

**DZ:** First of all, proper maintenance and cleanliness of the mikveh is preventing women from *many* different diseases that can be passed from woman to woman, and this is something that should be done at all times, not related to Corona as well. Because of the Corona pandemic, we've added the issue of making sure that women who are sick, in quarantine, have symptoms that may turn out to be Corona should not be using the mikveh, and by keeping sick people out, we are keeping other people from having the possibility of being sick. Now that the epidemic has gotten more serious, we are also using the tool of social isolation, keeping people away from each other, and if you are not close enough to

the person to be able to have the disease spread to you, primarily by droplet spread, which is about two meters, six feet, then you shouldn't be able to get sick from that.

**AE:** But Deena, I keep reading about asymptomatic carriers. People have even raised the theory that people might be more infectious before they actually show symptoms.

**DZ:** People have been raising the possibility, but this is not what we have been seeing clinically. Many of the studies that talked about the viral load, that an asymptomatic person may have, if you read them carefully, aren't really talking about asymptomatic people; it's talking about minimally symptomatic people, and that's why we're being very careful that if a woman has signs that aren't necessarily sounding like Corona, she should not go to the mikveh that night, and she should just wait a day or so to see, "oh, it really just was a cold, it just went away," and not "oh, this was really the beginning of something else." That's yet another level of preventing people from getting sick. We also have to realize that the amount of virus the person has doesn't necessarily mean the amount that he is spreading and getting to other people, and by keeping social distancing, even if you are in the same universe as somebody who has the virus, then if you are

far away enough from them, they are not going to spread the virus to you.

**AE:** Ok, so you are most concerned about droplet spread, that is what you are saying.

**DZ:** Yes.

**AE:** So, there was a study released by the Ministry of Health last week that said that 1% of patients were infected at the mikveh. What does that mean?

**DZ:** So, to understand that study, one actually has to look at the actual numbers that they were talking about. The authors of the study, or those who published the study because the full study is not what they've sent around on the internet; they've just sent around one table, but even the authors of this point out that these numbers reflect *what was happening before social isolation and other kinds of restrictions were being put in place*, and at that point they found that there was *one case of a mikveh where spread happened*. It says nothing there in terms of it happening specifically from the water. *Most likely it had to do with spread from person to person being in the same place. It also doesn't mention if it's a men's mikveh or a women's mikveh, and there's a very big difference between the degree of hygiene that is usually kept in those kinds of mikvaot.* For that reason, all the

men's mikvaot in Israel have in fact been closed, while the ministry is keeping open the women's mikvehs because we really understand it's not the same thing.

Also, the preparation for using the mikveh between men and women is so different. Men come in, get undressed and go in. Women are coming in in the cleanest possible fashion a human being could ever be.

**AE:** Got it. So in light of what you just explained, can you explain to me why in my home town of Efrat recently, there was a case where a woman immersed and then was later found out to be a carrier. This caused, understandably, some panic. That's putting it lightly. All the women who had immersed that night were told to quarantine. Why were they told to self-quarantine if the mikvaot are safe?

**DZ:** Because there the concern was not the mikveh water. There the concern was women who had been in the same space with this woman at the same time. Because at that point there was no way of knowing exactly what time this woman came out and other women came in, the decision was made to do it the entire night. Now, when we're working by an appointment system, then that scenario should not repeat itself. There may still be some people who need to self-quarantine, but it would be one or two women

who might have overlapped with her coming in, and not everyone who used the mikveh that night. I think it's also really important to realize what the tool of quarantine is. Being put in quarantine doesn't mean you are necessarily going to get sick, and many of the people will not and did not get sick, but they have enough of a reason for us to be concerned that we want to stop it and take extreme measures, mostly to make sure they're not going to pass it on further.

**AE:** Got it. So Deena, why are you so convinced mikveh water itself does not pose a danger?

**DZ:** Because the Coronavirus has been around already for over three months. Many studies have been done on the virus itself. *The virus itself is not such a sturdy virus, and we know it is killed by chlorine, bromine, and bleach, and therefore I am convinced that the amount of chlorine that is put into a mikveh standardly, because that is how we keep water that is used by more than one person safe, has standards, and those standards that are used routinely, are sufficient and more to kill the coronavirus.*

**AE:** It's really insane that such an unstable little virus is wreaking such havoc on this universe.

And so what you're saying, just to be very clear - we know this about this current SARS/COV-2, and it's not based on stuff about Cousin SARS-1?

**DZ:** No. The things that I'm saying about this virus being able to be killed by chlorine is relevant to THIS virus. It's also relevant to the other virus.

**AE:** Then why are public pools closed?

**DZ:** A public pool is a totally different situation. **The main reason decisions were made to close public pools is because they are a place where people congregate, and we want to close places where people congregate. A mikveh, working by appointment, that the women are not going to be too many people there at the same time, is no longer a place where people congregate.** Furthermore, any studies that are done about public pools or public baths are not relevant to mikvaot because many of you have used pools, there's a nice sign there that says please shower before going into the pool, and some people do, some people don't, and even if they do it's like a nice rinse-off, that's completely different from the amount of preparation and scrubbing that women do before they use a mikveh.

**AE:** Got it. I learned a new word, it's called fomites - that's a fancy word for surfaces. Could you talk to us about fomites? It's not just

droplets, right? Those droplets can go onto those fomites. How do we prevent spread from fomites?

**DZ:** The way that we prevent spread from surfaces, and I know there have been a lot of studies out there that have shown how much the virus can live on plastic, on wood, etc., but that's not really what's relevant in terms of causing disease. Because in order to spread it that way, one has to touch it, not wash his hands, and then touch the respiratory area. So even if they are there, there are things that can be put in place to prevent that from spreading disease. And those things are hygiene, washing your hands, wiping down surfaces, not touching your face, and that's good practice in a time of an epidemic, we want to do every little bit we can to prevent the spread, but ***the main way it is being spread is by droplet spread, and the way to deal with the fear of surfaces, is not to give in to the fear, but to be more careful with hygiene than we might be in our day to day life.***

**AE:** That is why at Nishmat's special portal on the Novel Coronavirus and Taharat Hamishpacha we offer a lot of suggestions of how to further minimize any kind of contact with fomites. But these are suggestions, right? These are suggestions to protect, but not that there is an inherent danger here. What I'm hearing loud and clear from you is that social distancing and hand

washing are the number one ways to prevent contracting the disease.

So, what if the mikveh attendant did not wipe down the surface when I get to the mikveh - so what if I touched the sink in the prep room, and the person before me was positive and she touched that sink also, and now I have the fomite and I didn't wash?

**DZ:** So first of all, hopefully you washed your hands, because that's what we're saying to do. You've also gone into the mikveh water, which will wash it off, and the amount that was probably left there was a small amount of viruses, and we have to keep into consideration what it is that makes us sick. ***One virus particle is not going to make a human being with a normal immune system sick.*** It takes a certain amount of viral load to make them sick. We don't yet know the exact number, and it's probably not one number; it's a matter of balancing the number of viruses and our immune system. ... [there are] viruses on surfaces that we are touching. We have bacteria. We are not living in a sterile world, but we are designed to be able to deal with it. So, a small occasional maybe I touched something, the chances of getting sick are extremely low. The way to keep that in my power and do what it is that I can is wash hands. I touch something, I wash my hands. I'm not sure they washed down the surface and I'm really

nervous? Wipe it down yourself and wash your hands. I think the issue of surfaces is something that can certainly be brought under control, and one can immerse in a way that one can feel comfortable. The degree that you want to take our advice about different ways to do it will depend from person to person. But the main emphasis we should be putting is the issue of social distancing, making appointments, and basic hygiene and cleanliness.

**AE:** But if someone is immunocompromised, their system may not be able to handle even a smaller viral load.

**DZ:** That is why women who are immunocompromised should be talking to their doctor before they go out, before they go to the supermarket and before they go to the mikveh. It will depend from woman to woman. There are different levels of immunocompromised, so everything has to be decided on an individual level. One of the possible suggestions might be for the woman to be the first person to immerse, and therefore the chances of anybody possibly touching anything is even lower. This is the kind of advice we often give to women who are immunocompromised not related to Corona. Just about the possibility of picking something else up in any public place, not just the mikveh, but this is something that people who are worried

about their immune system should be discussing with the doctor. It's very important, though, that the doctor understand what really goes [on] at a woman's mikveh, particularly today. A mikveh is not the same as a public pool, and decisions about what to do should not be based on swimming pools; it should be based on the understanding this is only clean women who are going into well-chlorinated water; each woman immerses by themselves, it is not a group immersion, and the water is kept with chlorine to proper standards.

**AE:** The next issue of concern here is there was a letter to the editor in *New England Journal of Medicine*<sup>4</sup> which has raised alarm bells for many. They're wondering about whether the humidity in the mikveh room might lead to an even greater concern about "airborne-like conditions"- that means that an infected droplet might hang around in the air longer than in other non-humid conditions and then transfer disease. How would you address this concern?

**DZ:** First of all, reading that letter, one has to realize this was experimental conditions. They purposely took the virus, took a

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<sup>4</sup> Neeltje van Doremalen et al. Letter to Editor, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 382:16 16.04.20. <https://www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJMc2004973?articleTools=true> (Accessed 18.05.20).

machine, made steam, put it in a room to see how long it was going to live there. So that is not necessarily the same thing as one person who may have given one cough or touched one surface. It can't be compared to anything in the usual day to day. The only thing in real life that is somewhat similar to that is hospital ventilators, and that is something that things are being put in place to prevent that aerosol spread in terms of protecting health care workers. But in terms of a regular mikveh, I'm not concerned because the viral load here is so [small]. And also, it's the amount of time that the woman is going to be in there. Because in order for you to get it from the air, which once again in terms of real life, where we're seeing it spreading, that does not seem to be the main place, certainly outside of a hospital setting, but if you're in and out in ten minutes, the amount of time you're exposed to air is much less, and to make the possibility lower, then just to work on ventilation of the area.

**AE:** So what do you mean, like opening a window?

**DZ:** I mean like opening a window, and I realize that some mikveh areas exactly don't have a window there, so open a window in another room, and open a door between woman and woman. By spacing women out, we're giving time for ventilation, we're giving time for cleaning, and even if the virus lives longer because it's

humid, it's still not long enough and I'm not going to be in there for long enough to be worried about that making me sick.

**AE:** Based on this, and our discussion of viral load from before, I'm actually much more concerned about the mikveh attendant's health than the woman who is very quickly getting through that prep room because she's done all her prep at home - again, see our website for all of our recommendations, and then she's very quickly entering and exiting the pool room. I'm much more worried about the mikveh attendant.

**DZ:** There is reason that communities should be thinking about what's happening with their mikveh attendants. First of all, making sure that the women who are coming to the mikveh are not women in quarantine. Putting a sign on the door: if you are in quarantine, do not come. Empowering the mikveh lady to tell women it sounds like you might be sick, please come back tomorrow. Make it very clear in our communities who is not allowed to use the mikveh - doesn't matter what the personal circumstances are - that is probably the most important thing that we are doing to protect the mikveh ladies. ... the fact that she is only seeing one woman at a time helps to some degree because it's not a bunch of people coughing in each other's faces. When she is taking care of the woman herself there are things that

should be put into place to make the risk less. There is no reason she needs to be close to the woman as she's going down. Her role is to see that her hair goes under the water. This can be done from a distance of two meters. All the things that mikveh ladies do that are based on custom, such as checking her back, are not necessary from a halachic point of view, and therefore for almost all women this can be a touch-free process. In the case where she needs to assist a woman who really can't walk down the steps or something, then providing her with gloves and a mask and some sort of gown for those specific circumstances is another thing we can do to protect her. Keep the mikveh well ventilated as I said, and maybe in very busy mikvehs, think of the possibility of taking shifts. And therefore the amount of hours that she's staying there will be less per woman. I also think there is a point to think about who we are using as mikveh attendants at this point. We should be using younger women, women who don't have underlying medical conditions. Think about who should be a mikveh attendant and protect her in that way.

**AE:** Would you even say she wouldn't need to be in the pool room herself? She can be standing in a separate room, and as long as she can see the woman's hair under the water, that would suffice. She would be standing in a different room.

**DZ:** Absolutely in most cases, except for those cases that women need physical help to get down the steps.

**AE:** So today's news, we heard there was a mikveh attendant in one of the cities in Israel who was found to be a carrier. What I understand is, there wasn't yet an appointment system, and all of the women were told to self-quarantine who had been exposed to her; I am very hopeful that that city now institutes the now mandatory appointment system and that could have avoided that amount of women having to go into self-quarantine.

**DZ:** Correct, and I think another thing that comes out of that case, which I don't know all the details about, but we need to make sure that women who are working as mikveh attendants - if they are sick, they have the right and they should be calling in sick, and they should not feel "Oh my gosh, I want to do my job"; this is a time, really if you are not feeling well, better safe than sorry.

**AE:** There's definitely a lot of education that needs to go on now to bring as many places into compliance as possible, that's for sure.

**DZ:** Which by the way is going to help in terms of preventing lots of disease spread, so it's a wonderful thing, so something good might come out of this [pandemic] as well.

**AE:** Be'ezrat Hashem. Could you see recommending a woman wearing a mask until right before her immersion and put another one on right after?

**DZ:** Based on where things are holding at this point, that does not seem to be necessary because once again the fear is not airborne spread. I think one of the things that the mask does a little bit is it reminds you not to touch your face and your mouth. But I think that's something at the level of individual choice. If we get to the point where the recommendations change that everybody has to wear a mask in a public place, then it's very important to listen to whatever guidance is being given at that point, but until that point, I would leave it to the individual woman. She wants to do it, let her do it. She doesn't want to, I wouldn't make her. \* *(Interview was filmed shortly before masks became mandatory in Israel in public places.)*

**AE:** Given all this, would you recommend that a woman who is on hormonal contraception space out her mikveh visits, obviously assuming her physician approves, by taking extra active pills?

**DZ:** I think that's really an individual choice. The woman herself may decide I just don't want to deal with this, give me a chance to deal with it less, that's perfectly fine; I don't think I would say that needs to be a public policy because the mikveh is not an unsafe

place to go; it should be individual decision, not policy for everybody.

**AE:** It's just to prevent her from needing to go out of the house more than she has to.

**DZ:** Yeah.

**AE:** Any advice for highly trafficked mikvaot? How would a mikveh that sees maybe 40 women a night really maintain these intense new standards?

**DZ:** I think it's a matter of advance planning. Making appointments makes a real difference. Women who are preparing at home and coming down and just dunking, can get in a fair number in an hour even with the strict guidelines. I think there is room for halachic work here in terms of making it possible for women to immerse as early as possible. Even though we very often wait until actual nightfall, there is room for slightly earlier than that, and there's room for halachic discussion about the possibility of using the mikveh the next day on the eighth day.

**AE:** So then you're spacing out and creating more room for more women.

**DZ:** Correct.

**AE:** Which might be necessary in a place that maybe sets a curfew anyway.

**DZ:** Also true.

**AE:** What about if there really is a serious local outbreak. Would you potentially recommend closing the mikvaot in such a community?

**DZ:** I think that's something that needs to be dealt with, with the local authorities knowing the details of that specific case. But if it turns out that there is an outbreak and these guidelines are not being followed, then I most definitely would close the mikveh until such point that they are willing to run it in the way that it needs to be run at all times and all the more so now.

**AE:** You've really explained to us how the measures taken by responsible rabbinic organizations – I know of the ones in the United States, and individual mikvaot in the United States, and followed by strict tightening of measures by Israel's Ministry of Health, they really do support keeping women's mikvaot open to the public, under these strict standards. What if a woman goes and sees that the mikveh is really not keeping to everything Nishmat told me it should be keeping to?

**DZ:** *Yet another advantage of making appointments, is it gives somebody the ability to ask some of these questions the night before. If she's not comfortable with the answers she gets, to look for other alternatives.* If for some reason she wasn't able to do

that, and she shows up at a place that really makes her uncomfortable, then she should not immerse and try to find another solution, even if it means being slightly delayed.

**AE:** Given all of this, is it still legitimate for an individual woman to decide that she might want to delay immersion in the current pandemic?

**DZ:** I think under all circumstances, it is legitimate for a woman to delay mikveh if she is not comfortable with what is going on. It is important, though, that she realizes what the consequences are, in terms of prolonging the time she's not able to have physical contact with her husband. But I think it's also *very important that we're keeping the mikvaot open for women who do choose to use it in our communities. It's very important to leave the choice open, and what an individual woman decides, that's her right.*

**AE:** Deena, thank you so much for your time.

**DZ:** You're very welcome. Let's end with hoping that- אבינו מלכינו, מנע מגיפה מנחלתנו . [Our Father, our King, withhold plague from our lot.] May this pandemic end quickly, with as few victims as possible, and may Pesach indeed be חג גאולתנו , the festival of our redemption.

**AE:** Amen. Thank you so much.

**DZ:** You're welcome.

## APPENDIX 2

# Background Information on Mikveh Preparation

To prepare for mikveh immersion, a woman cleans herself thoroughly and removes any foreign object (*chatzitzah*) that might intervene between her body and the water of the mikveh. This process is called *chafifah* (cleansing). Additionally, immediately prior to immersion, she checks her body and hair to ensure that they are free of *chatzitzot*. This is called *iyun* (inspection).

### **Chafifah** (Cleansing)

A woman should do the following to prepare for mikveh:

- 1) She should remove obvious barriers, such as clothing, jewelry, or contact lenses. (If bandages or other items cannot be removed for medical reasons, she should consult a halachic authority.)
- 3) Because dirt beneath the nails is a *chatzitzah*, the custom is to cut nails short.
- 4) She should remove all makeup. Long-term cosmetics without independent substance, such as hair dye or permanent makeup, are not considered a *chatzitzah*. If she has a well-maintained

manicure that she is reluctant to remove, she should consult a halachic authority..

5) She should wash her hair with warm water and shampoo. The hair on her head must be thoroughly combed with a comb; other body hair may be separated with the fingers.

6) Hair that is still attached to her body, even where it is undesired, is not a *chatzitzah*. However, a woman who is about to cut or shave her hair should ideally do so before immersing.

7) She should wash her entire body with soap and water. Preferably, she should use only warm water, but if there is a limited supply, she may wash her body with cold water and save the warm water for washing her hair.

While it is preferable to bathe in a bathtub, she may take a shower instead, as long as she is careful to wash her entire body.

8) Parts of the body whose natural form prevents water from entering (e.g., the armpits, under the breasts, and other crevices) are known as *beit hastarim* – hidden places. These areas need not actually come in contact with the mikveh water, but they must not be prevented from doing so by any *chatzitzah*. Therefore, they must be cleaned thoroughly, and often require special attention. Similar rules apply to internal parts of the body – in particular, the inside of the mouth. Therefore, she should thoroughly brush and

floss her teeth. Permanent fillings and crowns are not considered *chatzitzot*, but temporary dental work may be problematic, and a halachic authority should be consulted.

**lyun** (Inspection)

Inspection prior to immersion is required by **Torah law**.

- 1) She should visually inspect all visible parts of her body to ensure that they are free of foreign material.
- 2) She can inspect the other parts of her body by touch.
- 3) She should check her hair for knots.

**When to Prepare**

A woman should prepare for mikveh either the day before immersion or that night. The ideal is to begin in the afternoon and finish just before immersion, but any time during the day or night is acceptable. If it is difficult to prepare on the day of mikveh, it is permitted to take a bath or shower the night before. Cutting nails and shaving can also be done the previous day. She can fulfill the obligation of *chafifah* shortly before mikveh by removing any barriers, brushing and flossing teeth, and sitting in the bath (or even standing under the shower) for a few minutes while making sure that the warm water has reach all the cracks and crevices and there is no dirt remaining, washing hair with warm water, and combing it carefully. A careful inspection of the entire body (most

mikvaot have a mirror and checklist to help with this) completes the obligation of *iyun*.

A woman who will immerse on Shabbat or Yom Tov night must complete all her preparations during the day. A woman who will immerse on the second night of Yom Tov, on Friday night following a Yom Tov, or on Yom Tov following Shabbat, must prepare on the last available weekday – even if this is several days before her immersion.

Immediately prior to immersion, she separate strands hair with her fingers, wash any parts of her body that may have become dirty, and clean her teeth if she has eaten since brushing them – being careful to observe all the relevant Shabbat or *Yom Tov* restrictions.

In all circumstances, she must inspect herself immediately before she immerses.