

A message from Rabbi Jason Nevarez & Rabbi Arlene Bernstein, Cantor Emerita

A 21st Century Mikvah? Revitalizing a sacred tradition.



Our vision of a mikvah at Beth Israel both reclaims and reimagines one of Judaism's most ancient rituals—immersion in the mikvah.

The importance for Jews of ritual immersion in living waters (mayim hayim) can be traced to biblical sources. Wherever Jews settled, they established cemeteries and mikva'ot, even before they built their houses of worship. According to some Jewish sources, building mikva'ot takes precedence over building synagogues.

Today, many find that immersion has become a way to use Jewish ritual to enhance their lives and enrich their spirituality. Our 21st century mikvah will be created for contemporary spiritual use and for traditional ritual purposes. We are excited to teach all who are interested about this critical resource. The mikvah will be a sacred and safe space that is open and accessible to the non-Orthodox San Diego Jewish community.

Ritual immersion connotes a change of status. More recently, reimagined mikvah practices have come to play an increasingly significant role in the spiritual and communal lives of non-Orthodox American Jews. The strong association between water and life is even evident in its shared Hebrew roots, Tikvah, offering everyone who uses it, or who volunteers to help in a ritual immersion, a connection of hope.

A mikvah, open to Beth Israel and the wider non-Orthodox Jewish community, would meet a broad range of needs. In 2023-24 alone, our Introduction to Judaism class contains the largest enrollment in our history. Many of these students are planning to convert to Judaism, and mikvah immersion is the final, required ritual in becoming a Jew.

In addition to traditional uses of the mikvah such as couples immersing before their wedding ceremonies and individuals at the time of conversion, new uses of mikvah immersion include celebrations of milestone events such as graduations, significant birthdays or anniversaries, and marking the end of a period of study. Additionally, immersion in the mikvah can signify a new, spiritual start in the aftermath of pain and trauma, marking the end of formal grieving or the beginning of healing from events such as miscarriage, chemotherapy, completing a year of bereavement, or recovering from divorce, assault, or abuse.

Our goal is for visitors to the mikvah to emerge refreshed and renewed, ready for what life will bring them next. And while the ocean or the bay are acceptable "waters" for immersion (at certain times of year), they do not provide the safety, cleanliness, privacy, warmth, or emotional opportunity a mikvah offers.

As the oldest and largest synagogue in San Diego, Beth Israel serves as a hub for thousands of visitors every year from wedding and B'nei mitzvah families to groups from educational settings eager to learn about various religions and life practices.

The mikvah will enhance educational opportunities for members and visitors alike. In addition, an integral component of our modern mikvah will give our congregants the opportunity for meaningful volunteer experiences at all levels.

We invite you to help us bring our vision and this critical need to Beth Israel and our greater San Diego Jewish community. The opportunity to share a beautiful and uplifting Jewish ritual, with water, a life-affirming element for all, is priceless.