

Hearing Beneath The Surface: Crossing Gender Boundries at the Ari Mikve

By Tucker Lieberman

An Unorthodox Body

My body is not an abomination but it is unorthodox.

Like many Jews, at the age of 24 I joined the Birthright tour for a free trip to Israel, and as part of the itinerary found myself in Tzfat, once home to Rabbi Isaac Luria, the “ARI” (an honorific acronym which also means “Lion”). When several of the men from my tour group decided to immerse themselves into the Mikveh of the Holy ARI, I decided to join them although the prospect terrified me. What neither my tour group nor our host city’s residents knew was that I am a female-to-male transsexual. Beneath my masculine appearance is a torso that is ambiguously sexed. Undoubtedly, it would be unwelcome in an all-male *mikveh*.

I deliberately left my wallet in my room, taking only a shekel for a donation. I remember exactly what I wore: a white silk shirt, blue dress slacks, a red string bracelet given to me in Jerusalem, and sandals without socks. The chill of resignation spread through me and I heard my own thoughts rattling in my skull with an unusual detachment as if observing myself from the outside.

For me, the short walk to the *mikveh* was long, grappling with fear, a Jacob’s-angel- wrestling match on the banks of the river that flows through and divides me. One side of my brain tried to calm myself, assuring that I was merely a tourist and that this scenario existed merely for my amusement. The other side raced with fear. As my sandaled feet progressed ever closer to my destination, I felt like a kid confronted with an impending encounter with the sacred, *mysterium tremendum*, the terrifying unknown. The *mikveh* was enclosed in an unassuming building on the crest of a hill overlooking a field, marked with the banner reading “No women allowed beyond this point.”

“Male Privilege” in Tzfat

Rabbi Isaac Luria was a 16th century mystic and poet. Known for, among many other things, his conceptualization of *zimzum*, the notion that G-d “contracted” or “shrunk himself” to leave a void in which to create the world, he was believed to have spoken with several deceased teachers before him, as well as Elijah, the prophet.

Tzfat, home not only to Luria but to several schools of Kabbalists and, today, sects of Hasidim, enchanted me with the way religion infused every moment of life and, indeed, the city’s very structure. One of the ways this was most apparent was in the distinction between men and



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women. I saw both genders dressed modestly, men in black coats and top hats, women in multicolored clothing with pants under their skirts. Not every resident of city fit this profile, but in the heavily religious Old City, gender roles appeared far more crisply defined than they are in the US.

Men's access to space denied to women is called 'male privilege' by feminists. Though some female-to-male transsexual Jews feel guilty about having access to men's-only religious spaces, I personally do not. I remember all too well how it felt to be classed as a woman without feeling like one, to grieve every waking hour that I could not reconcile my conviction that I was male with the way the world treated me as a female. Now, I am simply glad to be free. I sympathize with feminist frustrations, but I cannot speak for women because my outrage as a transsexual comes from a different slant. I don't perform women's spirituality, except as an ally, because I am not a woman.

Anatomical Zimzum

The "face of the waters" existed before G-d said "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:2-3) and before G-d proclaimed creation to be good. Later, when humanity ceased to be good, G-d told Noah, "I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life..." (Gen. 6:17) The flood was sent to wipe out evil, yet the water itself was amoral, washing away everything in its path: human, animal, plant, and mineral, good and bad. Later in the Torah, water honed its moral discretion: the Jews walked through the parted Sea of Reeds, and then the water drowned their pursuers. Water, therefore, has a face, as it did even before the creation of the world, but its features continue to be imprinted over time. Is it reflecting our faces? It is reflecting G-d's?

Though the *mikveh*, or ritual bath, echoes the primordial waters of birth and creation, it, like the Red Sea, must be discriminating. Within a traditional *mikveh*, water cannot be dirty, plague-ridden, or stagnant; it must be *meyyim chayyim*, "living waters," as in Lev. 15:13, which has been interpreted as water with a natural current running through it. Before immersing in a *mikveh*, Jewish law instructs us to strip off every thread and jewel, every smudge of makeup, even to clip our nails and slough off the thick skin on our feet, so that there is no barrier between our bodies and the water. Intimate encounters with our own bodies are powerful for most people. For me, meeting my own body is tinted by the effects of transsexual body dysphoria, the sense that one's body is "wrong" or not one's own. The *mikveh* rule of removing barriers to my body reminds me of how I hated myself as a teenager, how body dysphoria translated into a feeling of uncleanness, and how I wished I could take off what I saw as the excess fat on my chest — if not for a year, if not for a day, then just for a minute in the shower, so water could run down the "real" flat chest I believed was underneath. I was fortunate to get reconstructive chest surgery. Except for the scars left behind, it was like erasing part of my history, starting off clean.



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The Mikveh of the Holy ARI is located inside a small, unpretentious building. The inside of the building looks like the inside of a stone eggshell, and contains a changing area, a bathroom, and the mikveh itself, fed by a spring and surrounded by stone. The immersion itself was simpler than I had feared. The pool accommodated one man at a time, so we waited in half-darkness, single-file (I discreetly wrapped in my towel). When it was my turn, I dropped the towel and climbed down the ladder. Facing the blank stone wall, there was a kind of privacy. The icy water sealed over the top of my scalp.

The Israeli staff at my program had told us that this *mikveh* grants wishes and answers questions. I was unable to articulate a wish on such short notice, but nevertheless went in searching for results. I tried wishing that a sore joint would heal. It didn't work. What I emerged with, however, was a sense of overall bodily integrity, the ability to remove the "Under Construction" sign from my body, the belief in my authority to direct my footsteps to places where my body needs to be.

Turning towards the rest of the waiting men, I hoisted myself out of the pool and grabbed my towel in what I hoped was a single quick motion. After dressing, I emerged from the cave and walked into the waning afternoon sunlight, across the boundary marked "no women," alive and whole.

In that moment, one person, the youngest of our entire tour group, ribbed me about my apparent genital "shrinkage" in the frigid water. *zimzum*. My body appeared to shrink from what my companion believed was its natural extension. I remained quiet and concealed myself in the open air.

Hearing the name of G-d

Accounts of the *mikveh* usually address fertility cycles and rules for heterosexual marriages. These do not present an ethic I can even attempt to live by, nor do they make sense out of my intuitions and experiences with the *mikveh*. Traditionally, the most common frequenters of the *mikveh* are women, who must ritually bathe after their menstruation and childbirth before they can be sexually available to their husbands again. Men are also supposed to bathe if they have had an emission (Lev. 15:16). For someone who is gay and sterile – my body produces neither eggs nor semen – the *mikveh* is bereft of its traditional framework. Nevertheless, I did immerse, so what did my immersion mean?

Most *mikvehs* are women's spaces. The Mikveh of the Holy ARI, however, is restricted to men, and before Shabbat, a day sacred for marital lovemaking, men in Tzfat line up to dip in these purifying waters. The concept of immersion is not inherently gendered. Anyone can do it. There is something profoundly humanizing about being welcomed into a font of renewal as if your nude body and your bare life were something very precious.



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Water, too, has unique properties that blur edges literally and figuratively. Water in the *mikveh* is used as a tool to separate clean from unclean, work week from Shabbat, men from women. Yet water itself is amorphous, concealing our bodies in refracted light and shadow and a rush of sound, making it difficult to distinguish male from female. Where we seek clarity and definition, we find boundaries beginning to soften and join us together.

For me, the answer is connected with hearing and with what often goes unheard. What we often think of as our humanity peels off like a brief, youthful fad, revealed as nothing more mysterious than clothes, makeup, body parts. Underneath all that noise, we are old and wise, at one with the history of the Earth and the source of our own creation, a current that runs through everything. Across the street from my home, a pond overflows into a waterfall and runs under a bridge. The rush of water is loud when one stands on the bridge and overlooks it. Yet, just a few feet away, the sound evaporates. Due to this cloak of auditory invisibility, it took me a month to discover the waterfall, and sometimes I still forget it is there.

On the other side of the world, in the holy city of Tzfat, where water trickles through a stone building and feeds a small pool about the size of a man. Just below the surface, the sound is deafening. It is the sound of hundreds of caravans pulled over the sand, of vegetables scratched from the dust, of fish multiplying, of plagues, of beautification, of sighs. It is the sound of water, the stuff of life, the skin of the earth, a shared resource that binds us together. Somewhere in that cacophony is the name of G-d.

Each morning, when I lift a glass to my lips and swallow, the pressure in my ear canal is altered. It is the sound of hearing. If I stay clean and open, the next thing I hear might be G-d in the falls.

Tucker Lieberman studied philosophy at Brown University and journalism at Boston University. His essay about wearing a yarmulke was recently published in [Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity](#), and his Jewish poetry has appeared online in Ariga. His memoir about camping in northern Canada appeared in Fresh Yarn. He lives in Providence, R.I.

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