

Water as a Portal to Sacred Consciousness

Goldie Milgram

Water symbolizes the presence of G*d for those who read the bible through a mystical lens. G*d as water traditionally symbolizes flow, loving-kindness, intimacy, transformation, nurturance abundance and prosperity. Mayim is the Hebrew word for water. G*d is our midwife, Her breath fluttering in Genesis above the primordial waters, the Cosmic womb that births “waters up there”, sham-mayim, “heavens”, and the mikveh mayim, “gathering of waters” [Genesis 1:10] below, that allow for human, plant and animal life.

Rock, too, symbolizes the presence of G*d. We have many references to stone and rock where G*d is tzur, “rock”, El Shaddai, “hills” and most intimately found upon a har, “mountain”. Rock is the mystical portal that leads us to G*d connection as justice, strength, healthy boundaries, safety, permanence and the steadfastness of creation.

Symbolism within the Hebrew Letters for Water

מים

Water (*mah-yim*)

The biblical Hebrew word for water, *mah-yim*, begins and ends with the letter *mem*. In its closed form, used grammatically at the end of words, the *mem* symbolizes pregnancy and in all other uses its open form symbolizes birth.

Mem is also the middle letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph* is the first and *taf* is the last. In sequence, read from right to left, these three letters spell *eh-met*, “truth.” In the mystical traditions *aleph* can signify the past, *mem* the present, and *taf* the future. Since few people learn without embodied experiences, it is helpful to let the word “truth,” *emet* be prayed through a movement-based meditation.

אמת

Truth (*emet*)

A meditation involving the Hebrew word for Truth.

א

Spread your legs comfortably and reach your hands upwards, you are an *aleph*, touching your past.

ם

Touch your fingers above your head and bring your arms down in a rounded arch before you as though enlarged with pregnancy; you are a *mem*, full with the precious present/Presence.

אם

spells the Hebrew root word *em*, “mother.”

מת

spells the Hebrew word *met*, “death.”

ת

Bend down and open your arms towards the earth and release what you are holding, what you have been, what you are working on or worried about; what has died and needs to be released.

Now you are a *taf*, open to the future.

Repeat this movement sequence until like water, the spirit of *emet*, “truth” flows through you as Presence always is always present, midwifing your life.

As is the case with Greek letters, every Hebrew letter has a value and the value of the letter *mem* is forty. Forty is the biblical number for transformations:

40 days of pregnancy until an embryo forms
40 days and 40 nights of rain water to re-purify the earth
40 days and 40 nights Moses went onto the mountain

40 years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness
40 days of travel by Elijah until his vision came
40 days Jesus experienced temptation in the wilderness

ness

40 units of water were required for the ritual baths at the temple in Jerusalem

Accordingly, it is not surprising that stories and rituals involving water infuse the scriptures. To the mind of the ancients the presence of water in a narrative was a form of foreshadowing, the presence of G*d was implied and it only remained to listen for how the great overarching story would work out in the details. Noah's ark serves as the womb for the survival of earth's non-water-dwelling species. Moses is placed into the Nile by his sister Miriam whose very name incorporates the word yam, sea. He will be drawn out, reborn to a new destiny as a leader, trained in the Pharaoh's courts. The Israelites will be brought out of Egypt and the great birthing metaphors of the parting waters of the sea rebirth them as a new nation.

The absence of water symbolizes disconnection from the presence of G*d. When Hagar is expelled by Abraham at the behest of Sarah, he sends her off with a full water sack – the ancient listener knows she will be all right, but Hagar does not remember the promise, she is downcast and unaware of the Well that is within sight. The death of Miriam is not mourned by Moses, he lacks time for tears. The water sources seem to have disappeared since she died. How painful that the people look to Moses to fulfill his sister's role in finding waters and his grief overflows, and instead of speaking to bring on the waters of life, he strikes out at the "Rock." Hagar's disconnect manifests as despair and depression; Moses repressed grief as anger. These stories remind us to be the sacred servants, the ministering angels who serve when our friends and family are in too much pain to be able to look up and drink from the Well of abundant life.

Rituals of transformation involving water as the purifying awareness of the Presence of G*d abound in

scriptures and some still offer opportunities for all of us to create moments of spiritual intimacy through which Presence can be felt and honored.

Examples of water rituals in the Bible

There are many variations on the role water plays in biblical rituals. Here are just a few examples. We find **drawing and pouring** (*Sho'ev*) in many passages including Genesis 24:13-19, 43, 1 Samuel 9:11, Isaiah 12:3, John 4:7-15, and Talmud Sukkot 41a-53a. **Washing** (*Rakhatz*) appeals in Number 8:7, Exodus 19:10, Exodus 30:19-21; Hebrews 10:22, while **drinking and testing** (*Sotah*) are found in Numbers 5:24, and **gazing** (*Ereh*) is in Ezekiel 1:1, and **casting into** (*Tashlich*) is in Micah 7:10. **Immersing** (*Mikveh*) appears in Leviticus 11:36 and **sprinkling**, (*Z'reekah*) is in Numbers 8:7 and Ezekiel 36:25

In the Talmud (*Chagiga* 14b), *Zohar* (I, 26b) and *Tikunei Zohar* (*Tikun* 40) the sages share a story about the perils of attempting to attain paradise in which they teach that water is ultimately an

illusion that is pointing to the higher reality of Presence, of overflowing Divine love. The sense of being embraced and so unconditionally loved that rebirthing to a new level of being is possible is most often occasioned in humans by immersion rituals. Today, at the foot of the Temple Mount beside the stairs where the Levites would be arrayed in their welcoming choirs, one can view the remains of stone ritual baths built there for the spiritual preparation of pilgrims.

The healing power of immersion in living waters, *mayim chayim* (pronounced: mah-yim khah-yihm), has offered a literal and spiritual gateway to purity ever since the creation of man. The *Midrash* relates that after being released from Edenic time in the womb, Adam sat in a river that flowed from the garden. Before the revelation at Sinai, all those assembled at the base of the mountain were commanded to immerse themselves in preparation for coming face to face with G*d. Aaron and his sons' ceremony of entry into the priesthood

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began with immersion. In Temple times, the priests as well as each pilgrim who wished entry into the House of G*d had first to immerse in a mikvah, a body of living waters or a pool that incorporated rain waters. On Yom Kippur the High Priest was allowed entrance into the Holy of Holies, the innermost chamber of the Temple, into which no other mortal could enter. This was the apex of a day that involved an ascending order of services, each of which was preceded by immersions. And, of course, conversion into a conscious covenant with G*d incorporates immersion as a central ritual of spiritual rebirth.

I write in awe of the power of immersion to restore us to awareness of our beloved place in the Cosmic Womb. I do not say this lightly, but as one who engages in the practice of monthly immersion after the cessation of menstruation, as one who also immerses in preparation for the Sabbath, for pilgrimage holidays, and before writing the Tetragrammaton on a piece of sacred text as is the custom of scribes. I write this as one who brings those preparing for surgery or chemotherapy for immersion, and as one who immerses the bodies of the

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dead in preparation for burial. Were one to be submerged in water for more than a few minutes, life would cease for lack of air. Immersion requires us to choose life, to rise up and accept G*d's kiss, to drink in the Breath that literally hovers on the surface of the waters.

In these difficult days when humanity pauses too little to appreciate the gift of life, within ourselves and within our neighbors, immersion practices undertaken with our children and communities are essential and restorative. When I monthly immerse (in the river when possible) I most often acknowledge before my first immersion that the potential for life has passed through me, accounting not only that physical reality of the egg's passing, but also what ideas and hopes passed through my life this month unfulfilled and immerse to release them. On the second immersion I review the ideas and deeds that indeed took on light and life this life and immerse in gratitude. The last immersion is just a state of being in the Cosmic Womb, knowing myself to be embraced by the Divine Flow of Blessing.

May all who immerse, emerge, tender, open, aware, embraced, received and renewed in Love.



About the author

Rabbi Goldie Milgram, a recent D.Min. graduate of New York Theological Seminary, serves as rabbinic director of *P'nai Yachadut*, a spiritual health education research and teaching center. She is author of *Reclaiming Judaism as a Spiritual Practice: Holy Days and Shabbat* (Jewish Lights) and *Make Your Own Bar/Bat Mitzvah: A Personal Guide to a Meaningful Rite of Passage* (Jossey-Bass). Her teaching schedule and other essays appear at ReclaimingJudaism.org and she welcomes email questions and comments at rebgoldiem@aol.com.