



# MIKVAH DURING A PANDEMIC

CHAYA SHUCHAT

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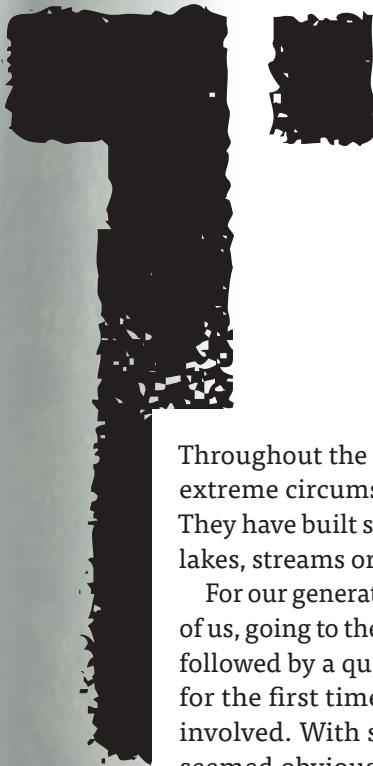
I am on shlichus in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Here in Argentina we are on strict lockdown. You are not allowed to leave the house unless you have a clear purpose. Before my mikvah night, I called the mikvah attendant and made an appointment. I had to send her my ID information, and she emailed me back a certificate with my name, date and hour that I had permission to be out of the house. Everything was set. A few days later the mikvah lady sent me a message; "I need to talk to you about something personal." I called her and she told me there was a shlucha who had been waiting to go to the mikvah. She lived in a different part of the city and the mikvah in her area had been shut down. She did not have a car and her Rav told her she was not allowed to use public transportation as the risk of infection was too high. The attendant asked me if I could pick her

up, drive her to the mikvah and drive her home afterwards.

I felt a rush of excitement and inspiration. Of course I said that I would be happy to do it. As I was doing my prep for mikvah, I was choked up thinking about the stories of women throughout the ages who had mesiras nefesh for this mitzvah and went together to strengthen each other. On my way to the mikvah, I was pulled over by police several times (as expected), because nobody is allowed outside their home without an excuse. Each time I proudly handed over the printed certificate and my ID, and they waved me on. Nothing would hold me back from fulfilling this mitzvah.

-Chaya Benchimol





Throughout the ages, women have sacrificed to use the *mikvah* under extreme circumstances, during wars and under religious oppression. They have built secret *mikva'os* in cellars. They have had to use freezing lakes, streams or oceans, or wells dug deep in the desert.

For our generation, though, these difficulties seemed remote. For most of us, going to the *mikvah* was a simple matter of taking a luxurious bath followed by a quick immersion. With the outbreak of the coronavirus, for the first time, using the *mikvah* had some genuine risk and fear involved. With schools, shuls, and most businesses closed down, it seemed obvious that *mikvah* would be next. If anything, the risk of contracting an infection at the *mikvah* seemed greater than at other venues, and many women were afraid.

Enter Mivtza Taharas Hamishpachah.

Sara Morozow, advisor at Mivtza Taharas Hamishpachah, says, “When it first became clear that coronavirus was going to be a threat, we made two firm commitments: Not to compromise on *halachah* and not to compromise on safety. Indeed, taking utmost precautions to safeguard health is the *halachah*. Using the *mikvah* during coronavirus meant completely changing our routine, from the way the woman prepares to the way we disinfect and clean the *mikvah* building.”

“Our goal was to be a central clearinghouse for information and support for *mikva'os* across the world,” says Chassi Rivkin, director of operations for Mikvah.org. “Whenever feasible, we advised that *mikva'os* be in contact with their local health departments and local doctors for guidelines. However, in some cases the *shluchos* had nobody in the community they could call on who was sensitive to the importance and central role of *mikvah* in Yiddishkeit. We



Chassi Rivkin

quickly set up a page at [mikvah.org/covid19](http://mikvah.org/covid19) to pass along to them the expert guidelines we had received from our team of Rabbanim, infectious disease specialists and public health professionals. *Frum* organizations in Israel and the United States took the lead in researching the constantly evolving health and safety protocols. Any *mikvah* was then able to easily access sample protocols around the world, and stay informed of updates as they occurred. Of course, however, it was up to each location to develop their own policies based on local conditions.”

“Different places were at different stages in the pandemic,” says Sara Morozow. “The Gedaliah Society in conjunction with Dr. Eli Rosen set forth specific guidelines for the Crown Heights community. In other locations, depending on levels of infections, there were very tight controls on when people could use the *mikvah* if they had been exposed. In some cases women had to wait for weeks. Having to delay their own *mikvah* use to ensure the safety of others was just one form of *mesiras nefesh* that women showed during this time.

“We had a very dedicated team of volunteers who put their heart and soul into keeping *mikva’os* up and running, problem-solving and troubleshooting with *shluchos* across the globe. We called experts in pool safety to find out the right balance of chemicals needed to keep the water safe and sanitary. With the help of infectious disease specialists, we developed disinfection protocols between *mikvah* users to ensure maximum safety. In the weeks before Pesach, in particular, our volunteers were fielding questions non-stop from people wanting to know whether it was safe for them to use the *mikvah*. Some *mikvah* attendants had to step down because they were in the high-risk category, and other women had to go outside their comfort zone to take their place. In this time of crisis, we saw many women setting aside their own needs to ensure that all women could fulfill this precious *mitzvah*. Local community members with open hands and hearts donated disinfectants, cleaning products, and personal protective equipment like masks and gloves.

“Some women were simply not up on the

news and were not aware of the extra safety precautions in light of the pandemic. In one case, a woman used the *mikvah* while symptomatic, and the entire *mikvah* had to be emptied out and disinfected. This is just one example of the type of problem that arose while trying to manage during the pandemic,” says Sara.

While most *mikva’os* were able to operate uninterrupted, there were some notable exceptions. In one large North American city, two of the largest *mikva’os* in town (one was Chabad) were closed by the government. *N’shei Chabad Newsletter* spoke with the *shlucha* in charge of the Chabad *mikvah*, who asked to remain anonymous. Due to the great sensitivity of the matter, many details of the story cannot be shared at this time.

“When the main *mikvah* was closed down, we had to find other *mikva’os* that could accommodate our users. This was very difficult because those *mikva’os* were small and not used to handling such a high volume. In the weeks before Pesach I was on the phone all day with hundreds of women to make arrangements. Everything had to be very hush-hush. All communication with me had to be over the phone, no text, so as not to leave a record. There was tremendous anxiety and fear that maybe they’d be found out and the other *mikva’os* would be closed down as well. In some cases women were going to the *mikvah* with flashlights so they wouldn’t be detected. Each phone call with a woman who needed the *mikvah* was a minimum of 15 minutes to make sure she understood what she needed to do and that she was safe to do it. It was the only thing on my mind, to make sure that every woman who needed the *mikvah* found a place. I don’t know how we made Pesach this year... I think my 15-year-old son cooked everything himself.”



Sara Morozow

For decades, Sara Azimov of Paris, France, made the *mitzvah* of *taharas hamishpachah* a centerpiece of her *shlichus*, educating and

Sara Azimov



encouraging hundreds of women to take on this vital *mitzvah*.

“When it hit us how much our lives would be upended by coronavirus, we made one firm decision: Our *mikvah* would stay open. All Chabad *mikva’os* stayed open in Paris, and some non-Chabad ones did too. But since many neighboring *mikva’os* did close, we were flooded with extra customers. Our *mikvah* serves a wide cross-section of the Jewish community of Paris. Lubavitcher women are maybe 10% of our clientele. Many of the women who use our *mikvah* are traditional; some do not cover their hair yet or observe Shabbos fully, yet they showed complete commitment to keeping this *mitzvah* even under these circumstances. Paris is a large city with many *mikva’os*. Although our *mikvah* stayed open, four other *mikva’os* in the city were closed, which led to some confusion and anxiety among the local women. *Baruch Hashem* we were able to reassure them that our *mikvah* would always be available.

“When women expressed anxiety to me and debated whether to make the trip, I told them, look, everything is closed. Airports are closed, schools are closed! Our husbands are *davening* at home, many for the first time in their adult lives. *Brissen* are taking place with only the *mohel* and the two parents. Look at our streets: empty. What is left open? Only three vital places. Food stores, pharmacies, and *mikva’os*. These are the true essentials.

“One time a woman came in and began expressing her concerns and doubts. Another woman was leaving and she stopped and told her the story about my grandmother, Maryasha Garelik, a”h, who would chop a hole in the ice in Russia to immerse. She would tie a rope around herself so that in case she would pass out from the cold, she could be dragged out. The

point was well taken.

“I must give great thanks to Chassi Rivkin of Mivtza Taharas Hamishpachah, who provided an invaluable service with the Mikvah Attendants’ Chat, which allowed all of us to share information, tips, problems and inspiration. My sister-in-law Estie Marasow, under N’shei Chabad of Paris, created a French *mikvah* attendants’ chat to share this information with *mikva’os* across France and to develop our own protocols to keep *mikva’os* running with maximum efficiency and safety. (The chats also included many non-Chabad *mikvah* attendants and supervisors.) I also thank our *dayan*, Rabbi Levi Kahn, who worked tirelessly to help resolve many complicated halachic situations, and our son-in-law, Rabbi Berel Kesselman, who made sure the *mikvah* had the appropriate amounts of chlorine and other chemicals necessary to make it safe.

“One of our sanitary rules was to leave the *mikvah* empty for at least 15 minutes between users. We spaced our appointments 20 minutes apart to allow for the waiting period, which meant we could only accommodate three women per hour when we normally saw eight to 15 women per night. This meant that the *mikvah* ladies had to stay in the *mikvah* at night for hours and hours.

“In France, in order to leave your house you had to produce a certificate with the date and time and reason for being outside. If you had to go to work, the form had to be signed by your boss. If you had to go out for any other reason, you could write that you were going out for exercise, for an appointment, to buy food or medication, or to deliver necessary supplies to a friend. Some women kept some groceries or medication in their car so they could use that as an excuse in case they got stopped. *Baruch Hashem*, nobody in our community ran into any such problems on their way to use the *mikvah*.

“There was one woman who had to use the *mikvah* on a Motzoei Shabbos. Since Shabbos ends very late, appointments were scheduled from 11:30 p.m. until as late as 2 a.m. This woman was about to do the *mitzvah* when suddenly she got a phone call from her



**'MY HUSBAND SAID NOT TO GO AND EVERYONE SAID NOT TO GO, BUT MY GRANDMOTHER DID THIS MITZVAH IN EUROPE DURING WORLD WAR II, SO FOR ME IT WAS NOT EVEN A QUESTION.'**

husband saying, 'You must come home right now!' He said that he had just heard from his doctor or his brother or someone that it was dangerous, and he refused to allow her to use the *mikvah*. The *mikvah* lady tried to convince her but she said she had twin babies at home and had to go. A few days later I called her and we spoke. I reassured her that we were making extraordinary efforts to keep the *mikvah* safe,

and that the *mitzvah* alone would protect her. She was safer using the *mikvah* than not! She was very grateful that I called. She spoke to her husband and they agreed. We made special arrangements for her to go to the *mikvah* at a time that she felt was safest.

"One night, in the middle of the pandemic, a woman wearing pants and no hair covering came in to the *mikvah* and said to me, 'My husband said not to go and everyone said not to go, but my grandmother did this *mitzvah* in Europe during World War II, so for me it was not even a question. I decided I would find a *mikvah* that is open,' and *baruch Hashem* she found us.

"Our *mikvah* ladies went out of their way to accommodate special requests, such as if a woman wanted to be the first or to go outside of the *mikvah*'s usual hours. Sarah Bretoire was responsible for taking the phone calls to set up appointments, and she spent hours on the phone talking to women, explaining, reassuring. Esther Rotensztajn was on duty most of the time at night and greeted the women with much warmth and love.

"Above all we must thank the Rebbe for instilling in us the great importance of keeping the *mitzvah* of *taharas hamishpachah* and teaching it to others. It was a point of pride to us that many women called our *mikvah* because, they said, 'We knew Chabad would always be open.'"

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**S**hluchos in remote areas are used to overcoming challenges to observe the *mitzvah* of *mikvah*. They may have to drive many hours or take a flight each month to the nearest *mikvah*. But with the coronavirus outbreak, those challenges only escalated. *Shlucha* Tuba Chernitsky of S. John's, Newfoundland, an island on the eastern coast of Canada, says, "The closest *shliach* to us is a 21-hour drive with a ferry in middle and, no, we do not ever travel that way. So for us, *mikvah* is a three-hour flight away to either Montreal or Toronto. In winter I'd fly out early in the morning and come home at

Chabad of Newfoundland is currently running a fundraising campaign to build a *mikvah*.

To donate, visit [thechesedfund.com/chabadofnewfoundland/mikvehcampaign](https://thechesedfund.com/chabadofnewfoundland/mikvehcampaign) or see the link on the [nsheichabadnewsletter.com](https://nsheichabadnewsletter.com) homepage.-Ed.

2 or 3 a.m. In the summer I'd take a flight in the afternoon, sleep over and then fly back the next morning. Sometimes it meant traveling with a tired, *kvetchy* baby and having to prepare while looking after them. Sometimes it meant asking the *mikvah* ladies to open at a time they were usually closed, and relying on their graciousness in doing so.

"Once I had a flight booked for Montreal, and at 2 a.m. the night before the flight I received a call that the flight was canceled. After hours

on the phone, I asked if they could switch the destination to Toronto. Boy, was the agent confused! What do you mean, you'll just go there instead? It wasn't always easy to get to the *mikvah*, but we accepted those challenges as part of our reality when we moved out on *shlichus* to Newfoundland.

"Then came COVID. That was not something we had signed up for when we went on *shlichus*. Newfoundland is on lockdown. Nobody can travel in if they don't live here. Traveling within Canada is also a problem because different provinces have different rules. In some, you would have to isolate for two weeks, and if you didn't have a place to isolate they would send you somewhere and make you stay there for 14 days. In other places you had to give an address and phone number and they would come check up on you to make sure you stayed in isolation. So traveling within

Canada was not an option, since I had to be home within 12 hours.

"Our only choice was the freezing cold ocean.

"As *mikvah* night approached, my anxiety grew. I didn't know how I would do it but I knew I had no choice. I called a few people who I thought might have done it before and asked for tips. Their responses only frightened me more. 'We're not like the women in Russia. We're used to being pampered.' Another person told me that I might black out in the water. Finally I found a woman who had done it and she gave me some guidelines. I felt a little reassured and was determined to do this.

"We spoke to Rabbanim and received exact instructions for what I needed to do. The night before *mikvah* I sat down and wrote a letter to the Rebbe. 'Rebbe, I'm writing to you like a child writes to a father. Please help me that the weather will hold up and I'll be able to do this.' I knew the weather was forecast to be freezing cold with hurricane-force winds. After writing, I felt that I had the Rebbe's *brachah* and Hashem would help.

"I received a *heter* from Rabbanim to go during the day on the eighth day. I woke up in the morning and the sun was shining. Cold, but sunny. We were driving towards the beach when it started to hail. What do I do now? My husband said, 'Don't worry, it's just Hashem's way of making sure nobody else will be on the beach.' I got to the beach and the hail stopped. The sun peeked out again and I walked towards the ocean. As I walked into the water the first wave washed over my feet. It was like walking into an icebox. I jumped back. 'I don't think I can do this!' There was no way I could get back into the water.

"... the wind and cold were picking up. I hurriedly got ready again and *davened* to Hashem. 'Please let me keep this *mitzvah*!' I ran and plunged into the water, praying to

Tuba Chernitsky



Hashem all along for strength. *Baruch Hashem*, a wave washed over me and covered me. I ran out of the water, putting on my down coat with my teeth chattering. I did it! I got back into the car and turned on the heat. As the car warmed up, I felt warm inside, grateful to Hashem that I was able to keep this precious *mitzvah*.”

“I have since had to go several more times in the ocean, and each month it doesn’t get any easier, with the dread of the ocean and the freezing cold. We are working on our own *mikvah* and hope to have it up and running by next year.”



For the past nine years, Mrs. Rochel Gordon has been on *shlichus* in Launceston, Tasmania, an island off the coast of Australia. *Mikvah* for her meant booking tickets to Melbourne or Sydney. Once when she had to go during a three-day Yom Tov, she had to stay home and use a freezing cold river, after which she promised herself, “Never again.”

Tasmania imposed a very strict lockdown during corona, with no travel allowed in or out. Flying to Melbourne was not an option. With no choice, she had to swallow her fears and use a beach an hour away. “I don’t know what I was more afraid of, the freezing water or the police stopping me to ask why I was out and about.”

Realizing that the beach was not a long-term solution, Rochel and her husband, Rabbi Yochanan Gordon, decided that they needed their own temporary *mikvah*. There was a *mikvah* in Hobart, Tasmania, a two-and-a-half-hour drive away, that had fallen into disrepair and had not been used in many years. They decided to work on renovating that *mikvah*. Rabbi Gordon made a few trips to Hobart, and with each trip he discovered new problems, which involved spending hours on the phone with Rabbanim. Finally the structural

problems were resolved, and after a few weeks of scrubbing the walls and floor, the *mikvah* was ready to be filled. They obtained 300 blocks of ice to fill up the *mikvah*. Little did they know how long it would take for that quantity of ice to melt. But after many years of our making every effort and sparing no expense to go to the *mikvah* on time, there is now a functional *mikvah* in Tasmania until the borders reopen.

Rabbi Nissim Aben-Athar, a *shochet* in Buenos Aires, Argentina, travels seven hours outside the city each week for work, coming home for Shabbos. When the lockdown began, his wife, Devorah, decided to join him with the children as the schools were shut down. They rented a small house in the town of La Pampa, Argentina. Once they got there, though, they realized they had a problem. With all roads into the city shut down, how would she get to a *mikvah*?

“When you don’t have a bakery you bake your own challah, and when you don’t have a *mikvah* you build one yourself,” says Devorah,



Devorah Aben-Athar

Rochel Gordon





# SHORTLY AFTER THIS CONVERSATION, MY BROTHER- IN-LAW CAME TO OUR WINDOW TO REPORT SCARY NEWS.

and they decided to build a *mikvah* in the shed in the back, even though they didn't own the house and had no idea how long they would be there. They consulted a Rav for directions and their little *mikvah* is now built. As of this writing, they are only waiting for enough rain to fill it up.

**D**er Eibershter blaiht nisht kein baal chov. Hashem does not remain in debt. Women have already experienced wonders and miracles as a result of using the *mikvah* under challenging circumstances. Famed *kallah* teacher and frequent *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*



contributor Sarah Karmely tells a story that she heard from one of her students:

"I was married for just a few weeks and my father-in-law was in the hospital with coronavirus. I was speaking with my husband about how hard it is to keep the laws of *niddah* during coronavirus, with people confined to their homes and all the heightened emotions and anxiety. The Rabbanim find a *heter* for everything else. Why can't they find a *heter* for this?"

"Shortly after this conversation, my brother-in-law came to our window to report scary news: The doctors were saying there was nothing more they could do; my father-in-law had taken a turn for the worse and was not expected to live. My husband and I started to *daven* for his father's recovery. After I finished I started flipping through my *Chitas* and came to the *Hayom Yom* of that date, Yud Nissan: '*Taharas hamishpachah* saves lives.' I turned to my husband and told him what I had just read. We both decided to rededicate ourselves to keeping this *mitzvah* to the fullest. We were very careful for the next two weeks, and on the day I went to the *mikvah*, my father-in-law opened his eyes for the first time. From that day on he made a steady recovery. The doctors say it's a miracle that he survived."

To quote the *Hayom Yom* in full:

**On the subject of the campaign to popularize the observance of *taharas hamishpachah* in your community, ponder this deeply: Let us imagine that G-d were to give you the opportunity to save a Jewish community from extinction (G-d forbid), you would certainly be willing to risk your life for this and you would thank and praise Him for His great kindness in offering you an opportunity of such enormous merit. The same then holds true to an even greater degree with regard to the campaign for *taharas hamishpachah*; it is an endeavor which literally saves lives. ❧**