

A House of Hopes



Mrs. Chava Willig Levy z"l

Chava Willig Levy, z"l, was an internationally noted lecturer, award-winning author and an outspoken advocate for the disabled, whose published writings in both Jewish and secular media have been read by millions. We mourn her passing, at the age of 71, this last Pesach, April 6, 2023.

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Etymology fascinates me. Take my name, for example. Chava, the biblical name for Eve, means mother of all living. As a little girl, I remember learning from my parents that names are very meaningful. Quoting the Talmudic sages of long ago, they told me that parents are granted a moment of prophecy when they choose their newborn's name.

I took their words to heart. Not surprisingly, children have always made me weak in the knees. The fact that a 1955 bout with polio made me very weak in the knees never deterred me from my dreams of motherhood. My name was prophetic; surely it would contribute to my destiny.

But in spite of my name's all-embracing quality, it looked unlikely that anyone would want to embrace me or, consequently, that I would ever know the joy of embracing a child of my own. So, in spite of my reputation as a disability rights activist, I hardly protested when the entrance to my home town's new *mikvah* boasted a long stairway. *Mikvah* and motherhood: Frankly, I never thought I'd enter either institution. The barriers to the

first were architectural; the barriers to the second, attitudinal. Together, they made me feel- not always, but often enough-powerless, insignificant, and isolated.

In His infinite mercy, the Master of the Universe felt my pain and, through the subtlest of orchestrations, sent me a wonderful husband. Today, *mikvah* and motherhood are two responsibilities I embrace with infinite joy. And now that the privilege and pleasure of using the *mikvah* is mine, I find myself once again intrigued by etymology.

The word *mikvah* means a gathering of water, as stated in Genesis (1:9): "Let the waters be gathered below the heavens to one place." For me, this verse evokes an image of powerless, insignificant, isolated droplets of water converging and ultimately becoming a mighty force. Maybe that is why the mitzvah of *Mikvah* is so precious to me: It reminds me that God can transform trouble into triumph in the blink of an eye. It reminds me that having a disability is not tragic. What's tragic is the stigma people attach to disability. What's tragic is being isolated, being left out. And *Mikvah*-derived from the concept of gathering- subtly reminds all of us that we must prevent that tragedy by gathering in each member of our community.

Mikvah also is linked to the word hope. It is the place where *tikvot*, hopes," reside. How many of us have come to the *mikvah* to pour out our hopes to God? And isn't it interesting that for our *tevilah*, "immersion," and the *tefillah*, "prayer," accompanying it to be kosher, we have to stand before God just as He made us? He cares about our hopes, attaching no stigma to physical imperfections, be they large or small.

My first *mikvah* visit fulfilled a lifelong hope for marriage. On scores of subsequent trips, the *mikvah* renewed my hope that someday my husband and I would be blessed with a child. For six years, the fulfillment of that hope eluded us. I'd pray for other women struggling with infertility—partially, I confess, to hang my hopes on the Talmudic principle that one who prays for a friend is answered first.

One thing I could never hope for was privacy. Like many women, I cherish the anonymity surrounding the *mikvah* experience. But ironically, whenever I have to go to the *mikvah*, sometimes as many as eight women know about it—and who knows how many husbands!—simply because of the help I need getting to and from, and in and out of, the *mikvah*, not to mention my wonderful neighbors' busy schedules.

Before experiencing the miracle of seeing my hopes for a child—indeed, for children—fulfilled, there were many emotional *mikvah* visits. As the seasons turned, I felt like a member of the U.S. Postal Service: "Neither rain, nor snow, nor sleet, nor hail . . ." would deter me from my "appointed rounds." There had been rainy trips and snowy trips. There had been Friday nights and Seder nights, Purim nights, Rosh Hashanah nights, and

post-Yom Kippur visits. Many were somber, tension-filled experiences. But one visit stands distinctly apart. It occurred on a winter evening, two years before our first child was born. Our *mikvah* lady greeted me with a solemn face.

"You shouldn't have come tonight," she disclosed in her thick European accent. "We have a terrible problem. In fact, you should go straight home."

My heart sank. Preoccupied with infertility, I believed timing was everything; a day lost could mean a month lost.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She replied, "Our heater broke. The *mikvah* water is ice cold."

I burst out laughing. "Is that all? I thought you were going to tell me that the *mikvah* had no water!"

Needless to say, I took the plunge.

And, time after time, I feel the exhilaration of that plunge. The *mikvah* waters transform me from a woman with four atrophied limbs into—honest to God a ballerina! For a few glorious moments, my arms extend effortlessly. And as I ascend unassisted the three bottom-most steps, I marvel at the miracle of human grace and motion.

Of course, with one more step, gravity returns. The mood, however, is anything but grave as my helper assists me up to the landing, back to our room, and into my clothing. Our conversation, ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous, flows so easily ("We've got to stop meeting like this," we often tell each other, *sotto voce*). It is inevitably the end of a long day. I ought to be exhausted; I'm thoroughly energized.

The *mikvah* waters are the primary source of my renewed energy. But coming in a close second is the *mikvah* bulletin board, whose array of business cards and announcements never fails to dazzle me as I head for the blow dryers. Promoting the services of psychiatrists, swimming instructors, social workers, and seamstresses; podiatrists, pianists, and public relations consultants; attorneys, artists, and advertising executives; caterers, cardiologists, and calligraphers, it puts to rest the stereotype some slap on those women committed to the *mitzvah* of *Mikvah*: "victims" of an "archaic, oppressive, offensive ritual." The way I see it, these women resemble the *mikvah* waters: a mighty force to reckon with, even if they enter this house of hopes one by one, with anonymity, without fanfare.

Perhaps that is why many women conclude their *mikvah* immersion with the *Yehi Ratzon* prayer, a plea for the rebuilding of the

Temple in Jerusalem. They are busy women, but not too busy to shift their gaze from a tiny, holy house of hopes--where they pour out their personal dreams and dilemmas--to the holiest house of all, whose reconstruction will coincide with a universal dream come true and the resolution of all dilemmas: "Behold, I will bring them from the northern land and gather them from the ends of the earth, among them people who are blind and lame, pregnant and childbearing mothers together; a great congregation will return here" (Jeremiah 31:8).

I believe that glorious gathering will occur because of the women who, month after month, generation after generation, have whispered this prayer, relinquishing their claim on God's personal attention for a greater cause. Surely, in their merit, God will never relinquish His People. Surely, in their merit, God will rebuild His house of hopes.