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"Concerning the Immersion": Trends In and Attitudes Towards Mikvah Use Among Jewish Virginians

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies from the College of William & Mary

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Acknowledgements

As this project centers on location and its impact on identity, it is necessary to begin with a land acknowledgement. The College of William & Mary resides on Kiskiack tribal land. Data from this project covers the state of Virginia and therefore historic Cherokee, Monacan, and Powhatan territory. Virginia is the traditional land of the current Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy, Mattaponi, Upper Mattaponi, Monacan, Nansemond, Pamunkey, Rappahannock, Cheroenhaka (Nottoway), Nottoway, and Patowomeck communities, as well as those currently unrecognized by the state government.

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Introduction

"So I have to ask, what got you into the mikvah?" This question was asked of me more than a few times over the course of this project. I would be the first to admit that this topic is obscure and somewhat odd. "Ritual bath," which is how I describe the mikvah to people who have never heard of it, is itself a strange term that does little to demystify the subject; ritual baths are an uncommon phenomenon in our society at large (with perhaps the exception of baptismal pools, which is an entirely different matter). The reaction of those who are completely unfamiliar with the concept is typically confusion over who would interact with this ritual in twenty-first century America, which is itself a small part of what this thesis aims to find out.

The mikvah is a compelling ritual to study because of its unique character, convergence with larger areas of study, and somewhat esoteric status. Ritual immersion lies at an interesting intersection between human behavior, community cohesiveness, and connection with natural resources, a position that few other Jewish rituals or *mitzvot*[1] occupy. Moreover, the mikvah is a jumping-off point for deeper dialogue about gender, sexuality, and the body, particularly within Judaism. Finally, outside of certain circles the mikvah is just not widely discussed. A Jewish community might talk about how kosher they want to keep their synagogue kitchen, or form a committee to organize Purim celebrations, but depending on movement, mikvah might not enter the conversation at all. The mikvah is a largely Orthodox ritual, wherein it is one of many *halakhic*[2] prescriptions for living a Torah-aligned life; most books on the mikvah are directed at observant audiences and encourage its use.[3] Outside of strictly observant circles,

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[1] Mitzvot, the plural of mitzvah, are religious commandments or obligations. Jewish tradition holds that there are 613 of these laws, accompanied by copious legal interpretation.

[2] *Halakhah*, meaning "law," refers to the body of Jewish religious law. Someone who attributes their mikvah use to halakhah, for example, is most likely saying that they immerse because they view it as a religious commandment and that they understand it through the framework of legal interpretation.

[3] See, for example, *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology* edited by Rivkah Slonim, or *Waters of Eden: The Mystery of the Mikvah* by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan. It is worth noting that although I refer to *Total Immersion* throughout this paper, this anthology is a work compiled and edited under the auspices of Chabad-Lubavitch, which is an organization devoted to increasing observance among more secular Jews, and therefore is designed to be persuasive and didactic rather than purely academic.

the rabbinic mandate to construct a mikvah before one builds a synagogue or acquires a Torah has largely been disregarded in modern Judaism. Mention of the mikvah is moreover sparse in academic circles: a search of the title keyword "mikvah/mikveh" on databases like JSTOR or ProQuest, for example, usually turn up less than twenty-five results, and this includes archaeological articles which make up a significant portion of the material. Scholarly literature on the mikvah generally falls into a larger archaeological, architectural, historical, feminist critical, or cultural study category.

However, despite this relative esotericism, people have strong feelings about using or not using the mikvah which are complex and relevant to conversations on what American Judaism is, especially how it does or should change over time. Immersing in the mikvah is a ritual that is alternately reclaimed or shunned, done only once or made into a frequent practice. Today, level of observance is not as clear an indicator of whether one uses the mikvah or not. As scholar Jack Wertheimer notes, the mikvah is becoming popular among a small number of non-Orthodox Jews for non-traditional uses, and this trend is likely to continue.[4] American Jews might frame the mikvah in terms of ancient custom or reclamation, halakhah or body positivity, purity or recovery, or even some combination thereof. In other words, the mikvah lies at the center of tensions between tradition, innovation, and apathy. Gaining some sense of why people have their individual relationship with this ritual will tell us something about how American Jews are interacting with their Judaism in the 21st century.

Literature that focuses solely on the mikvah may be rare, but the broader field of ritual studies is a rich discipline. Most relevant here is Catherine Bell's *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* which builds on the work of her predecessors to examine ritual as a mechanism for societal meaning. Crucially, Bell's treatment of the performance school of ritual studies notes that religious subjects are active participants in forming ritual. In her words, "ritual as a performative medium for social change emphasizes human

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[4] Jack Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 50. Wertheimer argues in this book that as American culture changes and shifts, so does American Judaism. Jews in the United States constantly engage in creative adaptation to keep traditions and rituals relevant, and the mikvah is a part of this project.

creativity and physicality: ritual does not mold people; people fashion rituals that mold their world."[5] In this paradigm, rituals must change over time or be discarded, and can be workshopped for new meaning, though many scholars would downplay this dynamism.[6] This framework is invaluable for seeing how the mikvah is adapted to new contexts. A limitation of ritual studies as mediated through Bell is its focus on how ritual conveys meaning in one given culture; the study of dual cultures or cultures within a multicultural society, as when looking at how Jews adapt rituals like the mikvah while they live within a majority non-Jewish society, makes this approach somewhat difficult.

This thesis looks at the dual cultures of Southernness and Jewishness by examining mikvah use among Jewish Virginians. In some aspects, these two ways of life have found a union in the creation of Southern Jewish culture. That such a merger exists at all may be surprising to some: when asked to consider the main historical centers of Jewish culture in the United States, one's mind does not immediately jump to South Carolina, Louisiana, or Texas. As research on Southern Jews often notes,[7] scholars and commentators of American Jewish history generally do not consider the Jewish history of the southern United States in great depth. Even a work such as *American Judaism: A History,* by Jonathan D. Sarna, while a thorough account of Jewish activity in the United States, neglects discussion of the South in any special detail, with exception of the Civil War period. Instead, Sarna pays more attention to the large cities of the Northeast, which are often viewed as the central points of Jewish culture and population in America. Southern Jewish history is often relegated to specialized books or journals, such as *Southern Jewish History*, regularly published by the Southern Jewish Historical Society since 1998. The dominant school of this field, including scholars like Caroline Lipsum-Walker, Eli N. Evans, and Marcie Cohen

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[5] Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 1997), 132.
[6] Bell, *Ritual*, 368-369.
[7] Take for example pages 53-54 of Ira Sheskin's article "The Dixie Diaspora: The 'Loss' of the Small Southern Jewish Community," *Southeastern Geographer* 40, no. 1 (2000): 52-74. Sheskin did note an increase in materials on this topic from the 1970s to 2000; it is reasonable to assume that the increase has continued since then. There is definitely a subsection of Jewish studies devoted to exploring the Jewish South in detail. Nevertheless, Southern Jewish history and culture is overall not a part of *mainstream* academic discussion in Jewish studies.

Ferris among others, argues that Southern Jewish culture and history is noticeably distinct from its Northeastern counterpart.[8] While Mark Bauman and associated scholars have recently challenged this view and noted that Jews in the South are still more similar to Jews across the country than their non-Jewish neighbors, this thesis seeks to situate itself between these two views.[9] The widely held concept of Southern Jewish distinctiveness may have been overexaggerated in the field, but regional differences still exist; dissimilarity with Southern Christian neighbors does not automatically make Southern Jews more similar to Northern Jews. This project will examine whether this distinctiveness extends to ritual, and in doing so return to the basic premise for this research which is that context and culture can affect the performance of rituals. In the specific case of ritual immersion, as this thesis will show, Southern mikvah use may not be distinct at all.

This research asks about mikvah use in Virginia, including how Virginian Jews interact with and think about this ritual. I hypothesize that assuming the concept of regional distinctiveness articulated above holds true, mikvah use and rationale in Virginia would look different from the dominant discourse about mikvah in American Judaism. In order to explore this fully, it will be necessary first to look separately at both the ritual of mikvah itself and the Southern Jewish context, from a historical analysis approach. The first chapter of this paper will give a summary of the mikvah, including a brief history of the ritual and both the historical and current dominant attitudes surrounding it, thus laying the boundaries of the dominant discourse I mentioned above. This is crucial, as the data later on will be studied in the context of these strains of thought. Specifically, this chapter will show the ties between gender, individual agency, and mikvah use. Chapter two will be another section of exposition, this time on Southern Jewish history and culture. As detailed above, it is important to understand that Jews in the American South reacted to their surroundings and inherited traditions in different ways (in their community structures and

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[8] Mark K. Bauman, *A New Vision of Southern Jewish History: Studies in Institution Building, Leadership, Interaction, and Mobility* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2019), 249.
[9] Bauman, *A New Vision*, 249, 255.

food, for example) than the general narrative of American Jewry permits. The clear regional distinctiveness shown through even a surface examination of Southern Jewish history raises questions about how it may affect ritual in this region.

The next chapter lays out the original data I collected over the course of several months through surveys and interviews; these will be the answers to the overarching questions that this study asks about how and why people use the mikvah. This research is my attempt to fill the gap represented by the lack of information about mikvaot and mikvah practices in the American South. It consists of 100 survey responses, 12 interviews, and related analysis. In examining this data I aim to gather evidence on mikvah culture in Virginia, and argue against its distinctiveness. My subsequent analysis will be focused on explaining why the mikvah in this context resists the effects of regional specificity, including whether this concept is still useful for thinking about modern Southern Jewry. The prediction of historian Eli N. Evans, that Southern Jewry will become more like Jews elsewhere just as regional specificity in general decreases, will be especially prominent here. The paper will end with an exploration of possible errors, as well as my own recommendations for the direction of future research on this topic.

The goal for this project is not to pass judgement on people's lifestyles or opinions, nor to make an argument for or against mikvah use. Any original analysis or speculation is purely from my standpoint as a researcher. I aim to present a neutral look at the mikvah as a complex and fascinating ritual, and explore how and why people interact with it within a specific modern context. In Judaism, rituals form the primary expression of religiosity, even though which rituals are important and how they are performed varies between individuals or communities. By studying the mikvah, I hope to illuminate not only its place in American Jewish ritual, but the similar position it occupies in Southern Jewish ritual as well.

Chapter One: An Overview of the Mikvah

The mikvah is, in the most basic sense, a pool of water or bath, such as one might see in a spa or bathhouse setting. To be considered kosher, it must have forty *se'im* (equivalent to roughly eighty gallons) of natural, not drawn, water. Immersion is halakhically performed in the complete nude, with no barriers including dirt or loose hair between one's skin and the water, and must be properly blessed; it is also usually done in the presence of an attendant or guide to verify that it is kosher. These specifics are interesting, but what is truly important to understanding this research is the way people have interacted with this ritual over time, and the connotations associated with mikvah use as a result; this will determine the dominant discourse by which to compare potential regional variation. The mikvah has various functions. The most common across denominations comes at the end of the conversion process, when converts to Judaism immerse in it as a symbolic rebirth into the Jewish people. Brides traditionally use the mikvah just prior to their wedding, and more recently grooms sometimes do as well.[10] Mikvaot can even be used to make dishes kosher. However, by far the most well-known use is the post-menstrual immersion of observant women, which this chapter will focus on in large part. This aspect has influenced the extent to which many Jews today still think of mikvah as a women's ritual. The complex notions of ritual purity that accompany it and the accumulation of centuries worth of baggage form important aspects of modern mikvah culture.

Section 1: Mikvah and the Legal Tradition

The mikvah and its use is one facet of a body of obligations called *taharat haMishpachah,* otherwise known as the family purity laws, laws of mikvah, or laws of *niddah*.[11] These laws, concerned

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[10] Halakhah for bridal immersion can be seen in texts such as Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 162:2, a nineteenth century legal commentary.

[11] *Taharat haMishpachah* are mostly concerned with proper sexual relations within the confines of marriage. Here is a brief explanation from George Robinson's thorough work *Essential Judaism*: *A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Rituals, and Customs* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000): "The halakhah of taharat mishpakhah proscribes intercourse during the five days of the wife's menstrual period and for seven 'clean' days after. It is customary in traditionally observant homes for the couple to refrain from any physical contact at all, even sleeping in the same bed. This separation is called niddah" (page 245).

with ritual purity and impurity connected to sexual activity, procreation, and bodily functions, are in turn part of the larger corpus of ritual purity rites discussed in ancient sources.[12] The mikvah cannot be divorced from these laws for separate scrutiny without losing its meaning; as this chapter will show, in certains contexts mikvah, niddah, and family purity laws are used interchangeably as terms or concepts. Thus, a firm foundation which encompasses all these ideas is required to understand the subject in its entirety.

The Hebrew Bible provides a clear origin for modern family purity rules, specifically in Leviticus 15:19-30 which discusses the ritual impurity of a menstruating woman and how this situation should be handled by both the woman and the community. This section introduces by name the concept of niddah, the separation of the woman in question from the people around her but in particular her sexual partner. It should be noted that the biblical process for regaining ritual purity after a period of menstruation involves cleaning with water (Lev 15:11-13, 16-18, 21-22), providing the basis for the concept of purifying water baths. Leviticus 15 is concerned overall with various types of bodily discharges, which could render both men and women *tumah/tamei* (impure),[13] but the verses surrounding menstruation are the ones which carry the most resonance regarding ritual immersion today.

Talmudic literature and medieval commentaries expanded the discussion on ritual impurity and proper procedure during a menstrual cycle. Two major developments in the evolution of the practice of ritual immersion occurred in the early post-Temple period: firstly, since sacrifices could no longer be brought to the Temple, the mikvah took on a greater importance as the primary method for regaining ritual purity.[14] Secondly, the ancient Sages determined that ritual immersion was one of the three time-positive mitzvot for women, solidifying the mikvah as an integral and routine part of women's, and

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[12] Ancient sources in this context refer to the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) as well as relevant discussions from the Talmud.
[13] Sarah Robinson, "Investigating the Biblical Roots of *Niddah*," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, 2nd edition, ed. Rivkah Slonim (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006), 90.
[14] Jonah Steinberg, "From a 'Pot of Filth' to 'A Hedge of Roses' (and Back): Changing Theorizations of Menstruation in Judaism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13, no. 2 (1997), 9.

not men's, lives.[15] The language used to discuss menstruation in the Talmud and by later medieval commentators such as Nachmanides is negatively charged, attributing a sense of danger and dirtiness to the bodily function.[16] Jonah Steinberg breaks down ancient and medieval Jewish literature on the subject and finds that overall, the men discussing niddah and mikvah laws viewed menstruation with "revulsion," [17] fearing that a menstruating woman could physically endanger Jewish communities as well as the ritual purity of the Jewish people. Proper family purity and by extension the regulation of a menstruating woman, they argued, would ensure the safety of Jewish communities.[18] The development of these laws and attitudes, combined with the appearance of physical ritual baths by the first century CE, means that the mikvah as a ritual and institution had taken on a form familiar to modernity by the end of the medieval period, as seen in the Shulhan Arukh.[19]

The importance of these ancient and medieval sources for determining mikvah use cannot be overstated. They are the source of the mores involved in immersion timing, behavior, and discourse. Throughout the centuries, if one's reason for using the mikvah was halakhic, these laws and their interpretation would surely be in mind. Moreover, for modern observant Jews these texts hold the same legal authority that they did when they were composed. It is no exaggeration, therefore, to say that these sources form the foundation of most mikvah use throughout history.

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[15] See for example, Tractate Shabbat 2:6 in the Talmud, which exemplifies the received tradition.
[16] Steinberg, "From a 'Pot of Filth'," 12-13; see also Nachmanides' commentary on Leviticus 18:19: "Indeed, how could a child be formed out of [menstrual] blood since it is deadly poisonous, capable of causing the death of any creature that drinks or eats it!... Physicians have also mentioned already that if the foetus derives nourishment from the best of blood, and all its nutriment be of the best quality, but some of this blood of menstruation is mixed with it, it will cause it to go bad, and produce in the child inflammatory swellings and sores of all kinds."
[17] Ibid., 6-7.
[18] Ibid., 12.
[19] See Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah 201 for detailed description of the halakhah for a valid mikvah, which remains much the same today. The Shulhan Arukh is a 16th century compendium of Jewish law by Joseph Caro, and a useful source on what observing halakhah might have looked like in that time period. Some observant Jews today still consider it authoritative. The Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, mentioned in footnote 9, is a modern legal commentary on it.

At the same time, it is prudent to take these formal legal materials with a grain of salt. Women had a certain agency in being the primary ones performing this mitzvah. As proof of this, one has only to read the general trends described by social historian Debra Kaplan in her investigation of the mikvaot in the central European town of Altona, at the beginning of the modern era. She notes that mikvaot were increasingly communally established and regulated by local Jewish officials in early modernity, particularly in central Europe and in Italy.[20] This signalled a break from the earlier practice of private mikvaot, which were housed in the residences of individuals in the community.[21] If this case is any indication of the larger situation, Jewish women in Europe like those in Altona were frustrated by this change, some of whom continued to immerse in the private mikvaot against community law.[22] This type of autonomy on the part of women is also suggested in *tkhines* (personal prayers in Yiddish) dealing with ritual immersion from around the same time period; while their authorship is unknown, it is likely that they were written by women.[23] It seems that the women of Altona preferred the freedom to choose where they immersed, and fulfilled the mitzvah elsewhere to avoid the close halakhic eye at the communal (and kahal-managed) mikvah.[24]

Women were not the only ones immersing in the mikvah, as Kaplan shows through her research; however, as she adds in a footnote, men's use was not subject to the same regulation that women's use was.[25] She makes the distinction that at this point, immersing in the mikvah was a requirement for all married women who menstruated, while it was a matter of choice for men.[26] For men in this time period,

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[20] Debra Kaplan, "'To Immerse Their Wives': Communal Identity and the 'Kahalishe' Mikveh of Altona," *AJS Review* 36, no. 2 (November 2012): 272-273.
[21] Kaplan, "'To Immerse Their Wives'," 269-270, 272; private here simply denotes that the mikvah was not a part of the local synagogue, and was in the custodianship of that particular household.
[22] Ibid., 276-277.
[23] Chava Weissler, "*Tkhines* and *Techinot*: Ancient Prayers," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, 2nd edition, ed. Rivkah Slonim (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006), 141; for specific examples, see works like Devra Kay's *Seyder Tkhines: The Forgotten Book of Common Prayer for Jewish Women* (Dulles: Jewish Publication Society, 2003) in which prayers for using the mikvah are on pages 158-161, 164-165.
[24] Kaplan, "'To Immerse Their Wives'," 274-277.
[25] Ibid., 264.
[26] Ibid.

the one life cycle event that would *require* immersion was conversion, which was itself a personal choice for the man undertaking that process. In the 17th and 18th centuries men would start to use the mikvah for mystical purposes and as a sign of piety, but this was still minor compared to women's use.[27] Though the situation in Altona was obviously not the case for every Jewish community in the medieval and early modern periods, it should be clear that by this time mikvah was perceived as a woman's ritual, and indeed solidly linked with menstruation. This is also evident from scholarly literature looking at historical mikvaot, which focus almost exclusively on women and their niddah practices; it is difficult to find accounts of how men used the mikvah or even interaction with the ritual baths outside of the realm of menstrual impurity. As Jewish life moved across the Atlantic in the following centuries, this association of mikvah with women and especially with menstruation and reproduction would continue.

Section 2: Mikvaot and American Judaism

Mikvaot have a long and convoluted history in America. In keeping with the commandment to build a mikvah before a Jewish community constructs a synagogue or even procures a Torah scroll,[28] mikvaot feature sporadically in various places along the history of American Judaism. The first mikvaot in New York and Philadelphia were constructed in the 1760s and 1780s respectively.[29] Charleston, South Carolina had a mikvah by 1809.[30] Despite this, it is unclear to what extent they were used. Documentation on mikvaot in North America during this period is scarce compared to the Caribbean scene, where more

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[27] Laura Leibman, "Early American Mikvaot: Ritual Baths as the Hope of Israel," *Religion in the Age of Enlightenment* 1, (2009): 111.

[28] This is a modern legal opinion, as expressed by the Chafetz Chaim, but it uses ancient sources. Since a Torah scroll and a synagogue can both be sold to facilitate a marriage (Talmud, Tractate Megillah 25-27), it is logical that a mikvah, which is necessary for halakhic reproductive life, takes precedence over both. See Chaim Jachter's *Grey Matter, Volume 2* (Teaneck: H. Jachter, 2001), "Building and Maintaining Mikvaot" part 1 paragraph 6 for halakhic extrapolation.
https://www.sefaria.org/Gray_Matter_II%2C_Building_and_Maintaining_Mikva'ot%2C_Part_I%3B_Community's_Responsibility_to_Build_a_Mikvah.6?ven=Gray_Matter,_by_Chaim_Jachter,_Teaneck,_N.J.,_2000-2012&lang=en&with=all&lang2=en

[29] Joshua Hoffman, "The Institution of the Mikvah in America," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, 2nd edition, ed. Rivkah Slonim (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006), 130.

[30] Hoffman, "The Institution of the Mikvah," 125.

extensive evidence of ritual baths has been uncovered.[31] Looking at the case of colonial Philadelphia, historian Pamela Nadell suggests that the tradition was disregarded entirely; mikvah features only sporadically in her discussion of life for Jewish women in America.[32]

Immigration from Central Europe and the subsequent construction of mikvaot in Jewish communities continued well into the 19th century, and carried on by Eastern Europeans immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[33] This was accompanied by patterns of "laxity" in family purity laws in the immediate generations following, regardless of place of origin or location of settlement.[34] Scholar of Orthodoxy Rabbi Joshua Hoffman attributes the sustained observance of *taharat haMishpachah* to a growing Orthodox presence among American Jews, although lacking strong leadership, which began in the late 1800s.[35] It was clear, however, in the early decades of the 20th century that mikvah and family purity laws were growing unpopular in America as religious reforms began to proliferate.[36] Several Reform leaders denounced the mikvah as antithetical to modernity.[37] This signaled a divide between mainstream, assimilated American Jews and newer immigrants who reinforced Jewish infrastructure, including mikvaot, in the places where they lived, the Lower East Side of New York City being the most prominent example.[38]

The first change in the overall popularity of the mikvaot came with the growing presence of medical scientism in interpretation of Jewish rituals. This movement started in the 1920s and featured medical and scientific rationale for the family purity laws, claiming their supposed benefit. The rise of

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[31] Pamela Nadell, *America's Jewish Women: A History from Colonial Times to Today* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019), 31-32, Apple Books.
[32] Nadell, *America's Jewish Women*, 31-32. This is another demonstration of how difficult it is to find information on historical mikvah use.
[33] Hoffman, "The Institution of the Mikvah," 125-127.
[34] Ibid., 127-129, 132.
[35] Ibid., 129-130, 132.
[36] Ibid., 129; he points here to synagogues without mikvaot in this time period as well as the attitudes of prominent early leaders of religious reform and Reform.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Marc Lee Raphael, *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 78.

this literature provided a reason for observing *taharat haMishpachah* other than adherence to halakhah, while at the same time feeding back into the ancient rationale of protecting the Jewish people. By 1930, several scientific studies had noted the lower frequency of cervical and uterine cancer among Jewish women.[39] Investigators of this phenomenon concluded that the specific sexual regulations and schedule practiced by observant Jewish women led to less irritation of the area and therefore better uterine health.[40] They were supported in this belief by studies showing the apparent "toxicity" of menstrual blood, which they argued was the impetus for the ancient mandates themselves.[41] The mikvah featured in the midst of this discussion as the only way to truly cleanse oneself after menstruating; a mikvah pool held "cleansing" properties that a bath at home simply did not possess.[42] Standing on what was then firm scientific ground, both prominent secular and religious Jewish figures of the interwar years advocated for increased observance of family purity laws with growing strength.[43] As prominent rebbetzin[44] Sara Hyamson said before the Women's Branch of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America in 1926, "These laws have the approval of scientific experts, and the whole-hearted support of eminent medical men."[45] In 1930, Rabbi Leo Jung likewise cited medical authorities to demonstrate that the halakhah functioned to protect the mental and physiological health of women.[46] Historian Beth S. Wenger notes that this popular pseudo-scientific movement was likely born of the dual fears in the American Jewish community of assimilation, and of the xenophobic racial theories of the time; claiming *taharat haMishpachah* as the key to a healthy family both provided a solid basis for continued Jewish culture and also refuted arguments

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[39] Beth Wenger, "Mitzvah and Medicine: Gender, Assimilation, and the Scientific Defense of 'Family Purity'," *Jewish Social Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 1999): 182.
[40] Wenger, "Mitzvah and Medicine," 182.
[41] Ibid., 183, 185.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 185-190.
[44] This, also rabbanit, are terms for a rabbi's wife, who may also be a religious teacher in her community.
[45] Sarah Hyamson, "We Must Act," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, 2nd edition, ed. Rivkah Slonim (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006), 146.
[46] Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880-1950* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 21.

that differences in cancer rates were due to racial distinctiveness.[47] This new emphasis on niddah and the mikvah also reinforced the expected duty of a Jewish woman to keep her family safe, from cultural and health standpoints.[48] The supposed science behind family purity laws made them more attractive to the "modern woman;"[49] mikvah building initiatives during this period that emphasized the aestheticism and cleanliness of their facilities (in part to refute the common, and sometimes true, rumour that mikvaot were unhygienic) helped to bolster this point as well.[50]

After the Second World War, this type of medical scientism became unpopular,[51] and despite various treatises on the subject by an assortment of scientists and commentators, it is unclear whether the movement had any lasting impact on the observance of family purity laws among American Jewish women.[52] For example, modern testimonies to the mikvah's healing power mostly focus on the spiritual, mystical, or psychological rather than the strictly medical. One writer says of immersion, "Spiritually, we are erasing the past to have a new beginning;"[53] another, who has a physical disability, identifies monthly mikvah use as "the primary source of [her] renewed energy."[54] However, arguments based on potential medical benefit do occasionally appear in discussions on the mikvah today. As of the year 2000, the Israeli rabbinate advanced medical reasons as part of their rationale for observing niddah and immersing in the mikvah. The argument utilizes similar language to that of the early 20th century movement and maintains that intercourse during the menstrual period and the postmenstrual waiting days following is physically dangerous.[55] Uterine cancer is also mentioned, thought be prevented or more easily detected by

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[47] Wenger, "Mitzvah and Medicine," 193-194.
[48] Ibid., 191-193
[49] Ibid., 193.
[50] Hoffman, "The Institution of the Mikvah," 124-125.
[51] Wenger, "Mitzvah and Medicine," 196.
[52] Ibid., 178-179.
[53] Tamar Frankiel, "To Number Our Days," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, 2nd edition, ed. Rivkah Slonim (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006), 59.
[54] Chava Willig Levy, "A House of Hopes," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, 2nd edition, ed. Rivkah Slonim (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006), 196.
[55] Inbal E. Cicurel, "The Rabbinate versus Israeli (Jewish) Women: The Mikvah as a Contested Domain," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 3 (2000): 168-169.

adherence to family purity laws.[56] Outside of the Israeli context, similar persuasive materials designed to increase observance of *taharat haMishpachah* tie in the key studies of the medical scientism movement with modern research which appears to substantiate those older results.[57] Although not as apparent in the reasoning provided by mikvah users themselves, it is clear that medical scientism, as one of the various minor reasons for immersing in the mikvah, lingers on in the minds of those for whom niddah and mikvah are valued practices.

Common immersion behavior did not always reflect the mikvah as it appeared in contemporary popular discourse; New York City represents a compelling example. For background, historian Celia J. Bergoffen notes that in the early 20th century, three types of mikvaot were common in this city: mikvaot associated with a local synagogue, mikvaot offered as part of Russian or Turkish-style bathhouses, and mikvaot in the homes of private individuals. Although the synagogue and bathhouse mikvaot were often more hygienic than private ones (which had little rabbinic oversight), and the bathhouse mikvaot were certainly more lavish, Bergoffen suggests that women were the main users of the private mikvaot in the city, a trend which continued until about the 1950s. She also theorizes that ease of access, cost, location, and privacy were prime determinants in choosing where to immerse. Although this was the heyday of medical scientism, it does not feature in Bergoffen's study as a major reason for average mikvah use. This shows that the women who were actually interacting with this ritual determined their own reasons for doing so, as well as what its meaning was.

Section 3: Feminism and the Mikvah

The most prevalent reactions to the mikvah arose in conjunction with the feminist movement, particularly the emergence of scholarly feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.[58] Women examining meaning in

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[56] Cicurel, "The Rabbinate," 169.
[57] Gila Berkowitz, "Loving Jewishly," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, 2nd edition, ed. Rivkah Slonim (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006), 46-47.
[58] For detailed reference on radical feminism in both the scholarly and non-academic circles, please see Joyce Antler's "Women's Liberation and Jewish Feminism After 1968: Multiple Pathways to Gender Equality," *American Jewish History* 102, no. 1 (2018): 37-58. Pages 46-48 lay out the primary agenda of Jewish feminists in this period, which is not concerned with mikvah.

a patriarchal society did not exclude the religious sphere from introspection. Mikvah was interestingly not as central a topic as subjects like women in the rabbinate, depatriarchalizing theology, and civil rights issues for women in American Ashkenazi communities.[59] When mikvah was brought up, the main point of contention was whether niddah, the mikvah, and *taharat haMishpachah* in general were predicated on the oppression of women, and therefore lacking in value to the modern woman. There is no question, looking back at the history of family purity laws, that these rituals were based in male-only discussion that spoke for (and sometimes looked down on) women; female voices were wholly absent. The sexist legacies of mikvah culture, a major one being the harmful view of menstruation as ritually impure, still resonate today and complicate observance for Jewish feminists. Feminist writers investigated the mikvah in light of this uncomfortable history, usually using either an apologetic-appropriative framework, or a critical one.

Pieces which lean toward the apologetic often center on the author's personal experience with the mikvah, either mentioning only briefly the history of the ritual or leaving it out entirely. One such piece, "Take Back the Waters: A Feminist Re-Appropriation of Mikvah" by Rabbi Elyse M. Goldstein is firmly rooted in this second wave feminism and focuses on immersion in the mikvah before her wedding. The work is a positive portrayal of immersion in the context of one of its traditional uses, but does not fully grapple with the ritual's past. Rabbi Goldstein addresses the problematic historical context but asserts her right to invest the mikvah with new meaning.[60] The collection *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology* includes several similar bridal immersion stories. Most focus on the transformative and joyful nature of the experience, linked to their imminent wedding; few go into the specifics of the tradition or *taharat*

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[59] For further reading on relevant topics, see Antler (above); Melissa Raphael's "Iconoclasm: The First Task of Second Wave Liberal Jewish Feminism," *Melilah: Manchester Journal of Jewish Studies* 12, no. 1 (2016): 110-121; and Brooke Lober's "Narrow Bridges: Jewish Lesbian Feminism, Identity Politics, and the 'Hard Ground' of Alliance," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2019): 83-101. Jewish feminists of this era encompassed a wide variety of backgrounds, with observant women prominently represented in leadership, but the lack of discussion about mikvah specifically suggests that not many of these feminists thought mikvah was a relevant issue.

[60] Elyse M. Goldstein, "Take Back the Waters: A Feminist Re-Appropriation of Mikvah," *Lilith* 15 (July 1986): 15-16.

haMishpachah.[61] This and the other re-appropriative stances discussed in the next paragraph relate back to Catherine Bell's analysis of modern feminist rituals; in this paradigm, feminists use the language of reclamation or experimentation to invest old rituals with new meaning.[62]

Exemplifying this, those seeking to readapt the mikvah for a non-traditional purpose might summarize and then disregard its history, since it no longer serves as the basis for their updated ritual. In one such case, an article from the Jewish feminist magazine *Lilith* does this in its proposal of immersing a newborn girl in a mikvah as a bris ritual.[63] The area where this is most effectively utilized is ecofeminist literature on the mikvah. Ecofeminism is a movement that places environmentalism high in the hierarchy of feminist ethical concerns. Michal Raucher, for example, argues that the traditional uses of mikvah have often served as a check on female behavior; re-appropriating the mikvah as a source of connection between women and the natural world would both make the ritual less uncomfortable for women and emphasize environmental issues in a Jewish manner.[64] Although Irene Diamond makes a similar distinction in her work, she suggests that Orthodox Jewish women, for whom mikvah is a familiar ritual, are the ones who would probably find the most connection with the updated approach, indicating a mix of the traditional and re-appropriative rationales.[65] This highlights that there is no easy way to separate the ritual of immersion in the mikvah itself from the ways it has been practiced for centuries and is still practiced today.

This is readily apparent in the pieces which are critical of mikvah use and its modern re-appropriation. S. L. Wisenberg interweaves the personal and the scholarly to show how, in her

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[61] The stories on pages 183-184, 188-200, 281-284 of *Total Immersion*, for example, are notably lacking in traditional purity language.
[62] Bell, *Ritual*, 389-391.
[63] "Ceremonial Welcoming for a Newborn Jewish Daughter," *Lilith* 1, no. 2 (January, 1976): 22. A bris ritual is one that secures a newborn's place in the Jewish community. Circumcision is the traditional bris ritual for boys; various ones have been workshopped for girls over the years.
[64] Michal Raucher, "Immersing in Climate Change," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 163-166.
[65] Irene Diamond, "'What, You're an Ecofeminist and You Don't Practice Mikvah?'," *Bridges* 5, no. 2 (December 1995): 87.

experiences, the mikvah cannot be divorced in any way from its legacy of patriarchal control. In her own words, "How can even the newest of a New Age feminist ritual make up for the historic misogyny of Jewish law? What is the new ritual to acknowledge the fact that the religion was not made for us, for me, that we have to manipulate it and change everything so that it's meaningful?"[66] Wisenberg argues that there is no point in reassigning new meaning to the mikvah; she envisions entirely different rituals and prayers that celebrate menstruation rather than subject it to male regulation.[67] Even writers who are more sympathetic to re-appropriation of the mikvah or who are more traditionally observant find the ritual's history uncomfortable to grapple with. Janet Shmaryahu's piece "We Will Do and We Will Listen" is part of a larger anthology that on the whole promotes mikvah use, but she takes a more conflicted and critical stance on the ritual. She is particularly bewildered by positive writing on the mikvah and *taharat haMishpachah* itself, with its "persistently affirmative tone" and tendency to sweep the controversy under the rug.[68] This uncomfortably unquestioning stance on one hand and intense criticism on the other have affected the way she views family purity and her own observance.[69] She finds value in both traditional rituals and feminist theory, but wishes for a balance between the two:

> We need to find our way between radical feminist claims that the established religions are patriarchal and perpetuate male authority and power at the expense of women, and the traditional Jewish discourses by both men and women which frequently call up an amorphous notion of feminine mystique and privilege and disregard the more problematic aspects of Jewish observance for women.[70]

With a stance somewhat similar to Wisenberg's, then, Shmaryahu argues that the mikvah derives its meaning from Jewish tradition, without which it exists in a watered-down form, but placed in the context of which it can become an uncomfortable and problematic observance.

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[66] S.L. Wisenberg, "'Mikvah': That Which Will Not Stay Submerged," *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 10, no. 1 (April 2008): 77.
[67] Wisenberg, "'Mikvah'," 74.
[68] Janet Shmaryahu, "We Will Do and We Will Listen," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, 2nd edition, ed. Rivkah Slonim (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006), 70.
[69] Shmaryahu, "We Will Do," 70-71.
[70] Ibid., 69.

The voice which is perhaps most emblematic of both the apologetic and critical sides of the feminist mikvah debate is that of Rachel Adler, the prominent feminist theologian. In 1973, while still deeply rooted in Orthodoxy, she wrote an article called "Tum'ah and Toharah: Ends and Beginnings," which, while not simply a recitation of halakhic and traditional reasons for ritual immersion, was still an apologetic piece. Adler tried at the time to reconcile the family purity laws with a Jewish, feminist spirituality, compatible at once with her Orthodox Judaism and notion of personhood;[71] in this sense she provides another re-appropriative stance towards the mikvah. While her piece was very popular among both advocates of mikvah use and those who had been uncomfortable with the implications of *taharat haMishpachah*, Adler began to feel a growing unease with her past ideas on ritual immersion. She realized her theological framework was not only flawed in multiple places, but harmful to the women who uncritically accepted it.[72] She no longer believed in the things she had written and furthermore considered them "intellectually and morally unjustifiable."[73] In 1993 she published an article refuting her earlier piece, this time centered on the idea that "the laws of purity will never be reinstated, nor should they be…They are unjust."[74] Mikvah use for the sake of purity or the supposed impurity of menstruating women were concepts Adler could no longer reconicle, no matter which context she framed them in. She does not dismiss the mikvah wholesale, however. She finds the "possibility of salvage" for the ritual in Jewish women who had begun using the mikvah as a mark of recovery from traumatic life events, who, she argues, reframe the notion of purity entirely.[75] In all, Adler's evolving theological vision surrounding family purity encompasses many of the key points of feminist scholarship concerning the subject. Moreover, she exemplifies how personal views on the mikvah, as well as those of the wider culture, can change over time, which is particularly relevant for our current moment.

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[71] Rachel Adler, "Tum'ah and Toharah: Ends and Beginnings," *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review* (Summer 1973): 118-120.
[72] Rachel Adler, "In Your Blood, Live: Re-visions of a Theology of Purity," *Tikkun* 8, no. 1 (January 1993): 38
[73] Adler, "In Your Blood," 38.
[74] Adler, "In Your Blood," 38-41.
[75] Ibid.

Fieldwork within feminist scholarship has also striven to uncover the thoughts and rationale of women for whom mikvah is an everyday practice. Two such prominent studies survey women in Israel, but their findings reveal trends and issues which are widely applicable to modern mikvah use. The studies show that women who use the mikvah interpret and reinvent the ritual for themselves. Because women are the ones primarily commanded to ritually immerse, the ritual bath house serves as a space for female hegemony within a system and culture that the researchers understand primarily as patriarchal.

Inbal E. Cicurel's research examines the reasons for immersion provided by "secular" and "traditional" women who use the mikvah in Be'er Sheba in southern Israel, in juxtaposition with rationale from the Israeli Rabbinate encouraging mikvah use.[76] She found that overall women both used self-defined halakhic terms that affirmed their female identity, and reversed the positive or negative connotations of certain reasoning provided by the Rabbinate.[77] Although still interpreting the ritual in reaction to the traditional establishment, these women were adapting mikvah use and ideologies to their own worldviews, observing tradition in a way that was meaningful to them as Jewish women.

Tova Hartman and Naomi Marmon pick up where Cicurel left off, interviewing Israeli Orthodox women whose rationale for mikvah use, Cicurel had argued, was too similar to that of the Israeli Rabbinate to examine separately.[78] Clearly, Hartman and Marmon's thorough analysis shows that even within this group, mandated mikvah use is attributed to more dynamic and personal reasons than simple halakhah. As the researchers point out, "a structuralist approach that attempts to separate rules from the women who live them seems inherently flawed."[79] Hartman and Marmon divided the attributions provided by these women for using the mikvah into positive and negative categories. Negative rationale included the physical burdens of observing niddah and going to the mikvah or an awareness of the

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[76] Cicurel, "The Rabbinate," 171.
[77] Ibid., 179-180.
[78] Ibid., 171.
[79] Tova Hartman and Naomi Marmon, "Lived Regulations, Systemic Attributions: Menstrual Separation and Ritual Immersion in the Experience of Orthodox Women," *Gender & Society* 18, no. 3 (June 2004): 391.

halakhic power over their bodies which was not entirely in their own hands;[80] these were balanced by the positive ways in which the women maintained that observing the family purity laws was meaningful to them, such as control over their sexuality and personal time during halakhic separation.[81] Thus, to reduce the mikvah to a "good" or "bad" experience erases the nuance and complexity inherent in this ritual, and obscures the thoughts and attitudes of real women towards it.

These valuable studies are usually limited to the Israeli context, which is easier to study for a variety of reasons, including the united Rabbinate as a centralized religious authority and the predominance of Jewish cultural life. Marmon, one of the researchers in the analysis of Israeli Orthodox women above, did conduct a similar study in the late 1990s with Orthodox women in Boston and New Jersey, however. Marmon repeatedly emphasizes that although all of these women practiced niddah because it was halakhah, there was a remarkable diversity in how and nuance in why they specifically did. [82] Similarly to the study of Israeli Orthodox women, there were positive and negative sides to every aspect of mikvah use.[83] This, as well as how niddah affected these women's relationships with their husbands and their own needs, was a similarity between the Israeli and American women interviewed in these two studies.[84] It is clear that attitudes towards niddah, and by extension the mikvah, are a direct product of personal views and experiences.

Section 4: Modern Mikvah Culture

In the 21st century, the mikvah remains the subject of debate as it has for the past couple hundred years, the core of the conversation being whether the mikvah is a positive, meaningful ritual for Jews in modernity. The main aspect of change has been the scope and visibility of the discussion concerning it. In

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[80] Hartman and Marmon, "Lived Regulations," 393-397.
[81] Ibid., 397-404.
[82] Naomi Marmon, "Reflections on Contemporary *Miqveh* Practice," in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, ed. Rahel Wasserfall (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 234-235.
[83] Marmon's study is formatted with this structure; see for example the section titled "Time to Oneself versus Logistical and Practical Inconveniences," 237-239, where the study subjects note how the distance from family caused by niddah can either foster individual time and space for individual needs, or create more burdens in their life.
[84] Marmon, "Reflections," 251.

a digital age where almost anyone can access academic research online, read an article by a Jewish newspaper on their smartphone, or see family purity laws featured in popular television series, the mikvah has become more visible than ever before, and to a much wider audience.[85] Take, for example, a piece published in 2017 by *Teen Vogue*, entitled "Jewish Women Open Up About Getting Their Periods." In it, young Jewish women and teenage girls offer their perspectives on menstruation, niddah, and their Jewish culture. As author Aimee Rubensteen notes, "Today, more Jewish-identifying teens are becoming aware of the tradition [of niddah], and choose their own interpretations."[86] Indeed, the stances in the article run the gamut from traditional to re-appropriative to disinterested,[87] reiterating in many ways the feminist scholarly debate of the late 20th century. However, *Teen Vogue* has a audience in the tens of millions[88] and incorporates the voices of young Jewish women into discussion on the mikvah, a topic where they have largely been absent. It serves as a prime example of how accessible talking about mikvah and family purity has become in modern society.

Criticism of the mikvah also increased with its popularity. Jewish author and researcher Hannah C. Tzuberi discusses the ritual within the context of Orthodox conversion, and specifically the Israeli conversion system. She notes the widespread belief among primarily secular Jews that the mikvah is "humiliating," and the assumption that her experience with it is by default one of degradation.[89] Tzuberi attributes this to the standard feminist framework for thinking about gender relations within Orthodoxy.[90] While refuting this stance, she also acknowledges the potential for abuse within the conversion process when it comes to the mikvah.[91] The mindset she examines, that the mikvah is a setting which symbolizes

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[85] Some recent examples of the mikvah in popular culture include the plays "The Mikvah Project" and "Mikveh," and scenes from the Netflix original show *Unorthodox*.
[86] Aimee Rubensteen, "Jewish Women Open Up About Getting Their Periods," *Teen Vogue*, September 18, 2017, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/jewish-women-on-menstruation.
[87] Rubensteen, "Jewish Women."
[88] "Teen Vogue," Brands, Condé Nast, accessed April 18, 2021, https://www.condenast.com/brands/teen-vogue/.
[89] Hannah C. Tzuberi, "Three Men Walk into a Mikveh," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 30, no. 1 (2016): 99-100.
[90] Tzuberi, "Three Men," 99.
[91] Ibid., 104.

male control over the most intimate part of women's lives, is part of the modern sensationalism regarding the mikvah. Books such as Varda Polak-Sahm's *The House of Secrets: The Hidden World of the Mikveh* exemplify such an approach, taking a tone which frames the mikvah as a mysterious, backwards ritual, and the women who use it as clinging to peculiar and outdated customs. As feminist scholarship reveals, it is difficult to distill this ritual as it is practiced today down to such a narrow approach. Moreover, this kind of sensationalism shows how limited modern uses and views of the mikvah have become, framing mikvah and ritual immersion as a women's issue ritual alone and disregarding the various other historical and present purposes for this ritual.

One interesting trend in mikvah use is the rise in egalitarian mikvaot. In 2001 Anita Diamant, author of the best-selling book *The Red Tent*, assembled the team of Mayyim Hayyim. This Massachusetts-based organization centers on mikvah education and outreach as well as the construction of a new type of mikvah itself, rooted in inclusivity, which opened in 2004.[92] For the founders of Mayyim Hayyim, the mikvah is a ritual that goes beyond just niddah and *taharat haMishpachah*; expanding ritual immersion beyond its recent narrow and gendered connotations, this new mikvah is space for all Jews interested in engaging with the ritual, whether for conversion, commemoration of healing, family purity, or anything in between. The first and most famous but not the only egalitarian mikvah or organization that has since been established, Mayyim Hayyim joined with other such groups in 2017 to found the Rising Tide Open Waters Mikveh Network, which is dedicated to creating inclusive mikvaot in any Jewish community interested in one. Their website currently boasts twenty-four current partners in the United States and two internationally, not counting expected future partners.[93] Egalitarian mikvaot may be the key to increased mikvah use in modern America, across various Jewish communities. By changing the meaning and the trappings of mikvah, this movement is making the ritual more accessible to American

[92] "History," Mayyim Hayyim, accessed April 18, 2021, https://www.mayyimhayyim.org/about/history/.
[93] "Meet Our Members," Rising Tide Open Waters Mikveh Network, accessed 18, 2021, https://risingtideopenwaters.org/members/.

Jews; this meshes with Bell's point about how people craft rituals to structure their world.[94]

In spite of the more prominent position it occupies in current cultural talking points, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which the practice of ritual immersion is increasing among American Jews, since there is no way of directly calculating the rise. Hoffman believes that it is indeed increasing. The "rebirth of American Orthodoxy," with aspects such as the *ba'al teshuvah* movement, a growing number of day schools and *yeshivot*, and especially Lubavitch outreach programs,[95] could be a sign of increased mikvah use in conjunction with this recent shift toward Orthodoxy.[96] Chabad-Lubavitch in particular represents a powerful source for persuasive material and information on family purity laws. Chabad asserts the observance of the laws of niddah is becoming more popular, though there is no source for this claim.[97] However, in his book from 2003 historian Marc Lee Raphael seems to confirm it in his observation of a congregation in Charleston, where he perceived monthly immersion to be on the rise.[98] As Raphael says, "use of the mikveh has become a marker in the Orthodox community."[99]

Outside of the Orthodox movement it is unclear how the mikvah features in the ordinary life of the average American Jewish community. Looking at the denominational stances on mikvah from the movement websites lends to some conjecture. Reform, for example, mentions the various established uses of mikvah and also emphasizes that there "are many creative rituals for using the mikvah at any significant lifestyle moment."[100] The Conservative movement's official stance notes the changing attitudes towards mikvah and family purity, and asks how best to approach these practices so that they are

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[94] See footnote 4
[95] *Ba'al teshuvah*, literally meaning "master of the return," refers to a secular Jew who has become religiously observant. Chabad-Lubavitch is known for outreach in the hopes of attracting *ba'alei teshuvah*, the number of whom increased notably in the late twentieth century. *Yeshivot* are institutions of traditional Jewish learning.
[96] Hoffman, "The Institution of the Mikvah," 136-138.
[97] "What is Niddah?" Chabad, accessed April 18, 2021, https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/4005372/jewish/What-Is-Niddah.htm.
[98] Marc Lee Raphael, *Judaism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 164.
[99] Raphael, *The Columbia History of Jews*, 12.
[100] "Mikvah," Glossary, Union for Reform Judaism, accessed April 18, 2021, https://reformjudaism.org/glossary/mikvah.

meaningful, empowering, and yet traditionally informed.[101] The events page of the Reconstructing Judaism website features educational talks about the mikvah through the Rising Tide Network, focusing not only on reclamation but on how old rituals might be adapted into entirely new ones.[102] These are a good start to understanding current mikvah use in the United States, but they also represent a distanced view; only by talking to those actually going (or not going) to the mikvah can we construct an accurate picture of what mikvah use looks like.

This thesis investigates that question by researching mikvaot and attitudes toward them among a small portion of the Jewish population of America, in a region where Jewish culture manifests differently than the Northeastern mainstream, to see whether this view of mikvah diverges from or conforms to the dominant discourse as articulated in this chapter. As this chapter has shown, individual agency, views, and experiences amongst women, regardless of observance level, are major factors in determining mikvah use and attitudes. In addition, there are many more purposes for the mikvah, both traditional and innovative, than just *taharat haMishpachah*. Mikvah use may be more popular among the Orthodox, but it does not belong to them alone. Mikvah as the finalization of conversion, common across all the movements, and regular immersion by men, a unique marker of the Haredi,[103] both confound the idea of ritual immersion as a women-only ritual. Mikvah culture is also subject to cultural contexts, as the sections on feminism and American mikvaot demonstrate. As we move on to the next chapter detailing the Southern Jewish cultural context, we will lay the ground for investigating whether mikvah use in this region reflects the specific history and mores of Jewry in the American South.

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[101] Miriam Berkowitz, Susan Grossman, and Avram Reisner, "Mikveh and the Sanctity of Family Relations," 2006, https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/yoreh-deah. This is a responsum, an informed legal opinion, and therefore carries more weight than a simple movement stance.
[102] "Into the Depths: Exploring Ritual Immersion in the Mikvah," Events, Reconstructing Judaism, accessed April 18, 2021, https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/networks/2019/into-depths.
[103] This is a blanket term for very observant Orthodox groups, commonly referred to as "Ultra" Orthodox.

Chapter Two: The Jewish South[104] and Regional Distinctiveness

Jewish communities in Virginia constitute the study population for this research. An analysis of mikvah use in this area relies on a careful understanding of the situation of Jewish Virginians, both at present and historically. Studying the performance of rituals tests the strength of regional specificity when it comes to Jewish culture in America.[105] Ritual can represent a point of commonality between Jews all over the world, but is itself subject to regional resources, realities, and cultural contexts. For example, a Jewish New Yorker and someone in a small Southern Jewish community, where Jewish infrastructure and resources exist on a much smaller scale, might practice the same ritual of mikvah through different means and with different intentions. Southern mikvah use must be analyzed in the context of Southern culture. Therefore, this chapter lays out a general history of Jews in the American South with details on Jewish communities in Virginia specifically where relevant, and traces the development and condition of these communities to the present day. This background will help to illuminate the dynamics between identity, observance, and area of residence for Jewish Virginians, and to determine whether their use of mikvaot reflects regional distinctiveness.

Section 1: Southern Jewish History and Cultural Formation

Jews have been immigrating to the American South since the early colonial days. A chronological review of Jewish communities in the South shows how cultural centers shifted over time. Early Sephardic immigrants settled in coastal cities, the most early and prominent of which were Savannah and Charleston in the mid-1700s. The Jewish community in Charleston would continue to steadily rise and embrace the

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[104] To prevent any confusion, the geographical region of the American South here includes the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia, as well as Washington, D.C. See Ira Sheskin's "The Dixie Diaspora: The 'Loss' of Small Southern Jewish Community" for more details.

[105] See the introduction for more on this school of the field. As an example, Caroline Lipsum-Walker argues this point about the distinctive "regional coloring" of Southern Judaism in her piece "It's All Relative: The Study of Southern Jewish Culture and Identity." She crucially claims that Southern Jews define themselves through their dissimilarities with both non-Jewish southerners *and* non-Southern Jews (page 4).

local culture after the Revolutionary period, becoming the site of "the second longest uninterrupted habitation by Jews in what is now the United States."[106] In the meantime, Jews were also coming to Virginia in very small numbers.[107] For example, historian Melvin Urofsky notes records of individual Jews in the "Tidewater, Fredericksburg, Richmond, Petersburg, and Albemarle County" areas by the late eighteenth century, but no sign of actual organized communities until Richmond's Beth Shalome early in the post-Revolutionary War period, which would become the United States's sixth synagogue.[108] This was a trend of early Jewish immigration to the American colonies, as the Sephardim could more easily engage in trade in port cities.[109]

A lack of stable or large community also means that culturally, although connected to each other by religion, these early Jewish Southerners were not overtly distinguishable from their non-Jewish neighbors, a theme that would continue throughout Jewish Southern history. For example, Southern Jews participated in common colonial occupations, such as tailoring or blacksmithing.[110] Socially, Sarna notes, like their co-religionists throughout the Eastern seaboard Southern Jewish colonials lived, did business, and sometimes married with Christian neighbors.[111] Religious and ritual differences aside, such intermingling occurred so frequently that it is clear that Jews in the colonies and early America were

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[106] Barry L. Stiefel, "Beyond Synagogues and Cemeteries: The Built Environment as an Aspect of Vernacular Jewish Material Culture in Charleston, South Carolina," *American Jewish History* 101, no. 2 (2017): 198.
[107] Melvin I. Urofsky, *Commonwealth and Community: The Jewish Experience in Virginia* (Richmond: Cadmus, 1997), 4, 17-18. Urofsky attributes the size of this immigration to the lack of existing Jewish community in Virginia, and the fact that Judaism is a communal religion. If new immigrants in this time wanted to observe Jewish law, they would have to do it somewhat independently and build the infrastructure themselves. See, for example, the case of Jacob Abrahams in late eighteenth century Portsmouth, who may have slaughtered his own kosher meat (Irwin M. Berent, "The Jews of Portsmouth, 1786-1930," *Renewal*, March 29, 1985, 46).
[108] Urofsky, *Commonwealth*, 4, 22-24; see also the history of Beth Shalome as given on the website of Richmond's Beth Ahabah: https://www.bethahabah.org/heritage/history/. Virginia might have been a more attractive place of settlement for Jewish immigrants due to the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, passed in 1786.
[109] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.
[110] Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg, "Introduction: Jewish Roots in Southern Soil," in *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History*, ed. Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2006), 4.
[111] Sarna, *American Judaism*, 27.

comfortable living in and fighting for their new communities.

Ashkenazim had been immigrating along with the Sephardim, but it was not until after the American Revolution and into the nineteenth century that their numbers became noticeable; they would make significant contributions to the Jewish culture of the American South. This wave of major migration, lasting until about 1870, consisted of Jews from central and western Europe; Jewish settlement moved west to cities like Memphis and New Orleans.[112] In Virginia, the Ashkenazim swelled the Jewish population to 2,600 by 1880, and reinforced community infrastructure in the previously mentioned regions so that Richmond was no longer the center of Jewish community, nor the only city in the state with a synagogue, as it had been up to that point.[113] They moreover expanded into the western and northern parts of the state, like Harrisonburg, Staunton, and Alexandria.[114] One of the most important developments stemming from this new immigration was the increased practice of Reform Judaism in the South. This signalled a shift from more established Sephardic practices in many cases, and a new approach to being Jewish in the United States. Indeed, the first attempt at synagogue reforms on American soil occurred in the South, at Charleston's K.K. Beth Elohim in 1824. Historian Gary Phillip Zola notes that historic Southern Jewish communities embraced Reform Judaism in greater measure than older Northern congregations in the post-Civil War period, and he postulates that the nativist, xenophobic atmosphere of the South at that time stimulated this shift.[115] Zola suggests that Southern Jews engaged in religious reformation projects both to gain a sense of shared Jewish identity as well as attempt to secure some respectability among non-Jewish neighbors.[116] From a ritual standpoint, this near-collective turn towards reforms and later Reform is crucial because it prioritized certain practices over others, to the complete exclusion of some rituals. As Zola says, Reform Judaism worked well within a "Christian

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[112] Ferris and Greenberg, "Introduction," 5-7.
[113] Urofsky, *Commonwealth*, 46.
[114] Ibid., 59-62, 64-65.
[115] Gary Phillip Zola, "The Ascendancy of Reform Judaism in the American South during the Nineteenth Century," in *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History*, ed. Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2006), 177-179.
[116] Zola, "Ascendancy," 177-179.

context" where Jews were not more than "one-half of 1 percent of the region's total population," and where certain ritual necessities, including mikvaot, were lacking in many communities.[117]

This postbellum development, however, was not the first time that Jews integrated into Southern culture. In the nineteenth century, some Southern Jews enjoyed prominent social positions, owned slaves, and fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War.[118] The famous sculptor Moses Jacob Ezekiel is a prominent example of this; accounts of his early life in Richmond recall his family's identification with high society and aristocracy, ties to the slave trade, and Confederate patriotism, while at the same time being distinctively Jewish.[119] Although newer German immigrants were subject to nativist derision and sometimes experienced tensions with more established Jews,[120] a pattern that would repeat as the Eastern European immigration wave began, assimilation was nevertheless clearly a realizable goal for Jewish Southerners. This was likely partly out of necessity, as the aforementioned lack of Jewish community infrastructure created an impetus to leave traditional culture behind, but also by choice, because the environment in America opened various opportunities which persecution in Europe had kept closed for centuries. Whatever the exact factors, it is clear how strong the assimilatory impulse was among Jews in Virginia and the larger American South because of how close Jewish history in the region intertwines with mainstream Southern history.

The fact that newly arrived German and Eastern European immigrants often engaged in peddling also contributed to the difficulty in forming a stationary, traditional Jewish community. Peddling was a common trade for immigrant men new to the country, pursued until funds could be procured in order to settle in one place and open a permanent business.[121] Historian Hasia Diner makes the point that peddling

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[117] Ibid., 181; Urofsky also notes on page 120 of *Commonwealth* how the lack of ritual infrastructure in Virginia meant that new immigrants had to construct it themselves, or else quickly Americanize, mentioning the lack of mikvaot specifically.
[118] Ferris and Greenberg, "Introduction," 7-8.
[119] Stanley F. Chyet, "Moses Jacob Ezekiel: A Childhood in Richmond," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (March 1973): 289-292.
[120] Ferris and Greenberg, "Introduction," 12; see also Urofsky, *Commonwealth*, 51, 120.
[121] Ferris and Greenberg, "Introduction," 8-11.

was a staple of the American Jewish experience regardless of region, but this does not mean that the unique conditions of peddling in the South did not have an effect on Jewish peddlers.[122] To ply their wares in the South, peddlers would travel wide, usually rural areas of land. This would necessarily affect both the ability to participate in Jewish community life and to practice traditions made difficult by life on the road in majority non-Jewish areas. As Diner says, peripatetic peddlers "embarked on lengthy road trips, spent time among non-Jews, did not return home with nightfall, and faced the challenge of living away from settled Jewish communities."[123] Contrast this with the immediate access to Jewish infrastructure and business relationships in the great Northern cities, New York or Chicago, for example. The upward mobility of many Jewish immigrants which enabled them to become established business owners in the American South would help with the formation of sedentary Jewish communities, but the early nomadism of Jewish experience in the region raises questions about how it might have disrupted tradition and ritual.

The Jewish immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mainly Eastern European and later Sephardic Jews, reinforced the geography of the Jewish settlement in the South, choosing to live in places where there were already synagogues and swelling the Jewish populations of some cities such as Atlanta.[124] Urofsky notes that the Eastern Ashkenazim invigorated Virginian Jewish communities as the German immigrants had done in the mid-19th century.[125] By the end of the century, there would be Jewish communities across Virginia, from Pocahontas to Suffolk to Winchester.[126] In addition, Jews from this later migration in particular engaged in important community building through the formation of *landsmanschaften*, societies of immigrants from the same European region; this was a

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[122] Hasia Diner, "Entering the Mainstream of Modern Jewish History: Peddlers and the American Jewish South," in *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History*, ed. Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2006), 86-87.
[123] Diner, "Entering the Mainstream," 90.
[124] Ferris and Greenberg, "Introduction," 12-13.
[125] Urofsky, *Commonwealth*, 98.
[126] "Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities–Virginia," Institute of Southern Jewish Life, accessed April 18, 2021, https://www.isjl.org/virginia-encyclopedia.html. The presence of Jews in small towns in Virginia is an important detail. For example, in Pocahontas, a small mining town on the Virginia-West Virginia border, Jews comprised a significant amount of the population and an integral part of the town's business.

way of preserving the old Jewish culture in a new, strange environment.[127] Just as Jewish Southerners formed ties with each other, they also became respected parts of non-Jewish Southern society, particularly through their upward mobility and entry in professional and business-class jobs.[128]

However, Jewish standing in Southern social structure was always precarious, as evidenced by various anti-semitic incidents. The most troubling of these disruptions of Jewish Southern tranquility was the 1915 Leo Frank lynching. The extrajudicial murder of Frank reminded Jewish communities in the South that while American anti-semitism was very different from its European manifestations, it was still a reality of living amongst a majority non-Jewish population. Eric Goldstein argues that the Frank lynching and other cases of anti-semitism which increased in the post-Reconstruction South (such as the barring of Jews from resorts, clubs, and political office[129]) contributed to an obsession among Jewish Southerners with assimilating not only into Southern culture, but into Southern whiteness. As Goldstein says, "Most southern Jews agreed… that the preservation of Jewish social status relied on their conformity to southern racial standards,"[130] a desire at odds in some enclaves with their business dealings with African-American customers as well as participation in anti-racism and anti-segregation work.[131] The Southern racial structure was another area where Jewish communities were torn between the need to fit in and the draw to old traditions which emphasized Jewish ethics and difference. Regardless of their best efforts to assimilate into mainstream Southerness, anti-semitism close to home would haunt Jewish Southerners in the rise of nativism in the early decades of the 20th century,[132] the build-up to World War II,[133] and into the postwar period. The fact that "Southern Jews shared many of the prejudices of other

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[127] Ferris and Greenberg, "Introduction," 11.
[128] Ibid., 12.
[129] Eric Goldstein, "'Now Is the Time to Show Your True Colors:' Southern Jews, Whiteness, and the Rise to Jim Crow," in *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History*, ed. Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2006), 138-139.
[130] Goldstein, "'Now Is the Time'," 142.
[131] Ibid., 144-146.
[132] Ferris and Greenberg, "Introduction," 12-14.
[133] Urofsky, *Commonwealth*, 147.

whites and believed in segregation"[134] did not prevent the series of synagogue bombings in 1957-58 or the rise of hate literature in Virginia as part of the backlash against desegregation.[135]

In more succinct terms, Southern Jewish culture is the culmination of all parts of this long history. Caroline Lipson-Walker thoroughly defined Southern Jewry in juxtaposition with Northern Jewry in her 1989 article "It's All Relative: The Study of Southern Jewish Culture and Identity." Using seminal works on the cultural distinctiveness of Southern Jews, she identifies key areas where they differ from Northern co-religionists, including their biculturality (in this case, secure dual identities as both Jews and Southerners), stronger regional network, and greater likelihood of identifying as Jewish religiously rather than culturally or ethnically.[136] According to Lipsum-Walker, Southern Jews relate strongly to Southerness while harboring anxieties about potential anti-semitism, act religiously in ways similar to their Christian neighbors (in the sense that synagogue activity and services are patterned on Christian regional norms), maintain "more extensive, intricate, and active [relationship] networks," and consist of a relatively affluent, small population.[137] Her article preserves a look at the regional distinctiveness of Southern Jewry as it existed thirty years ago.

As this chapter has also demonstrated so far, Southern Jewish identity possesses a certain tension between Southerness and Jewishness, which was not always negative. Hollace A. Weiner shows in a study of the turn-of-the-century Orthodox congregation in Fort Worth, Texas, that participating in both Jewish and regional culture could be done quite easily. These Jews maintained social networks with other Jewish communities in the area, but also participated in local activities in a way that confirmed their distinct identity.[138] However, wrestling with these dual identities could also be a source of strain. Some

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[134] Ibid., 169.
[135] Ferris and Greenberg, "Introduction," 13; see also Urofsky, *Commonwealth,* 172-173.
[136] Caroline Lipsum-Walker, "It's All Relative: The Study of Southern Jewish Culture and Identity," *Shofar* 8, no. 1 (October 1989): 6-16.
[137] Lipsum-Walker, "It's All Relative," 10-16.
[138] Hollace Ava Weiner, "Whistling 'Dixie' While Humming 'Ha-Tikvah': Acculturation and Activism Among Orthodox Jews in Fort Worth," *American Jewish History* 93, no. 2 (June 2007): 213-214, 234-235. Weiner concedes that Southern culture flavored observant Jewish life in Fort Worth, but argues that it did little else, and that Ahavath Sholom looked generally like observant synagogues in the rest of the country. I

three decades later, for example, the debate over Zionism among Richmond Jews in the 1930s showcased Jewish anxiety about fitting into Southern as well as American culture. Historian Myron Berman explains that the mostly German-born, affluent Jews of Richmond "placed a high premium on communal acceptability and assimilation into the traditions of a historic Southern community… It was not so much the existence of anti-Semitism that was a factor in developing communal attitudes but an exaggerated fear of its possible implications that affected the thinking of Richmond's Jewish establishment."[139] Anything that promoted Jewish distinctiveness apart from the American context was suppressed or minimized. While I would argue pushback to Zionism was a general feature of the early Reform movement and more assimilated Jews, the specific conditions of the South made anti-Zionism popular for Richmond and other Southern Jews until the 1940s.[140] This case reaffirms the tension between assimilatory Southerness and outward Jewishness that has strengthened over the course of the region's history.

Section 2: Modern Southern Jewry

The previous backdrop provides a starting point for an examination of the current situation of Southern Jewry. A demographic look at this population reveals several trends. For example, the percentage of the total American Jewish population which lives in the South increased slightly from 1960 to 2000, even excluding Florida and the Washington D.C./Maryland areas.[141] Those latter areas are the major Jewish centers in the region, with Atlanta, Dallas, and Houston as secondary prominent locales.[142] The Charlottesville and Northern Virginia areas experienced some of the greatest increase in Jewish population in the entire South.[143] As of 2017, Richmond, the Peninsula, and Northern Virginia are the

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would attribute this to a slower process of acculturation among recent or more observant immigrants, rather than a blanket statement on the effect of Southern culture. Relevant to this paper, the women of Ahavath Sholom organized to demand a mikvah be built in Fort Worth, which was completed in 1904.

[139] Myron Berman, "Rabbi Edward Nathan Calisch and the Debate Over Zionism in Richmond, Virginia," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (March 1973): 304-305.

[140] Berman, "Rabbi Edward Nathan Calisch," 304-305.

[141] Sheskin, "The Dixie Diaspora," 56.

[142] Sheskin, "The Dixie Diaspora," 57.

[143] Ibid., 63.

most populous centers of Jewish life in Virginia proper.[144] According to the 2014 Pew Research Center religious landscape survey, Jews make up about 1% of the adult population of Virginia.[145] Scholar of Jewish geography and demographics Ira M. Sheskin observes, however, the death of small towns in the South and by extension small town Jewish life, once a staple of the region.[146] In the case of Virginia, we can see this in how Jewish life shifted in the twentieth century; small towns like Pocahontas and Suffolk lost all Jewish settlement, while better developed areas like Fairfax and Blacksburg became new centers for Jews in the region.[147] The potential reasons for this decrease in small towns include outmigration and intermarriage.[148]

Demographic change necessarily entails cultural change as well, referencing the larger debate on the trajectory of Southern Jewish culture. Based on the exodus out of the South, and migration to it by Jews who grew up in other parts of the country, it would seem reasonable to assume that a distinctive Southern Jewish culture is fading out of existence. Bauman classes this in the larger process he refers to as "the Americanization of Dixie."[149] The assimilatory nature of life in the South would also lend to this hypothesis. Even twenty years ago, for example, an archivist writing to the *American Jewish History* journal noted how the Jewish community in Shreveport, Louisiana was losing its strength. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Susan Gross observed, Shreveport Jews had been so secure in their Jewish identity, made possible by the strong Jewish cultural life in the town, that they could freely take part in the cultural and religious events of their non-Jewish neighbors.[150] Gross asserted that in 1998 not only was this no longer the case, but Shreveport lacked the firm Jewish infrastructure that had allowed for

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[144] Ira M. Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky, "United States Jewish Population, 2017," in *The American Jewish Year Book, 2017, Volume 117* ed. Ira M. Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017), 247-248 (pages 68-69 of open access PDF); looking at the map provided on page 248 we can also see how large these areas are in terms of the Jewish population of the entire Southeast region.
[145] "Adults in Virginia," Religious Landscape Study, Pew Research Center, accessed April 18, 2021, https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/virginia/.
[146] Sheskin, "The Dixie Diaspora," 58, 60, 70.
[147] Institute of Southern Jewish Life, "Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities–Virginia."
[148] Sheskin, "The Dixie Diaspora," 64.
[149] Bauman, *A New Vision*, 267.
[150] Susan Gross, "Letter to the Editor," *American Jewish History* 86, no. 3 (September 1998): 353-355.

a thriving Jewish life in Louisiana in the first place.[151] To complicate matters further, the old tension between Southerness and Jewishness still exists for Southern Jews. Amy K. Milligan's recent article on a Jewish parenting group in Norfolk, Virginia, shows this. As participants frequently brought up, it was difficult to reconcile Jewish tradition and culture with the existing infrastructure and way of life in coastal Virginia, because they felt that resources for Jewish parenting were "northern-biased."[152] This difficulty was present for both those who had grown up in Southern culture and were trying to strengthen observance or Jewish cultural feeling for themselves and their family, as well as those Jews who had migrated to the region and felt lost in a majority non-Jewish, distinctly Southern area.[153] Some interviewees created harmony by adapting Jewish traditions to their specific situation,[154] something to keep in mind as we explore mikvah use in Virginia later in this paper.

These points and more raise questions on whether Southern Jewry itself is dying. If the particular way of life that has characterized it for so long is no longer visible in the region, has Southern Jewry ceased to exist? Scholars such as Stephen J. Whitfield do not think so. Whitfield argues that "while the particularity of a mercantile and village way of life is dying, southern Jewry is not."[155] He also mentions the idea that regional distinctiveness throughout the entire United States will diminish in the 21st century, potentially leading Southern Jews to be more like Jews from other regions just as Southerners in general will be more like people from other parts of the nation.[156] The question of whether some distinctiveness is

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[151] Gross, "Letter to the Editor," 355.
[152] Amy K. Milligan, "Creating Jewish Mothers: A Feminist Ethnographic Investigation of The Mothers Circle of Coastal Virginia and the Interfaith Parents Circle," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 37 (2020): 47-48.
[153] Milligan, "Creating Jewish Mothers," 47-50.
[154] An example mentioned in the article, page 48, is one family making (kosher) hoppin' john, a traditional Southern New Years' food, on Rosh haShanah, the Jewish new year. Doing so marks the Jewish calendar with a Southern culinary tradition, synthesizing the two cultures.
[155] Stephen J. Whitfield, "Jewish Fates, Altered States," in *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History*, ed. Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2006), 326.
[156] Whitfield, "Jewish Fates," 325; Whitfield references here the words of Southern Jewish historian Eli N. Evans from his book *Jewish South*: "Southerners in the 21st century will be more like other Americans, and Jews in the South will be more like other Jews…" This will be a prominent idea for the remaining chapters of this thesis, discussing demographic changes in the geographic South and what this means for regional distinctiveness.

lost in this paradigm still remains. Moreover, what would it mean for Southern Jewry to look more like the American Jewish standard, i.e. Northeastern Jewry, and how can we chart this against a historical background? Studying rituals like the mikvah can give us a glimpse into this question.

If literature on Southern Jewry itself is itself rare, literature on the mikvah within that context is doubly so. The mikvah represents a gap in scholarship on Southern Jewish life; discussion on ritual baths in the South is almost nonexistent in materials focusing on Jewish life and culture in the region. Regional archives and resources preserve some information on historical mikvaot.[157] A Norfolk newsletter calls for funds to assist with the completion of a mikvah in 1954;[158] fundraisers for the upkeep of this same mikvah later in the 1980s also appear in local news.[159] Pocahontas had a mikvah at one point in its short Jewish history.[160] In Lynchburg, the mikvah was apparently a point of debate between more and less observant factions of the community in the 1920s.[161] Despite these references and snippets of conversation, it is difficult to tell how Jews in the state interacted with this ritual on an individual basis.

Studies of the Southern Jewish relation to other rituals, however, have been conducted in works such as Marcie Cohen Ferris' piece examining kosher adherence in the American South, which also provides a concrete example of Catherine Bell's theories about how ritual can and does change over time. Cuisine and kosher laws constitute a "barometer, a measuring device that determines how southern Jews

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[157] The information here reflects only that which could be found in digital archives. I was not able to explore physical archives due to Covid-19.
[158] "Norfolk Ritualarium Seeks Community Help," *JCC News*, October 1, 1954, 5. There was apparently also a mikvah in nearby Portsmouth since 1902 which, if it survived the century, presumably closed when the synagogue it was connected to did in 2014 ("Portsmouth, Virginia," Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, Institute of Southern Jewish Life, accessed April 19, 2021, https://www.isjl.org/virginia-portsmouth-encyclopedia.html).
[159] "Response Noted By Mikvah Fund," *UJP Virginia News*, September 6, 1985, 4. This is just one example mentioning upkeep of the mikvah in this period.
[160] "Pocahontas, Virginia," Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, Institute of Southern Jewish Life, accessed April 19, 2021, https://www.isjl.org/virginia-pocahontas-encyclopedia.html.
[161] "Lynchburg, Virginia," Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, Institute of Southern Jewish Life, accessed April 19, 2021, https://www.isjl.org/virginia-lynchburg-encyclopedia.html.

acculturate, while also retaining their own heritage."[162] In other words, it is a ritual or series of rituals which are affected by location. Ferris notes in her introduction that maintaining a kosher diet in the American South "is particularly challenging because so many regional dishes feature pork, shrimp, oysters, and crab, all of which are forbidden by kashrut [kosher dietary laws]."[163] Moreover, access to specifically kosher foods were historically limited; the existence of kosher butcheries and therefore accessible permitted meat, for example, varied by region.[164] As in many situations in their new country, American Jews adapted, and these adaptations encompass a wide spectrum. Some, in an effort to conform to Southern society, prepare and consume forbidden foods alongside more traditional dishes.[165] Others use distinctly Southern ingredients in inherited Jewish recipes, suggesting a syncretic mix of cultures.[166] Still others hold kashrut above all else, a position ranging from establishing their own places to eat kosher, to avoiding non-kosher food "whenever possible."[167] Overall, Ferris concludes that "Southern Jews embrace their ethnic and religious worlds through their food traditions– traditions that vary from one southern state to the next and from the low country to the Mississippi Delta."[168] Jews in the American South explored Southern culture with a distinctly Jewish flair.

Ferris' analysis of kosher adherence could provide a template for looking at mikvah use in the South. Obviously, dietary kashrut and ritual immersion carry different expectations and modes of adherence as rituals. However, Southern Jews were commonly unable to do either due to the same reasons: a lack of necessary infrastructure or resources, and assimilation out of tradition and into regional cultural norms. In both cases, being observant in the South posed difficulties and inspired innovation. This is in some places still the case today. Studying how Southern Jews interact with the mikvah in

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[162] Marcie Cohen Ferris, "Dining in the Dixie Diaspora: A Meeting of Region and Religion," in *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History*, ed. Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2006), 227.
[163] Ferris, "Dining in the Dixie Diaspora," 227.
[164] Ibid., 228, 239.
[165] Ibid., 229.
[166] Ibid., 233.
[167] Ibid., 235, 243.
[168] Ibid., 248.

modern times can let us see where tradition reigned, where it was abandoned, and where adaptations were made, just as we can see variations in kashrut adherence. For example, did some individuals, however observant, not grow up with the expectation of mikvah because it had been abandoned by their families in generations prior? Do people immerse in natural bodies of water due to the lack of mikvah facilities, like those paragons of piety who immersed in frozen lakes?[169] Above all, this is an exploration of the mikvah's meaning in a Southern context, and how it might be different from normative understandings.

[169] *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, cited earlier in this thesis, has a few such stories of women immersing in freezing rivers or lakes to fulfill the mitzvah where they did not have access to a mikvah. See pages 266-267, 277-278, 293-295 for specific examples.

Chapter Three: Virginia Mikvah Culture and Its Lack of Regional Distinctiveness

This research focused on the mikvah experiences and thoughts of Jewish communities in Virginia to see how it might diverge from the dominant picture of mikvah culture in America. As far as online research shows, there are currently seven mikvaot in the state of Virginia, four of which are in Richmond alone and the farthest west of which is in Charlottesville.[170] This does not include the few mikvaot in Washington, D.C., which are accessible to Northern Virginia Jews but are not in Northern Virginia proper, and the ongoing mikvah planning project on the Peninsula. Knowing that these Virginian mikvaot exist provides a good starting point, but alone does not reveal much about mikvah culture in the state, or its intricacies. For this, we must look to the words of Jewish Virginians themselves.

I collected data through two methods: the first was distribution of a digital survey that could be taken by any Jewish adult who resides in Virginia, and the second was a series of interviews with Jewish professionals, such as rabbis, mikvah directors, and community leaders, from across the state. My goal was to gauge general mikvah use within these communities, as well as common attitudes and feelings about the mikvah and ritual immersion. My survey received 100 responses in the period of data-gathering from July to December 2020, and my twelve interviewees spanned the spectrum of Jewish community positions and observance. This chapter will break down the collective data, which stands out for its indistinctiveness when placed in the previous context of Southern Jewish regional specificity.

Section 1: Demographics

I distributed my survey by contacting the administrators at Jewish federations and synagogues that I thought would be most able to help, based on contact information that I found online as well as through contact recommendation. I asked these officials if they would be interested in spreading my

[170] As mikvah directories usually only show mikvaot considered kosher by Orthodox standards, this may not be the exact number of baths in the state. Here are specifics on the ones I do know: four mikvaot are located in Richmond, one in Norfolk, one in Charlottesville, and one in Fairfax. The Fairfax and Charlottesville mikvaot are run by the local Chabads, and the Norfolk mikvah is community-owned under the oversight of the Orthodox congregation B'nai Israel. Of the Richmond mikvaot, one is run by the local Chabad, one by the Orthodox congregation K.B.I., one by the Conservative congregation Beth El, and the last by Young Israel and the Orthodox Union.

survey to their congregation or area via email newsletter or other form of outreach. As not every organization could or wanted to distribute my survey, this limited the area I was able to cover.[171]

My survey began with a number of personal, mostly multiple choice questions designed to chart responses among several demographic categories. The survey was anonymous and the questions kept to a topical level, so there was no risk of specific identifiers being recorded. Informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the survey, and respondents would not be able to access the questions if they did not confirm that they consented to participate in this survey. This was the first category of questions, in the order in which they were asked, along with answer choices in parentheses:

1. What is your gender? [Male, Female, Other (please specify)]
2. What is your age? (18-30, 31-45, 45-60, 60+)
3. Are you currently married? (Yes, No)
4. How would you describe your area of residence? [Urban, Suburban, Rural, Other (please specify)]
5. Have you always lived in the state of Virginia? [Yes, No (please specify number of years in residence)]
6. What movement are you most closely aligned with? [Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Not affiliated, Other (please specify)]

Looking at the answers to these questions from survey respondents, several trends emerged. Firstly, 91% of respondents designated their gender as female, the remainder answering male. It should be noted that this survey was not targeted at a specific gender in distribution, as its accompanying description made clear that these were questions about mikvah use, and that all participation was valuable

[171] Here I would also like to again thank my advisor, Dr. Mary Fraser Kirsh, for her help in distributing my survey in her professional channels. I would not have received the amount of responses that I did without her invaluable assistance.

"[r]egardless of whether you do or do not use the mikvah."[172] That women formed the overwhelming majority of respondents affirms how the mikvah is still conceived of as a women's issue, or at least that knowledge of the mikvah and ritual purity laws is concentrated mainly among women. I will speculate further on the relation between gender and the mikvah later.

In terms of age, over half of those who took the survey were in the middle two age categories, with 26% in the 31-45 range and 43% in the 46-60 range (those over the age of 60 were the third highest range at 20% and 18-30 year olds formed the lowest at 11%). This is generally comparable with both the age distribution of Jews in North America as well as Virginia age distribution.[173] Tangential to age range, out of the 76 respondents who indicated that they were currently married, 62 were in these middle age groups. Again, it is important to remember that age and marital status are important factors for mikvah use in its traditional sense. These numbers indicate that Jewish Virginians are largely employment-aged, rather than students or retirees, corresponding with Ira Sheskin's identification of Virginia and the larger Sunbelt as a place for professional opportunities. Jumping ahead slightly, I would link this with the question on years of residence in Virginia, as overwhelmingly (85%) respondents answered that they had not lived in Virginia their whole lives. For those of this group who did answer how many years they had been in residence, most indicated between 28 and 33 years. This data reinforces the earlier analysis about the changing demographics of this region. If the Jewish South is changing demographically, this lends credence to the argument that it may be changing culturally as well.

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[172] This was the description provided alongside the survey link: "Hello, I am James Barrie, an undergraduate student researcher at the College of William & Mary. For my senior year Honors Project, I am studying trends in and attitudes towards mikvah use in Virginia. To this end, I am disseminating this short, anonymous survey to Jewish communities across the state. If you are Jewish, over the age of 18, and currently residing in Virginia, please consider taking it! Regardless of whether you do or do not use the mikvah, your answers are extremely valuable to my project. The survey is best done on a computer but can also be completed on a smartphone. Thank you! For more information on this project or to follow up, feel free to contact me at tfbarrie@email.wm.edu."

[173] "QuickFacts: Virginia," US Census Bureau, accessed April 18, 2021, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/VA; see also "Jews," The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050, Pew Research Center, accessed April 18, 2021, https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/jews/.

The next survey question asked about type of residential area, and all survey takers answered either urban or suburban. No respondents indicated that they lived in a rural area. By a wide gap, a suburban residential area was the most common answer, at 82% compared to 18% who designated that they were urban residents. This could easily correspond with areas in Virginia that have sufficient Jewish infrastructure to participate in religious and cultural life, and by extension come into contact with this project. This also will be expanded on in the section concerning potential errors.

Finally, the survey asked about Jewish movement affiliation. I provided a wide range of choices, including an "unaffiliated" answer, in order to accommodate respondents who did not live near an established synagogue or did not match the affiliation of their nearest synagogue. The most common answer by far was Conservative at 59%. Reform and Reconstructionist were fairly even at 18% and 15%, respectively. Five respondents said they were Orthodox, two indicated that they were unaffiliated, and one specified that they were "Conservadox." This is interesting because it differs from recent demographic research, in which 35% of American Jews identified with Reform, 18% with Conservative Judaism, 10% with Orthodoxy, and 6% with smaller movements, in addition to the 30% who claim no affiliation.[174] Going back to the data, given that more than 90% of respondents placed their religious affiliation among the so-called "liberal" movements, one would assume that according to this sample mikvah use in Virginia is uncommon, at least with halakhic observance as a primary rationale. However, this would be premature, as it leaves out egalitarian reasons for ritual immersion, and also casts unrealistically rigid lines between the movements.

Section 2: Mikvah-Focused Questions

The remainder of my survey asked questions directly related to the mikvah and its use; the intent here was to generally gauge frequency, rationale, and preferences for ritual immersion. These were the questions in the order I asked them, with answer choices in parentheses:

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[174] "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," Pew Research Center, last modified October 1, 2013, https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/.

7. Would you say that using the mikvah is an important part of your lifestyle? (Yes, No)
8. Approximately how often do you use the mikvah? [Once a week, Once a month, Once a year, On special occasions/circumstances only, Other (please specify), Never]
9. If you use the mikvah, why? Write as brief or detailed an answer as feels comfortable for you. Possible reasons could include halakhah, conversion, etc. (Space was provided for respondents to share their thoughts or not answer)
10. If you do not use the mikvah, why not? Write as brief or detailed an answer as feels comfortable for you. Possible reasons could include not being raised with the tradition, uncomfortable with the tradition, etc. (Space was provided for respondents to share their thoughts or not answer)
11. How far away, in commute time, is your nearest mikvah? (<30 minutes, 30 minutes - 1 hour, 1 to 2 hours, >2 hours, Don't know)
12. Would you say that your place of residence affects the frequency of your mikvah use? I.e. its political or social culture, location, etc. (Yes, Maybe, No)
13. Have you ever used, or ever considered using, a natural body of water (such as a lake or the ocean) as a mikvah? (Yes, No, Not Applicable)

The first question in this section set the tone for this entire project, and the results showed that 89% of respondents answered in the negative, with only eleven affirming that mikvah use is an important part of their lifestyle. I had expected that a majority of those surveyed would not use the mikvah regularly or consider it an important practice for their Judaism, though the numbers here are more heavily weighted in that direction than I anticipated. Among the nine men who responded to this survey, one-third said the mikvah was important to their lifestyle, compared to less than a tenth of women respondents. My hypothesis for this is that men who are more familiar with and have a positive perception of the mikvah would be more likely to answer this survey, returning to my point that ritual immersion is still mostly conceived of as a woman's ritual. In addition, the sexist legacies of the tradition regarding mikvah are

more prevalent for women's use than they are in men's.[175] An interesting statistic for this question is revealed when the data is examined in conjunction with the question from the previous section concerning long-time residence in the state. Almost a third of those who responded that they had always lived in Virginia said that the mikvah was an important part of their lifestyle, compared to only 8.2% of those who said they had moved to the state. While the sample size for the first group is too small to deduce anything major, this is still an intriguing disparity.

The next question represented a more objective look at the mikvah to measure relative frequency of use. First, a note on some of the answers I provided. While a respondent's frequency of mikvah use could be due to any reason and therefore without a rationale to attach to every response it would be reductive to make generalizations, there are some common reasons that one might immerse according to each answer. The "once a week" option was intended for those who might use the mikvah to purify themselves each Friday before Shabbat, a common practice among Chassidic and other very observant men.[176] "Once a month" is the most likely answer for those who immerse according to *taharat haMishpachah* or for Rosh Chodesh. Respondents who used the mikvah before Yom Kippur or infrequently enough to fall into this category could answer "once a year." Finally, "on special occasions/circumstances only" was intended for respondents who would only immerse in honor of a special event or life milestone, such as finishing conversion to Judaism or marking recovery from an illness. The "other (please specify)" gave survey takers a chance to explain their pattern of mikvah use if it did not fall into one of these common categories.

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[175] Looking back at chapter one, we can see that mikvah use has solidified in Jewish culture outside of Haredi communities and conversion contexts as a women-only ritual, despite its technically non-gendered origins. This has led to discomfort among women who do not wish to subject their sexuality or bodily cycles to halakhic regulation. Contrast this with the modern egalitarian mikvah movement, which not only wants to create a more comfortable immersion space for women but to open the ritual to anyone regardless of gender.

[176] Baruch Emanuel Erdstein, "The Mystical Mikvah," Laws & Customs, Chabad, accessed April 18, 2021, https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/1322499/jewish/The-Mystical-Mikvah.htm. Daily immersion by men, even more rare, is given attention in Abby Stein's *Becoming Eve: My Journey From Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi to Transgender Woman*, pages 95-96 (Apple Book format).

In terms of the data, 55 respondents answered that they never use the mikvah, a drop from the 89 in the previous question who indicated that the mikvah was not an important part of their lifestyle. This shows that some people use the mikvah even if they do not consider it an important (or regular) part of their practice. The second most popular answer was the "on special occasions/circumstances only" option, with 25% of survey takers. Although I did not expect many respondents to place themselves in one of the first three answer options, which imply a more traditional approach to mikvah use, I was surprised that more respondents chose the "other (please specify)" answer and elaborated on their specific practice. While some of the reasons for immersion provided in this category could definitely be defined as milestones or special circumstances, they also reflect a one-time use of the mikvah that the respondents perhaps did not feel fit into the previous category of "on special occasions/circumstances only." The supplemental answers here fall into two categories: pre-wedding immersion, and conversion immersion. Using the mikvah at the end of conversion to Judaism to signal one's definitive entry into the Jewish people is common across movements,[177] and I will discuss it further in the interviews section. Brides and to a lesser extent grooms immersing the night before their wedding is an equally traditional but less common practice.[178] Both cases indicate an interaction with one aspect of mikvah tradition but no desire to explore it beyond that.

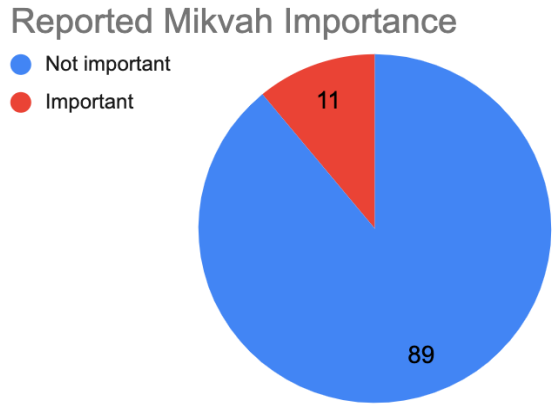
Briefly breaking this question down further into demographics, two-thirds of male respondents indicated some frequency of mikvah use, as opposed to only about two-fifths of female respondents. Again, as per my earlier speculation the number of male respondents is very low and was probably affected by the subject matter of the survey, so a more general survey of Jewish men across the state would have likely yielded vastly different results. In terms of movement affiliation, there was no regular

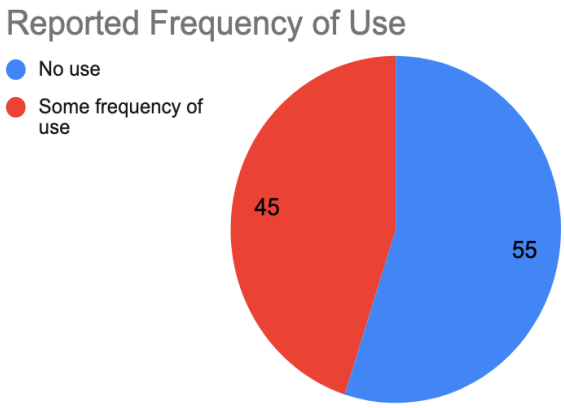
[177] See, for example, Robinson's *Essential Judaism* page 176, where mikvah is framed as an essential part of conversion regardless of movement affiliation. In contrast, in the matter of circumcision Reform and Reconstructionism are singled out for their more liberal stances, but no such distinction is made concerning immersion for conversion.

[178] The glossary entry for "mikvah" on the Reform Judaism website, for example, does mention immersion by brides and grooms as just one of many potential uses for the mikvah, and does not consider it an obligatory feature of a Jewish wedding. See Union for Reform Judaism, "Mikvah."

use associated with Reform and Reconstructionism, but both did have high numbers for their movement in the "on special occasions/circumstances only" category, 22.2% and 33.3% of affiliated respondents respectively. The Conservative movement, which was the most represented movement in this study, had an almost equal number of non-users and users with some type of mikvah experience.

The following two questions were left completely open to respondent input. I provided a text box for survey takers to fill in, instead of multiple choice answers. Moreover, they were free to select which of these two questions to answer based on which was more fitting in light of their mikvah practice, or even to skip both. My goal here was to gain some sense of a respondent's rationale in their own words. Somewhat surprisingly, 29 respondents answered the first question which asked about reasons for mikvah use, and 71 answered the next question about reasons against mikvah use; some answered both and some skipped them entirely. This is intriguing because it represents a middle point between the attitudes revealed in the answers to the first two questions for this section, wherein lifestyle importance ranked low but overall use was higher.





Figures 1 and 2: Charts showing the data from questions 7 and 8 from the survey. While it is clear that in both cases the majority of respondents indicated no kind of relationship with the mikvah, the dramatic increase from Figure 1 to Figure 2 in respondents who had engaged with the ritual in some way is notable.

In this section I would like to highlight certain trains of thought and use the respondent's own

words to examine their reasons. Breaking down the 29 answers for question nine, we can see certain themes emerge. By far the most common reason for using the mikvah was finishing conversion, closely followed by immersion the night before a respondent's wedding. These are one-time traditional uses of the mikvah that do not require a sustained commitment to the ritual; they therefore suggest an interaction with tradition without strict observance. Related to this would be mikvah use to mark a milestone or holiday, which also featured in several responses. In all of these reasons, using the mikvah commemorates a special event or time which the respondent wanted to mark in a Jewish way. Existing outside of this paradigm but important to mention is use of the mikvah to kasher (make kosher) kitchen utensils and appliances; only one respondent attributed any part of their mikvah use to this.

Only six of the 29 answers for this question attributed some measure of their mikvah use to *taharat haMishpachah* or traditional halakhah. The words "pure" and "purity" did occasionally feature in these responses, as in a few others, along with the idea that the mikvah was a site for cleansing. Mostly, however, the mikvah was portrayed within this context as a fertility ritual that was important during pregnancy and while trying for conception. Some respondents mentioned using the mikvah for spiritual healing after experiencing a miscarriage, an example of the emphasis on mikvah as a healing ritual which is popular within the egalitarian mikvaot movement.[179] This was also affirmed in responses that cast the mikvah as a site of spiritual and emotional renewal; one respondent used the word "rejuvenation," another said the mikvah uplifted and prepared her for the next month.

Within all of these answers we can see that the mikvah is foremost a ritual, and the rationale for doing it can encompass a variety of motivations. Interaction with tradition, segments of tradition, or modern ways of appropriating this practice all feature as part of mikvah use among this group. While a small number of the overall respondents, the reasons that these survey takers provided for their personal mikvah use are valuable for understanding how Virginians think about this ritual.

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[179] The egalitarian mikvah movement is most exemplified by the efforts of Mayyim Chayyim and its affiliates; for more information on this, see chapter 1.

Moving on, 71 respondents answered question ten about reasons for not using the mikvah, with some overlap with respondents for question nine. Out of this group, over half of the respondents, 38 to be precise, attributed their non-use of the mikvah with not being raised with the tradition. Moreover, those who indicated that they were not raised with the expectation of mikvah included both people who had no interest in learning more or experiencing the ritual (example: "Don't think it would speak to me spiritually or religiously."), as well as those who were interested but had simply not had exposure to it (example: "I'd be curious to go if there were one that's convenient."). About 15 of the responses for this question displayed an explicit willingness to try or use the mikvah more than they currently do. Some of the factors preventing them from doing so included distance to the nearest mikvah, lack of free time, and unfamiliarity with how to go about using a mikvah, as well as the natural hesitation or anxiety that surrounds a new experience.

Roughly one-fifth of the responses for this question revolved around what I would term a halakhic critique, in that they identified an aspect of halakhah surrounding this ritual that they were uncomfortable with. This widely involved purity standards, and the idea that menstruation makes one unclean. Some respondents highlighted menstruation as a normal biological process (example: "Menstruation is natural bodily function necessary for reproduction."), others expressed discomfort with the overall concepts of uncleanliness or impurity (example: "Women are as G-d made us and we are not impure."). There was a general sense among the answers from these respondents, and among those who answered this question across the board, that the mikvah was not a ritual meant for them, either because they perceived it as an Orthodox-only space that their presence would be inappropriate or out of place in (example: "Out of respect for women who use the mikveh as part of their monthly rituals I do not think it would be appropriate for me to use it if I am NOT following the laws."), or because they believed it was an anachronistic and outdated ritual (example: "I don't feel it has a place in our lives [in] 2020."). Here I should also briefly mention the respondents who disclosed that since their menstruation had ceased (either

due to menopause or birth control), they did not see a point in using the mikvah; this is another example of people feeling unconnected with the traditional aspects of mikvah.

Answers to question ten also highlighted ways in which mikvah use was difficult or inconvenient for certain Virginians. The shortage of accessible, nearby mikvaot appeared as a recurring theme. This encompassed both problems of distance and insufficient support in terms of a specific respondent's needs. In the latter vein, one survey taker noted that there was no mikvah near him that could respect his identity and his mobility needs; another said that she would be more comfortable using a mikvah with less supervision, or no pre-immersion inspection process. This is connected to an awareness about the lack of egalitarian mikvaot in the state and the aforementioned preconception that the mikvah is an Orthodox-only space. Others stated that the distance between them and the nearest mikvah would make using it an inconvenience, even if they expressed an interest in the ritual. Indeed, ritual immersion is slightly more time-consuming than other Jewish rituals, especially if one has to drive to the nearest big city to use a mikvah.

It should be noted that some degree of discomfort with the mikvah frequently appeared in these responses, whether because of personal past experiences or the mikvah portrayals survey takers had come in contact with. Not all respondents elaborated on their feeling of discomfort, though some mentioned a disconnect with the meaning behind the ritual. It is clear from even surface-level knowledge of the mikvah that it is a very vulnerable and intimate space; based on personal familiarity or comfort levels, one might hesitate to designate it as a safe place for immersion. One respondent brought up an incident in a Washington, D.C. mikvah, where an Orthodox rabbi was arrested and dismissed from all his positions following proof of his voyeurism of women using the facility.[180] Responses that highlight uncomfortability make clear just how intimidating mikvah use can be.

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[180] Tzuberi discusses this incident at the beginning of her article cited earlier in this thesis "Three Men Walk into a Mikveh," pages 98-100, noting the potential for abuse in the mikvah. She also places it in the context of visibility/publicity of the mikvah, and how this event seemingly confirmed mainstream feminist thoughts about the "degradation" of women with Orthodox Judaism.

The answers to both question nine and ten showcase a broad array of reasons for using or not using the mikvah. These symbolize a variety of backgrounds, personal practices, and value systems. Furthermore, this is likely only a small sample of how Jewish Virginians in general think about the mikvah. Even this brief survey gauging surface feelings on the topic illuminates the complexity surrounding this topic.

Question eleven returned to a multiple choice structure and asked about the relative distance a respondent would have to travel to the nearest mikvah. I formatted the answer options by commute time, which I felt to be a better measure of accessibility to mikvaot than a fixed distance measurement. I also included an "I don't know" option for respondents who were not aware, off the top of their head, where the nearest mikvah was. This proved to be valuable, as 25 respondents, a fourth of the total survey takers, selected this option, highlighting that knowing the location of the nearest mikvah was not a major concern of theirs. In contrast, 38 respondents chose the first option, indicating that there is a mikvah less than a half hour's commute away from them. A further 35 answered that it would take them between 30 minutes to an hour to travel to a mikvah. The remaining two respondents indicated that the nearest mikvah was a one to two hour commute. My expectations for this question were that distance would affect mikvah use and its lifestyle importance; in other words, the further distance from a mikvah, the number of frequent users and people who would consider it an important part of their lifestyle would decrease. As at least 74% of the survey takers live within an hour commute of a mikvah, this distinction is hard to see; moreover, this group runs the gamut of mikvah use and importance to lifestyle, as previously noted. It would seem that distance is not a major factor, suggesting that culture is more important than convenience when it comes to mikvah use.

The next question was far more subjective and sought to find out if there was a direct link between place of residence and mikvah use. It asked respondents if their place of residence, meaning Virginia or their specific location in the state, had any bearing on how often they used the mikvah. While I

included examples of factors that could be related to their place of residence ("its political or social culture, location, etc."), I wanted to keep the question ambiguous so respondents could answer according to what they thought influenced their personal practice. For this question, 22 respondents said "yes," that their place of residence does affect the frequency of their mikvah use, 69 said "no," and 9 selected "maybe." Thinking that there might be a relationship between this data and commute time, I cross listed the two sets and found little correlation, save for within the "30 minutes - 1 hour" category which had an almost even number of "yes" and "no" responses, 14 and 16 respectively. While interesting, I still would not label distance a major factor in how this group thinks about the mikvah. I also compared this question to the results for the question on lifestyle importance, and found that 64% of respondents selected both that they would not consider the mikvah an important part of their lifestyle and that they do not think their place of residence affects the frequency of their mikvah use. This suggests that attitudes towards the mikvah may be independent of location for a majority of this group.

The last question in my survey asked about ritual immersion in places other than a mikvah. Halakhically, any natural body of water containing the right volume can be a mikvah, which could provide a more attractive immersion option for those who may be uncomfortable with aspects of a normative mikvah experience, such as supervision while submerging. By asking whether respondents had ever used or considered using bodies of water like lakes or the ocean for ritual immersion, I hoped to find out if mikvah use in Virginia defied a lack of infrastructure, ritual orthopraxy, or widespread discomfort with the tradition. Within the results, 22 respondents answered "yes," 61 said "no," and 17 selected the "not applicable" option I included for those who had never entertained the question or did not use the mikvah under any circumstances. All those in this last group had previously indicated that the mikvah was not an important part of their lifestyle. It is interesting that out of the 89 respondents who were in that group, 15 said they had used or considered using a natural water source as a mikvah, and that only 7 out of the 11 who designated mikvah use as important had considered immersion in a natural body of water.

As this last question clearly shows, using the mikvah does not always correlate equally with lifestyle importance or frequency of use. People interact with the mikvah in complex ways. Furthermore, various demographic factors may influence how people think about the mikvah.

Section 3: Interviews

From July to December I conducted twelve interviews with various people involved intensively in their Jewish community, such as rabbis, mikvah directors, and community leaders. Through these I wanted to get a general view of how their specific community interacts with the mikvah, and how these figures approach it from a professional stance. Due to Covid-19, the interviews were conducted over Zoom video calls or the phone. Before each interview I sent informed consent forms to the interviewee over email and had them send the completed form back; I obtained verbal consent in the instances where this was not possible. I did not record participant names or direct identifiers beyond the date that I interviewed them and basic descriptions of their role in the community. While I adjusted my questions based on who I was interviewing in each case, I had a general structure of asking background questions about their career and role in the community and how long they have been in their current area. I also asked about the mikvah in their area, if there was one, and how it was used. From this I tried to construct a picture of mikvah use across the state, as well as the general culture of the mikvah in Virginia.

There was a general consensus among my interviewees that there is not a culture of heavy mikvah use in Virginia. This is not surprising in light of the previous survey data; I would also conjecture that outside of strictly observant enclaves, there is no area in the United States where the mikvah is frequently used by the majority of adult community members. More than this, several contacts described mikvah use as rare or limited in their area. This depended on the exact location of the interviewee; a contact in an Orthodox community might necessarily interact more with the mikvah than one who belonged to a different movement. On the whole, however, there was agreement that mikvah was not a ritual of high importance of Jewish communities in Virginia.

Interviewees had different ideas on why this might be. Several pointed to the fact that many Jewish Virginians as a whole do not have much awareness of or knowledge about the mikvah; depending on one's background, education on the subject can be limited. One administrator who also worked as a mikvah guide expressed doubt that anyone in her immediate community "gets" the mikvah, despite her efforts to provide more information about it.[181] A different interviewee saw mikvah as "another casualty" in the lack of traditional observance among American Jews, which intersected with what another contact said concerning a perceived "hierarchy of mitzvahs," where mikvah use was at the bottom.[182] I would tie this back to quintessential perceptions of American Jewry, in particular the debates over assimilation and acculturation, and the shift over time in traditional methods of observance. In this way, the mikvah's peripheral status in ritual life is just another facet of the larger Jewish assimilation into broader American culture, wherein some rituals are easier to maintain than others. The mikvah is more foreign to the dominant national culture than kashrut or taking work off on the Sabbath, and also requires a certain amount of time and dedication; thus, it easily falls by the wayside. Therefore, I would not consider these attitudes to be a marker of Southern Jewish culture but rather a reflection of modern American Judaism.

One of the talking points in these interviews was the potential reasons for immersion in the interviewee's region. Across the board, the mikvah was mainly used for conversion.[183] As rabbis are involved in the process of conversion, this was the use they came most into contact with; however, mikvah directors also confirmed that immersion for the purpose of finalizing a conversion was the most popular reason by far for visiting the mikvah. One contact estimated that conversions made up about 85% of immersions in her community mikvah.[184] This makes sense considering the previous survey data on reasons for immersing, and the associated analysis on interaction with tradition and time commitment.

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[181] Interview, October 19, 2020.
[182] Interview, November 17, 2020; interview, October 27, 2021.
[183] Officials from more observant communities might dispute this. In an interview on November 17, 2020, one contact expressed that his regional mikvah was used almost exclusively by women observing *taharat haMishpachah*. Conversion was, in his view, a far less frequent rationale.
[184] Interview, October 27, 2020.

Using the mikvah for conversion represents an interaction with tradition on a one-time basis and without the uncomfortable associations of *taharat haMishpachah*. Bridal immersion can also fall under this category, along with immersion to commemorate life events.

There were also variations in immersion use depending on the nature of the closest mikvah; here the distinction between "Orthodox only" and other types of mikvaot should be noted. While not restricted in a true sense, mikvaot associated with Orthodox synagogues or organizations have certain guidelines, particularly for conversions, that may not make them a comfortable choice for many who do not subscribe to this way of immersing. By contrast, mikvaot connected with non-Orthodox communities or egalitarian mikvaot are not as rigid concerning the exact procedure or reasons for use. For example, the mikvah at Adas Israel in Washington, D.C., which is now associated with the Rising Tide Network, was built in 1989 to have a space where women rabbis could officiate conversions; this was previously not possible with the mikvaot in the Northern Virginia area which were Orthodox affiliated. In another scenario, the three mikvaot in Richmond show the strict divides in immersion preference: the Conservative and two Orthodox mikvaot serve different members of the community, have different immersion experiences, and cater to different needs. Regardless of the existence of non-Orthodox mikvaot in the state, the perception of the mikvah as an Orthodox-only space persists. One contact reported that the people in her area thought of the mikvah as a "good idea for the Orthodox," but did not really see the value in participating themselves.[185] Another interviewee confirmed this sentiment, speculating that many probably thought of the mikvah as an outdated ritual.[186]

There often seemed to be a divide between how these community members viewed the mikvah versus how they thought their community interacted with it. Although some admitted that they did not really think about the mikvah outside of when it features in their job or life, most had some sort of personal or professional opinion on it. The overwhelming attitude was that the mikvah could be a much

[185] Interview, October 16, 2020.
[186] Interview, December 2, 2020.

more valuable aspect of Jewish ritual life than it is currently in Virginia. Many, regardless of movement affiliation, brought up the positive ways mikvah use could affect one's life. Several interviewees with this outlook mentioned specifically the mikvah's potential for celebrating or commemorating important life events; it represents a distinctly Jewish way of recognizing transitions that can already be seen in traditional uses like immersion for conversion. Others highlighted the possibility for healing and intention in this ritual, especially within the context of body positivity. One brought up the fact that the mikvah is one of the only Jewish rituals that one does alone, allowing for a space that is relaxing and individual without being particularly lonely.[187] Another contact maintained that the core message of the mikvah is "your body is holy," and since she did not perceive many other channels for that message, the mikvah is an important concept for all bodies regardless of gender.[188] Other interviewees centered the mikvah as an important part of Jewish community building. One contact, who is more observant, framed it as a "basic" and "integral" ritual for the community, going back to the ancient mandate that a mikvah must be constructed before a synagogue is built or a Torah acquired.[189] Another put this distinction in similar terms, that the mikvah is crucial to maintaining a strong Jewish community.[190] A third contended that "every community should have a mikvah" as an accessible "centerpoint."[191]

Conversely, interviewees were divided on whether mikvah use would become more popular in Virginia. There is mikvah-building activity currently ongoing in the state, the most active regions being the Peninsula and Tidewater areas where there have been two recent mikvah projects, one through the organization Mikvah USA (more traditionally oriented) and the other with the Rising Tide Network (egalitarian mikvaot). Some were hopeful that these new mikvaot and other outreach efforts, with which quite a few of these contacts were involved, could change the culture around mikvah use and increase

[187] Interview, October 19, 2020; the exception to this is of course the mikvah attendant who supervises immersion, and who can be more or less involved in the process depending on which mikvah one goes to.
[188] Interview, October 27, 2020.
[189] Interview, August 24, 2020.
[190] Interview, November 17, 2020.
[191] Interview, July 27, 2020.

usage. One expressed optimism that Virginia would be part of the "much broader renaissance" concerning ritual immersion, and that these mikvaot could be a tool to "resuscitate" Jewish communities that were losing their cultural cohesiveness.[192] Another contact did point to a perceived increase in use of her mikvah over the past decade, though she did not know the exact reasons behind people's immersions.[193] It is true that an increase in the number of mikvaot that are both physically and culturally accessible is likely to increase use in their general areas. The converse also being true, if a mikvah is not immediate in the community, people will not use one; this likely the case for the majority of smaller Jewish communities across the state. Moreover, the mindset that the mikvah is a ritual only for the Orthodox or for the more observant is still pervasive. As the survey data also illustrates due to the overwhelming number of female respondents, the mikvah is widely seen as a women-only ritual. This challenges the push from egalitarian mikvaot to make the mikvah a space for everyone regardless of gender. Although some interviewees warned me against only viewing ritual immersion through the stigma surrounding traditional Judaism, there is no denying that this stigma does exist, especially in so-termed liberal Jewish communities. Finally, even building a mikvah in a community relies on a lot of different factors concerning want and need. One contact mentioned the trend outside the state of community mikvaot that exist outside of strict denomination and serve the whole needs of the wider community, as egalitarian mikvaot aim to do; he was not sure how popular this would be in Virginia. Indeed, the rigid divides between the three main mikvaot in Richmond, for example, showcase the boundaries between different mindsets and levels of observance, wherein movement affiliation determines which mikvah one would go to and why.

Section 4: Summary

As this chapter shows, there are a wide range of attitudes and approaches to the mikvah within Virginia. The aim of this project was not to come to an indisputable conclusion in regards to mikvah use or disuse in the state; indeed, the variety of responses that Jewish Virginians provided displays that trying

[192] Interview, October 27, 2020.
[193] Interview, August 12, 2020.

to reach such a conclusion might be impossible. I would also argue that trying to claim anything definitive about mikvah use would be just as difficult if the subject group was American Jewry in general, a line of reasoning I will pick up in the next chapter. Instead, the data from this study highlights the diversity of ritual practice among and within Jewish communities, as in any part of the country.

The survey data revealed that although a majority of respondents would not consider the mikvah an important part of their ritual practice, a notable percentage of them do think about it or interact with it in some capacity. Mikvah use is, therefore, not a fringe ritual in this region. Furthermore, mikvah use and its frequency are determined by background, gender, movement, and various other factors. My interviews showed that community leaders often had more contact with the mikvah and therefore more to say about it, usually in positive terms; they also held a broader picture of mikvah use in their communities. However, there was still no general consensus on how the mikvah is being used or how it should be used. In the next chapter, I will analyze the data further and draw some conclusions from it.

Chapter Four: Conclusions and Possible Sources of Error

This thesis has traced the separate histories of the mikvah and Southern Jewish culture, and explored their intersection through data from across the state of Virginia. The results show that interaction with the mikvah is not widespread, but it does exist, and that it is tied to the ways that American Jewry in general is grappling with the subject. I propose that this project is a specific demonstration of the aforementioned prediction that Jewish communities in the South are becoming more like Jewish communities in the rest of the country.[194] Gauging engagement with a ritual, such as the mikvah, provides a way to study regional attitudes in comparison with a larger discourse. I argue that the data I collected show that Jewish Virginians think about the mikvah within the same terms and approaches that constitute the general conversation around mikvah in American Judaism, and that this signals the broader ways in which regional differences among Jewish communities in American are diminishing. This distinction will be clearer after breaking down the data for further analysis, and speculating on the possible reasons behind it. This will illuminate that mikvah use in Virginia, as this study has explored it, is reflective of the wider discourse in the United States rather the product of a regional history or culture. This lends credence to the case that Southern Jewish culture has changed to mirror general Jewish culture, perhaps at the cost of its distinctiveness.

Firstly, we must look at the provided rationale for mikvah use in the context of modern dominant streams of thought concerning the ritual. The area with the clearest connection is that of feminist scholarship and criticism. The respondents who brought up a feminist critique of the mikvah in their rationale for not immersing echo the arguments from Jewish feminists concerning this and other rituals that involve the Jewish body. I would place responses that touch on body positivity within this category, although they are more specifically equated with the egalitarian mikvaot movement and that particular

[194] See introduction, as well as footnote 112, located in chapter 2; this prediction from Eli N. Evans is important for understanding how Southern Jewish culture is changing, and the place that the mikvah might occupy within that paradigm.

brand of feminism. Interviewee and survey content that referenced halakhah and concepts like ritual purity or family life also pick up on larger segments of current mikvah discourse, namely those within Orthodox and more observant contexts; as an example, the anthology *Total Immersion* is an extensive collection of such arguments. Another stream of thought represented in the data is that which refers to the "anachronism" of the mikvah, which itself harks back to an older movement concerned with gauging the compatibility of rituals with modernity, and transforming them accordingly. With this in mind, this study population therefore represents a notable sample of the mikvah discourse in contemporary American Jewish thought.

Another sign that the views represented in the survey responses and interviews are not characteristic of region-specific cultural norms is the fact that respondents almost never brought up ways of thinking about the mikvah that were unique to the geographic context. I expected, going into this project, that I would hear instances of observant Jewish women immersing in nearby rivers or the Atlantic Ocean owing to the lack of area mikvaot, of people remembering a relative doing such a thing, or even other ways of fulfilling ritual immersion characterized by the dearth of widespread Jewish infrastructure in the South. However, only once did I hear anything like this mentioned. Instead, immersion rationale and methods seemed to fall with the normative mikvah culture of the United States, as I have presented it in this paper. Higher frequencies of mikvah use where the infrastructure exists, and where there is also widespread community use, is a component of American Jewish mikvah culture as a whole.

Why does the mikvah defy regional specificity? This could have to do with the connection of the mikvah to gender. As the data from the previous chapter revealed, over 90% of survey respondents were women, without any aim to gauge only the attitudes and experiences of women. Clearly, the mikvah is still widely thought of as a women's ritual, rather than one for everyone, as egalitarian mikvaot are dedicated to making the norm. Mikvah is firmly embedded in *taharat haMishpachah* to this day, and the connotation of these with womanhood puts the onus on women to regulate or police their own sexuality

and reproductive health. This forms part of the stigma that has made mikvaot a distasteful concept for many modern Jewish women. Moreover, it shows that gender and the cultural discourse around it are more important for determining mikvah use than location.

I would argue however that the major factor behind the results of this study is the demographics of Virginian Jewry. As noted in the data section, a significant majority of survey respondents had not lived in Virginia their whole lives. Instead of majority state-born respondents, most survey takers had grown up somewhere else and moved to the state later on. This is not surprising both in the context of the various professional career opportunities in Virginia, emigration from small towns, and the earlier mentioned prediction about the decline of regional specificity. In this light, this study is therefore more representative of American Jewry as a larger body, than Southern or Virginian Jewry specifically. It is not out of the realm of possibility to say that just as Southern Jewry is changing demographically, it is changing culturally as well. If, then, the data I have gathered is a marker of the decline of a unique Southern Jewish culture, this once more raises questions about the fate of Southern Jewish ways of life. I do not have the expertise or foresight to answer these questions. I will simply note that from a historical perspective, the absence of a distinctly Southern mikvah culture today does not mean the lack of one in the past, perhaps when this regional specificity was stronger. Even more intriguing than questions about what mikvah use looks like in the South now (and what it will look like in the future) is what it looked like historically, a line of inquiry complicated by the dearth of sources.

This study was neither perfect nor holistic. It was designed to cover as much ground as I was capable of processing within my limited capabilities. Due to this, not all variables affecting study data were within my control. For example, the Covid-19 virus halted all physical social activity in the United States shortly after I submitted my original proposal; although I did not have to alter too much of my project, some features still had to be changed. For example, I was originally going to travel around the state and conduct in-person interviews, as well as visit actual mikvaot. Because of the pandemic, all

contact had to be virtual and many mikvaot still remain closed.[195] An effect of this is that, although I was locally based for most of this project, my contact with Jewish communities in Virginia was completely remote, and therefore not as strong as I would have liked.

In a related vein, since I was completely reliant on technology to communicate with contacts and spread my survey, I could not always ensure that I would get a response to outreach attempts. Especially with the virtualization of every aspect of social, professional, and academic life, my emails could be, and probably were, easily lost in inboxes or disregarded. Although the amount of responses I received were well-suited to my ability to process and analyze them, I could have obtained more data through different outreach methods, such as physical meetings or tangible flyers with survey links in community centers. As stated above, these were not feasible measures in the data gathering process for this project. In addition, data collection for my survey was reliant on the cooperation of community organizations like local federations or synagogues to distribute to their members. If I was never able to establish contact with one of these organizations in the first place, or if they had a policy about not distributing outside materials to members, I was not able to collect data from a certain area. I also had no reliable way of following up with most organizations to make sure my survey did make it to their newsletters. It is here that I would like to thank those groups that did distribute my questions, as well as my advisor again for her invaluable efforts in helping the survey reach more inaccessible channels, without which I would not have been able to get most of this data.

Mikvah use represents a gap in scholarship on American Judaism, and it is my recommendation that it should be further studied in the context of the American South; doing so would uncover new perspectives on the relationship between location and identity, both of culture and gender. Placing this

[195] I have tried to the best of my ability to ensure that the fact that mikvaot are largely still unavailable to the public would not affect survey data; in interviews and in my survey informed consent, I specified that I was looking for answers that would be true for normal, pre-pandemic conditions. However, unless this same project was repeated in non-Covid-19 conditions, there is no way of knowing whether the data was affected or not.

thesis in the context of a wider study of mikvah use in the region would only strengthen it. Concerning future similar research, there are certain things I would encourage researchers to take into consideration. The first, as I mentioned above, would be data gathering techniques. Although phone calls might have made contacting local synagogues more complex, it might have ensured a different answer rate than with emails. In addition, spreading a survey through online community groups, like those for Jewish educators or Jewish studies researchers, might allow for more ground coverage, or at least for more people to come in contact with research questions. Another thing to consider is the survey questions themselves. For example, I would have liked to get a better understanding of where respondents were based; unfortunately, the anonymity standards for this kind of research prevent asking directly where survey takers are, but it might be useful to ask geographically if they were in the north of the state, the west, et cetera, or which major city was closest to them. Questions about family mikvah culture and location of origin would also have been good to ask to better understand how this group interacts with the mikvah. Lastly, a better sense of the existing mikvaot in the region is key. Understanding where immersion sites are not only helps in constructing a map of mikvah use across the state, but also provides more contacts to interview and survey for a better picture of who is immersing and why.

In conclusion, within the parameters of my research I have not been able to find evidence of a distinct culture of mikvah use in the state of Virginia. It could be the case that I have barely skimmed the surface of Jewish culture in the American South concerning ritual immersion, or even that this mikvah culture is defined by its mutedness. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that the culture surrounding mikvah as I have examined it here is reflective of the nationwide debate surrounding the mikvah, rather than a specific regional context. This could be due to a few possibilities: that the mikvah as a ritual somehow defies regional distinctiveness, that regional distinctiveness is no longer a useful category for looking at Southern Jewry, or that regional distinctiveness of mikvah existed historically but does not now. Determining the exact reason would require significant research into the historical situation of mikvaot in

Virginia and the larger South. Keeping in mind the relative dearth of mikvah mentions in both scholarly and non-academic literature, this would be an intensive undertaking. However, without it the true picture of mikvah use in this area is incomplete.[196] Another direction for future study, particularly tied to how ritual and ritual language change over time, could be informed by the work of researcher Isabel Wilkerson. Her recent book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* examines the American racial caste system, including how purity language is used to enforce the social hierarchy.[197] It could be worthwhile to examine whether Jews in Southern states translated ritual purity language from the context of mikvah and *taharat haMishpachah* to that of the racially stratified culture of the American South. In the case that uncovering the traces of a distinct Southern Jewish mikvah culture characterized by physical baths is impossible, this provides a way to study how conceptions of ritual purity adapted to new regions and circumstances. In whatever context, it is my hope that one day this small, subregional study will be part of a wider body of literature detailing past as well as current mikvah use and culture of the American South.

[196] One course this research on the relationship between geography and ritual immersion could take is the study of natural springs, their use for supposed health benefits, and related tourism. This already parallels mikvah in the context of the medical scientism movement, and it is worth investigating whether the existence of a local natural water source already being regularly used had an effect on ritual immersion behavior. The presence of many such natural springs in the South could provide another link with Southern culture. See for example "Medicinal Springs of Virginia in the 19th Century," Historical Collections at the Claude Moore Health Sciences Library, University of Virginia, accessed May 13, 2021, http://exhibits.hsl.virginia.edu/springs/introessay/.

[197] Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* (New York: Random House, 2020), 115-130.

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