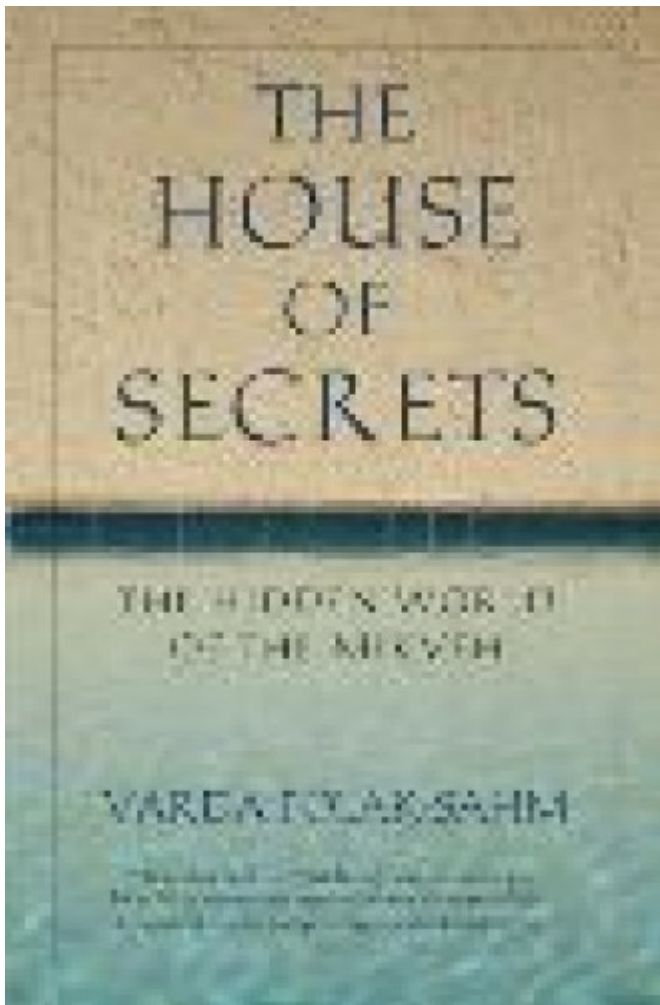


The House of Secrets: The Hidden World of the Mikveh

reviewed by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [July 27, 2010](#) issue

In Review



The House of Secrets: The Hidden World of the Mikveh

Varda Polak-Sahm; Anne Hartstein Pace, trans.
Beacon

Most Christians have little understanding of the practice in which baptism has its origins: ritual bathing for purification in the Jewish tradition. Israeli author Varda Polak-Sahm takes us into the contemporary Jewish ritual bath, the *mikveh*, not only as a cultural anthropologist but also as a woman on a spiritual quest.

Her first venture to the *mikveh* came as a young bride on the eve of her wedding. She was secretly pregnant and terrified that the waters would somehow give her away. She went again to the *mikveh* more than a decade later, before her second wedding, following her family's tradition of bridal bathing as well as Orthodox rabbis' demand for a kosher marriage. She viewed the rabbis' role in her wedding as invasive of her privacy, and she found the whole practice of the *mikveh* to be archaic and even, ironically, unclean.

Yet on this second immersion, she had a powerful experience that was at once sensual and spiritual. As she emerged from the bath, her body "was placed in the hands of the three mothers, who, like three bacchantes in a Dionysian orgy, energetically massaged and kneaded my flesh with skilled hands, stimulating all my five senses to the edges of their nerve endings. . . . I was flooded with an elemental emotion so stunning in its intensity, so acute, it was as if every fiber of my being was stirring wondrously to life."

The memory of this experience led Polak-Sahm to return to the *mikveh* another decade later, this time as a student of folklore at Hebrew University. She wanted to understand how other women understood the experience and to get insight into her own experience.

For the first half of *The House of Secrets*, Polak-Sahm mesmerizes the reader with her encounters at the *mikveh*. She relays stories from women that could only be told in this intimate context. Her storytelling and analysis skillfully led me toward a greater understanding of what it means to have a female body in a social world dominated by men. In Orthodox Judaism, women's bodies move in and out of states of "purity" while men's bodies remain constantly pure. The blood of *niddah*, or impurity, is what causes this movement, and it is an extremely ambivalent substance. It represents both life (the ability to reproduce) and death (the death of an egg that will not become a person). It is also blood that flows without conscious human control, unlike the blood of circumcision. Thus when a woman is bleeding, she is in a state of "nature" and must avoid "culture" (the world of men). She must

refrain from all contact with her husband until after her ritual immersion.

Polak-Sahm brilliantly illuminates these tensions and their religious and cultural meanings, not just intellectually but, like all good anthropologists, in a way that produces a rich understanding of people's lives. She moves between the extensive and intricate rules and regulations of Orthodox Judaism and an examination of how individual women make sense of and live them.

It baffles her, for example, that secular Jewish women come regularly to the *mikveh* to bathe and observe *niddah*. "Why, in this day and age, are women enthusiastically choosing a lifestyle centered on concepts of purity and impurity? Why do they readily accept being 'untouchable' for . . . half of their fertile lives?" Some women are intrigued by the prospect of "life-giving waters"; others see their immersions as part of their *tikkun*—their work to repair the world. Many want a kosher wedding and kosher pregnancies even if they struggle to understand their relationship to the rabbis who dictate the boundaries. Others connect the *mikveh* to the cycles of nature and further connect their femininity to those cycles.

Ultraorthodox women believe that the *mikveh* produces kosher Jewish children whose presence on earth helps to bring about the coming of the Messiah. This is the understanding of the *balayinot*—the women authorized to conduct the immersions. Tensions arose between Polak-Sahm and the *balayinot* on this point. Polak-Sahm finds this view despicable—the creation of a superior Jewish race smacks of Aryanism to her. In turn, the *balayinot* accused Polak-Sahm of failing in her duties as a Jewish woman by producing children who are not as Jewish as they should be.

About halfway through this wonderful book, Polak-Sahm stops serving the rich stew of personal, social, cultural and religious tensions and turns to what sounds more like a traditional ethnography. I wanted to know what effect her time in the *mikveh* had on her understanding of her own Jewish identity. Did the *mikveh* change her? Did she step any closer to the mystery of her second immersion and its life-giving properties? She never reveals this and never returns to that experience to offer a greater illumination of it.

Ultimately, Polak-Sahm would like to see the *mikveh* come under greater female control. She does not object to the concept of *niddah* as much as she objects to its elaboration by the rabbis. She feels that rabbis have "poked and prodded and stuck their noses into a woman's most private, intimate parts, into her house of secrets, . . . her hidden places, deep into her sexual organs" in order to regulate a woman's

body in a way that is insulting. She is encouraged by recent innovations because they may mean that women will be able to take over more of the act of interpreting *mikveh*. She would like to see a more flexible and responsive practice, one that adapts to its location in time and space. And she would like to see women rise to the challenge of creating Jewish identity for the next generation rather than having that identity force-fed to them in the name of being kosher.