

# HOT SPRINGS MIKVEH

BY MARNA SAPSOWITZ

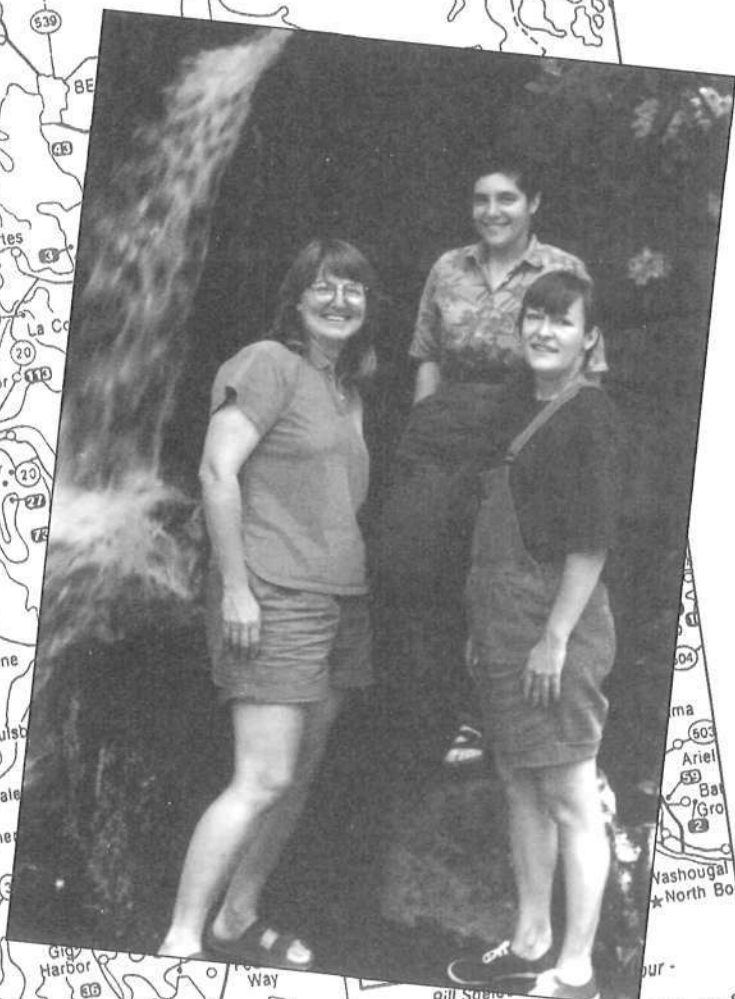
Ronda and Donna had been studying with me for a full year, in preparation for conversion. The time had come to formalize their commitment to Judaism, and so we talked about mikveh [the ritual bath], about what it signified, and about what the options were.

There's a mikveh near Seattle (60 miles away), maintained by the Orthodox community. We non-Orthodox rabbis are allowed to use it for our conversions, but not without unpleasant hassles each time. Neither Ronda nor Donna particularly wanted to use the "official" mikveh, and I, frankly, supported them in that decision. To me, traditional mikvehs smack of the idea of menstrual impurity — a concept I find distasteful. I also dislike feeling that I need to be on my "best behavior" so that the Orthodox don't revoke non-Orthodox privileges (which has happened in the past), and I resent as well what I consider to be the extortionist fee charged for mikveh use.

Since Donna and Ronda are both outdoorsy types, lovers of nature, we discussed more "natural" options. Lakes, rivers, the ocean all sounded good, but would be COLD at this time of year. Besides, we needed a place secluded enough to guarantee us privacy for naked immersion. What to do?

Brainstorming, it suddenly came to us: a hot spring! Here in the Pacific Northwest we are blessed with an abundance of natural wonders; one of the most wondrous is hot springs. Water bubbles out of the earth, pre-heated, natural . . . and acceptable as a kosher mikveh. What could be more perfect?

Ronda did the research. A number of possibilities had to be eliminated—many of the hot springs have been developed into spas or resorts. Those wouldn't work. Others,



Above, left to right:  
Donna Albert, Rabbi Marna Sapsowitz,  
Ronda Friedman.

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tragically, have been so overused and so irresponsibly used that they've become virtual cesspools. (So one of the forest rangers told Ronda.)

Finally, after countless phone calls, Ronda found what sounded like the perfect place: Goldmyer Hotsprings (it even sounded Jewish!). Maintained by a group called the Northwest Wilderness Foundation, only twenty people per day are allowed into the area. There were no reservations at all for the day we wanted to go; we could have it all to ourselves.

The directions sounded pretty straightforward: Twenty-two miles down a dirt road (we would, of course, borrow a four-wheel drive), then wade across a stream, find a path on the other side and follow it up to the hot spring. But when we got to the stream—perhaps wadable in August—it was, in late May, a rushing, ice-cold torrent. Absolutely uncrossable. We despaired. Still, having come all this way, we weren't going to give up that easily. Downstream a ways was a large tree that had fallen across the river. We bushwhacked down, and, holding on for dear life, slid across. (Actually, Donna walked across; Ronda and I weren't so daring.) Thoroughly covered with mud, we found our way back upstream to where we could pick up the trail to the spring.

**T**he spring made it all worthwhile. The water comes out of the earth inside a cave with a high, arched ceiling . . . inside the cave lies a steaming pool . . . then the water spills out into a smaller, rock-lined pool, just outside the cave's entrance, and, from there, into a larger pool. Each pool is successively a little cooler than the one above it, as the water is chilled by the much cooler air. All sit on the side of a cliff, overlooking a cascading waterfall.

By this time we were all hyperventilating, so we stripped and plunged in, soaking for a while in utter bliss. (So much for rabbinic distance and dignity!) Then I got out, dressed, and Donna and Ronda each immersed and said the *brachot* [blessings]. We had done what we came there to do. Indeed a memorable mikveh experience. One that Ronda and Donna—and I—will not forget.

Back home, on *erev* Shavuot [the eve of the holiday], we convened the traditional *beit din* [religious "court"], and the two brand-new Jews-by-Choice read from the Book of Ruth (in Hebrew as well as English) and talked about their odysseys into Judaism. It was beautiful and moving. As a gift, I had T-shirts made for them. On the front, they say: THE MIKVEH AT GOLDMYER HOTSPRINGS. On the back: I DUNKED.

Marna Sapsowitz is rabbi of Temple Beth Hatfiloh in Olympia, Washington.



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