



We've uncovered ancient Jewish communities all over the world — some still viable, most no longer around — but one thing we can usually be sure of finding is the town's *mikveh*. It might be moldy and putrid, hidden under a building or frozen over with ice, but there's nothing that attests to the tenacity of the Jews like those wet, crumbling structures

# *Taking the* **PLUNGE!**

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# A

*mikveh* is one of the first structures built in any Jewish community and is a central pillar of family life, so it would be logical that — on our numerous journeys over the years researching ancient Jewish districts — we’d discover many of these ritual baths. Well, we haven’t been disappointed.

While the *mikveh* had many more purification functions during the time of the Beis Hamikdash than it does today, it’s still central to Jewish ritual. Family purity is the *mikveh’s* primary use, but it serves other functions as well. All new eating utensils created by a non-Jew must be immersed before being used, many *sofrim* immerse before they write G-d’s name on the parchment, and most men immerse before Yom Kippur, while some immerse every Erev Shabbos, or even daily. So it’s no wonder that wherever we found a shul, we could assume there would have been a *mikveh* in close proximity.

Our “*mikveh* quest” got a boost recently, when we were in the Alsace region on France’s eastern border, visiting small communities, old shuls, and some of the oldest matzah factories in the world. We arrived at a lovely, restored old shul in Thann, a small town of under 8,000 people that had a Jewish community dating back to the 12th century. That shul had quite a history: In 1818 the Jewish villagers build the town’s shul in a barn, which was replaced by an imposing structure in 1862. Following bombings in World War I, it was restored in 1924, plundered during the German occupation, restored after World War II, and again in 1975. Today not one Jew lives in the town, but after our non-Jewish contact unlocked the doors for us, she mentioned something she thought might be of interest. Just two weeks before, workers were digging the front yard of the shul and discovered what seemed to be some sort of ancient bath. A *mikveh*!

What we found truly startling is that for hundreds of years, the end of the street was known as Zum Judenbad (“to the Jewish bath”)

We clambered down into it, bombarded with questions by the curious townspeople, although we weren’t able to find out too much information about the Thann *mikveh*. Apparently it was built in front of the shul, but fell into disuse when the rabbi’s house was built right next to it. Still, that got us thinking: maybe we should compile the information on all the *mikvaos* we’ve come across and present that to our readers. While initially dubious about the amount of material we might have on the topic, as we began to think about what we’ve seen over the years, we realized we could practically write a book — so we decided to take the plunge.

**In the Shadow of Death** About an hour and a half north of Thann is Strasbourg, a major metropolis with a blend of both French and German pasts — and a long and checkered relationship with its Jewish inhabitants. Today the city has over 16,000 Jews, whose community is centered around an imposing shul built in 1958 to replace the one that stood on that same site before it was destroyed by the Nazis.

The modern community is primarily descended from the small group of Jews that lived there at the time of the French Revolution in 1789. Yet a trip to the center of the city reveals a Jewish presence for close to 800 years.

The most imposing building in the city is its massive cathedral. This structure, whose construction began in the 12th century, was the tallest building in the world for over 200 years. The edifice is covered in sculptures, and what truly amazed us was how many of those sculptures relate to Jews. Jews are depicted with pointed hats, involved with the devil, or in other nefarious acts. In that same central square is a museum whose courtyard contains 700-year-old Jewish tombstones, and not far away are the former locations of the 12th-century shul, bakery, butcher, and cemetery. But what we found truly startling is that for hundreds of years, the end of the street was known as Zum Judenbad (“to the Jewish bath”). Yet it was only during recent excavations that the 13th-century *mikveh* was uncovered.

While the site was not yet open to the public, our local escort had access to the key and we were able to go inside. One can still see the original pool of the *mikveh* and some of the steps. Amazingly, during the



1.

Thann, France



Mishpacha

2.



**1. PIPES IN THE MUD** We discovered the Thann *mikveh* when workers found “some sort of bath” digging up the yard of the old shul

**2. WATER OF LIFE OR DEATH** Just a few meters from the Strasbourg *mikveh*, the Jews were burned to death if they refused to be baptized



Strasbourg, France



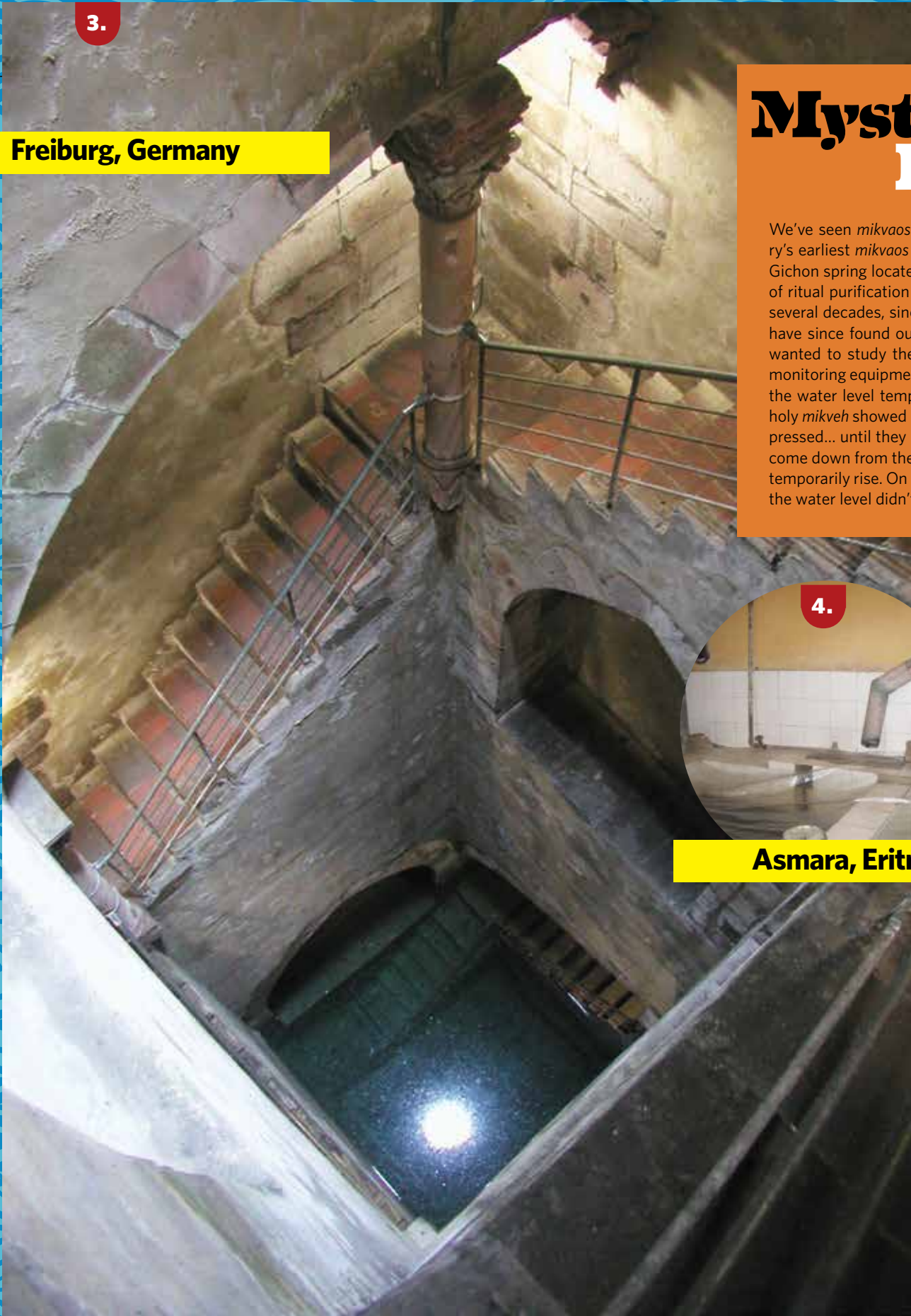
excavations two Hebrew texts were found. One was a stone inscription from the early 1100s describing the charitable acts of one Dame Rebecca — it might have been from her tombstone or possibly a dedication plaque. The other is a tiny tablet of wood covered with a thin wax layer that seems to have been the equivalent of a modern business card belonging to a man named Yom Tov.

It is truly mindboggling to think that the building Jews were using as a *mikveh* over 700 years ago stood literally in the shadow of that huge cathedral, which spewed noxious Jew hatred. We could not help but mourn the fate of those pious Jews. On Shabbos Shekalim in the year 1349, the citizens of Strasbourg attacked their Jewish neighbors. The Chronicle of Mathias of Neuenburg describes it as follows: “The Jews were conducted to the cemetery to be burnt in a specifically prepared house... but the few who chose baptism were spared.... All the rest were burnt, and many were killed as they leaped out of the fire.”

**Built to Last** Less than five kilometers from Strasbourg is something called a “Mikveh Museum” that houses the Bischheim *mikveh*, classified as a French historic monument since 1977. Bischheim is a small Alsatian town that had over 3,000 Jews in the mid-19th century. The significance of this Jewish community is clear from the fact that its rabbi, Rav David Sintzheim, was asked by Napoleon to head his “Sanhedrin,” and in 1807 he became the first chief rabbi of France.

The exceptionally beautiful *mikveh* was built around 1800. There is an elaborate, completely renovated, 25-foot (7.5-meter), 48-step spiral staircase that leads down to a Renaissance-style vault that seems to have been built more than 200 years before that. There are niches in the wall in which to place lamps, and halfway up is a small room that was used as a changing room. The *mikveh* holds about 500 liters, is over 28 feet (8.5 meters) below ground level and is supplied by groundwater, providing clear water to the bath. There are also holes in the ceiling through which hot water was added.

Freiburg, Germany



# Mystery of the Rising Pool

We’ve seen *mikvaos* all over the world, but right in Jerusalem, one of history’s earliest *mikvaos* is not a man-made construction at all, but is in fact the Gichon spring located in Ir David, which has been in continual use as a place of ritual purification for over 3,000 years. We’ve been using it ourselves for several decades, since we began our intensive study of Har Habayis, and we have since found out that we are not alone. Several decades ago scientists wanted to study the water levels in the Gichon spring, and installed some monitoring equipment. To their great surprise they found that six days a week the water level temporarily rose early every morning. Only on Shabbos this holy *mikveh* showed no fluctuation. For a while they were both baffled and impressed... until they discovered the explanation: A group of chassidim would come down from the Old City daily to immerse, and that caused the water to temporarily rise. On Shabbos they didn’t make the walk down the hill and thus the water level didn’t budge.

4.



Asmara, Eritrea



Izmir, Turkey

**3. BENEATH THE FLOORBOARDS** This Judenbad, a medieval *mikveh* dug 200 feet underground, was discovered under a German woman’s house

**4. MODERN REMNANTS** The *mikveh* in Eritrea is a bit dirty, but it’s still full of rainwater and probably kosher

**5. MIRACLE SPRING** Rav Chaim Palagi merited that the water follow him after he was reinterred. The *mikveh* sprung up under his grave

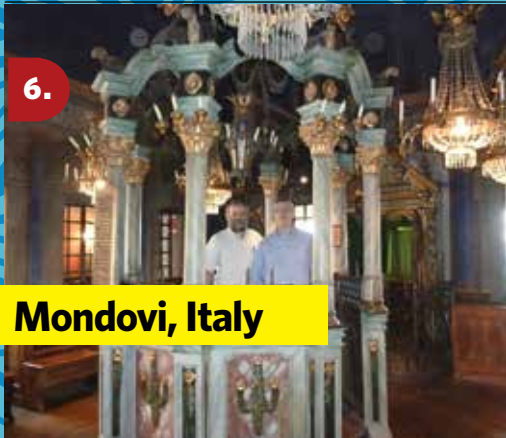
On a visit several years ago to Eritrea on the eastern African coast, we discovered many remnants of a fairly recent 20th-century community. Jews arrived here from Aden in south Yemen about 100 years ago and set up a *kehillah*. The community’s last remaining Jew, Sammy Cohen, lives in Italy, but returns for visits and pays for the upkeep of the cemetery and shul compound. And while the school and other areas of the compound are no longer usable, when we visited five years ago the *mikveh* was still intact and full of rainwater, albeit slightly dirty.

In Izmir, Turkey, there is a *mikveh* in, of all places, a cemetery. The famed Rav Chaim Palagi was initially interred in the Barhi Baba cemetery, but at some point in the early 20th century the government wanted to use that land and closed the cemetery. Among the graves relocated was that of Rav Palagi. What they didn’t know was that in his last will he had requested to be buried near water, and indeed the old cemetery was on the Aegean Sea. The new cemetery is not located near water and thus, according to the local legend, when his remains were transferred to the new location, a miracle occurred and a spring appeared under his grave. This bubbling creek is what feeds the little pool and is the source of the constant flow of fresh water to the *mikveh* built a few meters away. This *mikveh* is still used by those who travel to his grave and immerse in its water.

**Brushing Bedrock** Many years ago while in the US Army reserves, Ari G. spent a Shabbos in Germany with Rabbi Hershel Shachter, the first rabbi to enter a concentration camp with the American army in 1945. On Sunday, they drove to an unremarkable private house in Freiburg and knocked on the door. A German woman saw them standing there and motioned for them to follow her, while she unlocked a door. Under her house is the Judenbad, a medieval *mikveh* dug down about 200 feet underground. It is a square shaft with a staircase on each wall with beautiful Romanesque pillars carved out of the bedrock. This *mikveh*, like many others of the period, was fed by a natural body of water, and thus was dug below the water level of the local Rhine river.

Worms, Germany, the location of a deadly pogrom about which we read a *kinnah* on Tishah B’Av, was also the town in which Rashi studied. Adjacent to the Rashi Shul and *beis medrash*, and near the Rashi house, is a small *mikveh*. Ari G. once asked a guide why there were so many fist-sized rocks down on the bottom. She answered that the temperature in the winter was freezing, and so before immersing, the *mikveh* users would heat up stones





6. Mondovi, Italy



Putti, Uganda



Bukhara, Uzbekistan

On a visit to Plovdiv, when we asked where the *mikveh* was, we were told that there never was one. We knew that was impossible, since it had been a Torah-oriented community. Sarita, an octogenarian, reported that “it was in the furniture store”

**6. CELLAR SECRETS** In Italy, this opulent shul was hidden on the fourth floor of an apartment, while the *mikveh* was dug out in the basement. The stone pipes are still visible

**7. AVOID THE SNAKES** Building a *mikveh* in the African jungle was our greatest engineering challenge

**8. SIX FEET UNDER** In an Uzbekistan cemetery, we discovered a *mikveh* beneath this domed structure. That custom piqued our interest and definitely warrants further investigation

**9. OUT OF SERVICE** In the mud-covered building in Bukhara, the caretaker told us this *mikveh* was recently used, but judging from the rot and smell, we didn’t believe it



9.

and toss them into the water in order to heat it up a bit. This heating method is actually described in a *mishnah* (*Yoma* 31b) in relation to heating the *mikveh* in the Beis Hamikdash for an elderly Kohein Gadol.

In northern Italy of the 1700s, small community shuls were often in Jewish apartment houses — opulent on the inside, but giving no external signs of their existence. In one such building with a fourth-floor shul, we found a *mikveh* in the basement. A complex stone water collection system was devised, and the stone pipes that transport the water are still visible.

On a visit to Plovdiv, Bulgaria, when we asked where the *mikveh* was, we were told that there never was one. We knew that was impossible, since it had been a Torah-oriented community. Sarita, an octogenarian, reported that “it was in the furniture store.” We weren’t sure what she meant, and begged her to take us to the old domed building, now a furniture store that had once been the Turkish bath house. We went into the dank back rooms and there she showed us where there was a pool. It was not uncommon for a natural pool used as a public bath to serve a community where there was no separately constructed *mikveh*, provided certain halachic conditions were fulfilled.

In Uzbekistan, the sad reality of *galus* hit us again. After spending the day touring the “*mahallah*,” the Jewish quarter of Bukhara, and then spending a Shabbos with what is left of the community, we decided on Sunday that it was time to find the *mikveh*. We strolled down mud-covered alleys with the head of the community. He brought us to a broken-down, filthy building. The little water left was dank and smelly. Based upon its present state, it seemed no locals regularly use it, and the non-Jewish caretaker told us it had last been used about a month earlier by a tourist. Empty of water, filthy, and in disrepair, we questioned whether it had in fact been usable in the recent past.

**Pooled Resources** In Israel, archaeologists have uncovered over 850 ancient *mikvaos*, many from the Second Temple period. Surprisingly, they have yet to find a single one that is verifiably from the time of the First Beis Hamikdash. These structures have been found in various contexts, including near shuls, cemeteries, the area surrounding Har Habayis, and even in people’s basements, indicating that the *mikveh* played an important role in daily life. For people trying to stay *tahor*, ritually pure, and keep their utensils such, one needed easy access to a *mikveh*.

Rabbi Dr. Yonatan Adler, an American-born Israeli archaeologist whose specialty is the interface between archaeology and halachah, has analyzed *mikvaos* found in agricultural settings near winepresses and olive presses, of which about 20 have been identified. In an era when *tahor* wine and olive oil were in demand, having the ability to perform the required ablutions so close to the press was beneficial. In light of these findings, a previously mysterious *mishnah* (*Mikvaos* 7:4) that discusses wine or olive fluid falling into a *mikveh* finally makes sense.

What Adler has elegantly shown is that these *mikvaos* adhere to Chazal’s interpretation of an intermediate level of *taharah* known as *tevil yom*, where a person would immerse during the day — although complete *taharah* didn’t occur until evening (e.g., before evening the Kohein could not eat *terumah*), certain actions requiring *taharah* could be performed (such as preparing *tahor* wine and oil). It was especially important for the Jews of the era to uphold this interpretation, specifically because it was rejected by the Tzedukim and the Qumran sect.

Quite perplexing are the approximately 20 *mikvaos* found near burial sites in Yehudah and the Galil, dating from the late Second Temple period to the fourth century. In light of the fact that *tumas meis* (*tumah* from contact with a corpse) cannot be purified by a *mikveh* but only by the ashes of the Parah Adumah (which we no longer have today, although they still had it in the Talmudic period in Eretz Yisrael), the purpose of these many *mikvaos* seems





**10. STAIRCASE TO PURITY** This amazing remnant, discovered intact, illuminated the Mishnah. Now we knew what it meant that “down” is for *tame'im* and “up” is for *tehorim*

strange. Here, too, Dr. Adler has shown that it fits perfectly with mainstream halachah. Anyone who attended a funeral yet did not come in direct contact with the corpse or grave is not *tamei meis*, and a *mikveh* would indeed be sufficient to purify them.

In our travels around Israel we have seen many of these *mikvaos*. One of the most fabulous of these ancient *mikvaos* — which clarifies an otherwise difficult *mishnah* — is the *mikveh* on Derech Ha'Avos, the ancient Roman road that went from Chevron to Jerusalem. In the area of Gush Etzion, the road is clearly marked with the original Roman milestones engraved with “XI” and “XII.” (Ari G. has been walking this path for years, every time he has a Shabbos bris to do in the villages around his home in Efrat.)

One day, an Arab farmer was digging and found a hole in the side of a stone cliff. As he dug, he uncovered a *mikveh* from the Bayis Sheini period, just a day’s donkey travel from Jerusalem. This *mikveh* sheds light on the *mishnah* (*Shekalim* 8:2) that states: “All vessels found in Jerusalem on the way leading down to the *mikveh* are *tamei*, but those found on the way up are *tahor*, because the way leading down is not the same way leading up; these are the words of Rabi Meir.”

The description in this *mishnah* seems strange. All modern *mikvaos* have a single staircase leading into them. This 2,000-year-old *mikveh*, though (and others like it that have recently been excavated), has two staircases separated by a wall. It’s almost, *l’havdil*, like the song in *Fiddler on the Roof*; one for the *tame'im* descending into the water and the other for *tehorim* going up. Pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, either

with their *terumos* and *maaser*, or to bring a *korban*, would often purify themselves on the way, in order to avoid the crowds in the city.

**Help Wanted** The laws of how to build a kosher *mikveh* are quite complicated, and while halachic experts in this area exist around the world, it’s not yet one of our specialties. But in our travels, we have encountered requests for assistance and always try to help. The Israeli community in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, is not large nor especially religious, but does include some special and dedicated individuals who, although not mitzvah-observant, begged us to help them get their own *mikveh*. Due to technical and financial constraints, there is still no *mikveh* in Addis, but the project is being worked on.

When the same request came our way from Putti, Uganda, from an entire community, we knew we had to help. We contacted an architect who specializes in designing *mikvaos* in off-the-beaten-track locations and explained to him the unique conditions that exist in the Ugandan jungle. Among the challenges was making the plans understandable to the local builder in that remote location and ensuring that the *mikveh* would indeed be kosher. To guarantee that, we insisted on daily e-mail photos so there could be oversight on every aspect of construction. The *mikveh* was built exactly as designed and we traveled to Uganda for its inauguration. There was one caveat, though, unique to this jungle edifice — no walking there on foot after nightfall, due to the poisonous snakes in the surrounding brush. ●