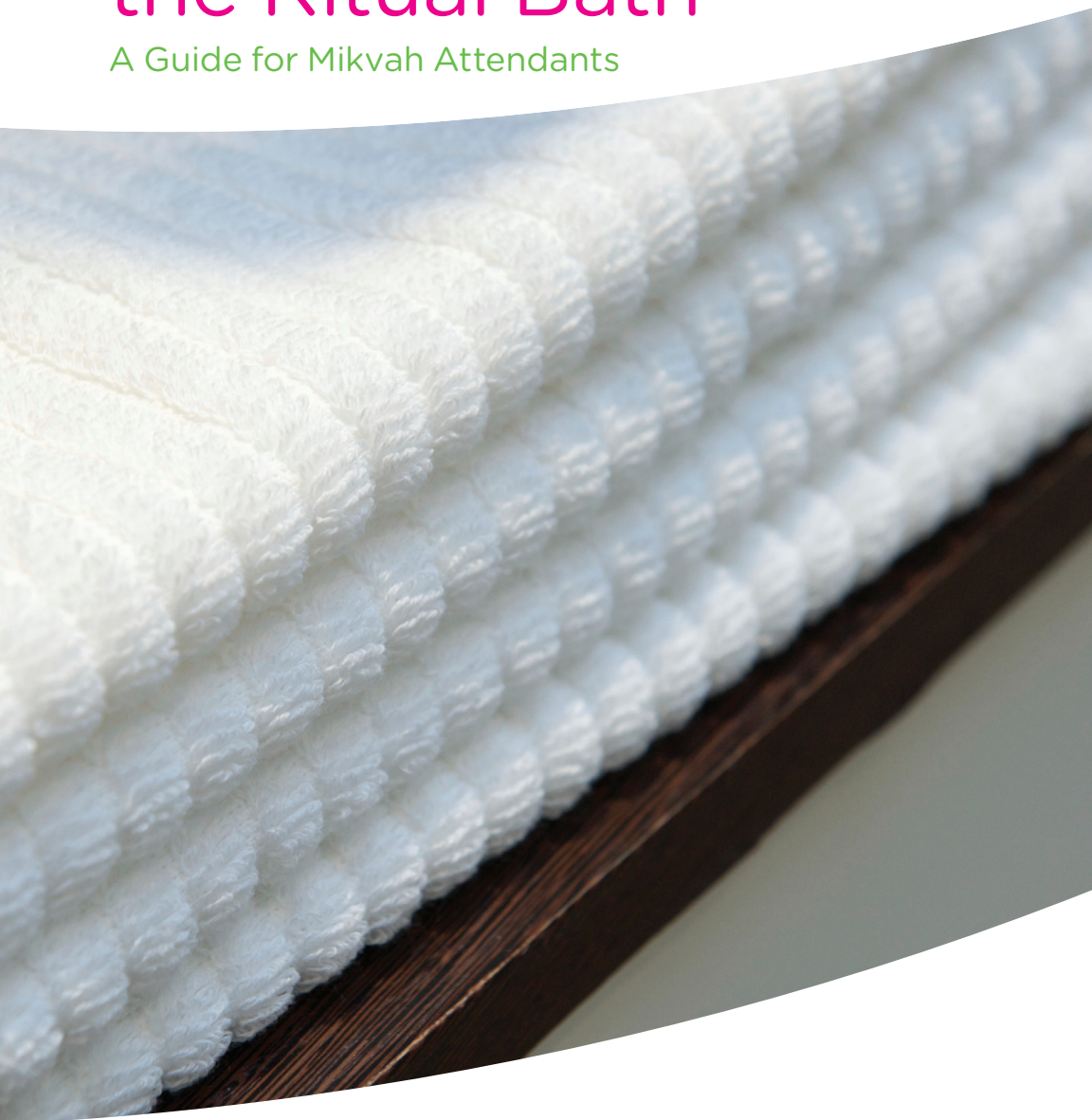


# Breast Cancer and the Ritual Bath

A Guide for Mikvah Attendants



SHARSHERET®



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A Guide for Mikvah Attendants

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## GET TO KNOW SHARSHERET

Sharsheret supports young Jewish women and families facing breast cancer and ovarian cancer at every stage — before, during, and after diagnosis.

Our name, Sharsheret, means “chain” in Hebrew and represents the strong, nurturing connections we build to support Jewish women and their families at every stage of breast cancer and ovarian cancer. We help women and families connect to our community in the way that feels most comfortable, taking into consideration their stage of life, diagnosis, or treatment, as well as their connection to Judaism. We also provide educational resources and create programs for women and families to improve their quality of life.

We understand that young Jewish women have unique concerns when it comes to breast cancer and ovarian cancer, and we are the only organization that specializes in serving them. Our programs are easy to access. From Boston to Burbank, Milwaukee to Miami, Sharsheret is wherever you are.

Sharsheret is a growing community of women and families. Together, we are creating a chain of strong links that reaches across the country so that no Jewish woman or family needs to face the challenges of breast cancer or ovarian cancer alone.

Visit **[www.sharsheret.org](http://www.sharsheret.org)** or call us at **866.474.2774** to participate in our programs and to become a link in the Sharsheret chain. All inquiries are confidential and answered by qualified staff who can help.

## OUR PROGRAMS

### The Link Program®

- **Peer Support Network**, connecting women newly diagnosed or at high risk of developing breast cancer or ovarian cancer one-on-one with others who share similar diagnoses and experiences
- **Embrace™**, supporting women living with advanced breast cancer or recurrent ovarian cancer
- **Genetics for Life™**, addressing hereditary breast cancer and ovarian cancer
- **Busy Box™**, for parents facing breast cancer or ovarian cancer while raising children or teens
- **Best Face Forward®**, addressing the cosmetic side effects of treatment
- **Family Focus®**, providing resources and support for caregivers and family members
- **Ovarian Cancer Program**, tailored resources and support for young Jewish women and families facing ovarian cancer
- **Sharsheret Supports™**, developing local support groups and programs

### Education and Outreach Programs

- **Health Care Symposia**, on issues unique to younger women and Jewish women facing breast cancer and ovarian cancer
- **Sharsheret Educational Resource Booklet Series**, culturally relevant publications for Jewish women, their families, and health care professionals
- **Sharsheret on Campus™**, outreach and education to students on campus

As part of our education and outreach efforts, Sharsheret serves as a resource for *mikvah* attendants as well. Please call Sharsheret at any time for additional information related to Jewish women facing breast cancer. Sharsheret's written materials are culturally-sensitive for all Jewish women and can easily be displayed in a *mikvah* waiting room.

## INTRODUCTION

“Using the *mikvah* for the first time after surgery was an emotional experience. Standing alone in the mirrored and brightly-lit preparation room, I was anxious about the attendant’s reaction upon seeing my scars. I carefully warned her, even though at the time it was difficult for me to discuss my diagnosis. How much more whole I felt after each *mikvah* visit, when the gentle attendants treated me just like they always had before.” — Fran

The *mitzvah* of *mikvah* has been a thread connecting Jewish women like Fran throughout the generations. By virtue of having breast cancer, a woman may feel different and disconnected from other Jewish women. The *mikvah* experience can be a time of renewed healing. Whether the woman uses the mikvah regularly, or is using it for the first time as a source of spiritual renewal, the *mikvah* can be a place of comfort for those women feeling anxious or damaged by breast cancer surgery and treatment.

In your role as a *mikvah* attendant, you may witness first-hand the fear and anxiety that can accompany the prospect of going to the *mikvah* after surgery or during chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer. Before a woman with breast cancer even enters the doors of the *mikvah*, there are actions that you can take to anticipate her needs. Your level of understanding and preparedness can greatly enhance a woman’s *mikvah* experience.

This guide is designed to raise your awareness about the various concerns and challenges of the *mikvah* ritual for a woman with breast cancer and help you anticipate her needs. It can also help you ensure that her *mikvah* experience is one that she sees as a part of the healing journey. Together, we can help make the *mikvah* experience more comfortable and meaningful for Jewish women in your community facing breast cancer.

**As a *mikvah* attendant, your level of understanding and preparedness can greatly enhance a woman’s *mikvah* experience.**

# CONCERNS OF JEWISH WOMEN LIVING WITH BREAST CANCER

## Body Image

“Although I hope that returning to the *mikvah* will feel like a normalizing experience, the focus on preparing my body for immersion reminds me of my feeling damaged and unattractive.” — Adeena

Some women may feel uncomfortable about exposing themselves completely to the *mikvah* attendant. This can raise additional anxieties for women like Adeena, who have had breast cancer surgery. For some women, surgery may not have been limited to the breast itself. They may have had reconstruction involving the stomach, back, leg, or buttocks resulting in scarring. Additionally, a woman may experience lymphedema in her arm as a result of breast cancer surgery, which can be caused by the removal of lymph nodes as part of the surgery. Lymphedema can cause swelling in the arm, making it appear disfigured. She may have also lost her hair as a result of chemotherapy.

It can be difficult to witness someone's scars, disfigurements, and baldness. And it would not be an unusual reaction to gasp, flinch, or stare. However, whatever you

are experiencing, it is important to contain your reactions and act with heightened sensitivity when you conduct your examination for immersion. For any woman immersing in the *mikvah*, and particularly for a woman with breast cancer, holding the towel at your eye level provides relief and privacy. The towel provides a boundary and a sense of security when a woman may feel exposed and vulnerable.



# CONCERNS OF JEWISH WOMEN LIVING WITH BREAST CANCER (continued)

## Side Effects of Breast Cancer Treatment

“The impact of cancer treatment has been physically overwhelming and I worry about how it will affect my *mikvah* experience.” — Aliza

Many women, like Aliza, may have concerns about their *mikvah* experience after breast cancer treatment. Some of the issues that women in the Sharsheret community have shared with us and each other include:

### **Hair Loss:**

Generally, women undergoing chemotherapy begin to lose their hair during the first few weeks after treatment begins. Some women in Sharsheret’s community have expressed that this is the most significant and difficult side effect of treatment. Until the onset of hair loss, a woman can mask the cancer. She may not have emotionally accepted her diagnosis and treatment. However, once she begins to lose her hair, she feels like a cancer patient. She may look sick for the first time since her diagnosis. Her hair loss can feel like a public announcement that she has cancer. When a woman is at the onset of losing her hair, thoroughly combing through her hair as preparation for immersion can create heightened anxiety. She may fear that each pass of the comb through her hair will generate additional hair loss.

### **Infection:**

Chemotherapy attacks fast-growing cells in the body, including cells in the immune system. This can lower a woman’s immunity to other infections. A woman may express concerns about infection as a result of immersing in the *mikvah*



after other women have already immersed. Consider offering special appointments; being scheduled for the first appointment of the evening may decrease anxiety about this issue for a woman who is concerned about infection.

#### **External Port:**

Chemotherapy may be administered as pills or through a needle placed in a vein. To make it easier and less painful for a woman to receive intravenous treatment and blood tests, a doctor may insert a port, which is a small plastic or metal disk about the size of a quarter that sits just under the skin of the upper chest or upper arm and is inserted into a blood vessel. In addition to a woman feeling self-conscious about the port, she may have questions of *halacha* regarding its presence. It may be helpful to gently inquire if she has spoken to her rabbi about this issue if she has concerns.

#### **Tattooing:**

A woman who receives radiation for breast cancer will have small tattoos to indicate where the radiologist needs to direct the radiation. Additionally, as part of reconstructive surgery, a woman may also opt for tattoos to complete nipple reconstruction. These tattoos may make a woman feel self-conscious or uncomfortable.

#### **Fatigue:**

A woman may experience symptoms of fatigue as a result of undergoing breast cancer treatment and running to doctor appointments. She may lack the energy to pursue her normal routine and may have anxiety about relying on others for help. She may feel too tired to go to the *mikvah*, or have difficulty concentrating and paying attention to detail, which could impact her preparedness for immersion.

## Privacy

“I have remained private about my breast cancer and I worry that when I go to the *mikvah* other women in my community may discover that I am sick.” — Tova

Like Tova, privacy and confidentiality are critical to some women living with breast cancer. There are those who may not have informed members of the community of their illness and face increased anxiety

about meeting other women at the *mikvah*. Consider scheduling a private appointment before or after standard *mikvah* hours, for women living with breast cancer.

## THE MARITAL RELATIONSHIP

“My husband has been very supportive, but I worry about the impact that breast cancer has had on my relationship with him.” — Miriam

Breast cancer is a pervasive experience in a woman's life and can have a significant impact on all parts of the marital relationship. It affects routines, co-parenting, and most significantly, intimacy. Busy with medical appointments and often fatigued as a result of treatment, a woman may find that she does not have the time that she is accustomed to spending with her partner. Her energy may be depleted and she may feel she needs to reserve her energy for fighting cancer. Her own sense of sexuality may be diminished significantly. Her loved one may need to assume additional household or child care responsibilities and feel fatigued, vulnerable, frightened, or neglected. The couple may share an unspoken aversion to the woman's post-surgical body and a woman may fear her partner's reactions to her.

The time after immersion in the *mikvah* is one during which many couples reunite intimately. In *kallah* classes, a woman may have been taught that on the nights after she goes to the *mikvah*, she re-experiences her wedding night. The impact of cancer and treatment can interfere with that experience. It is particularly important to be sensitive to the issues of a young woman who has experienced breast cancer and

who will be using the *mikvah* for the first time before her wedding. She may be feeling especially vulnerable in having to expose herself.

A woman's sexuality can be greatly impacted by breast cancer. The change in body image or stresses to personal relationships due to breast cancer treatment can have a profound impact on a woman's sexual functioning. Some medications may interfere with a satisfying sexual experience for a woman, reducing or eliminating her ability to feel aroused. Other side effects impacting sexuality may include vaginal dryness, fatigue, and depression.

Fertility may also be of concern to a woman facing breast cancer. Some breast cancer treatments may cause temporary or permanent infertility. A woman who has not yet had children, or one who would like to continue to grow her family, may worry that she will be unable to bear children. The *mikvah* experience may heighten these feelings. For a woman of childbearing age, the *mikvah* represents the opportunity for conception. For a woman who is prematurely menopausal or has to postpone having children, the ritual of *mikvah* can trigger profound feelings of loss and sadness.

## MIKVAH AS PART OF THE HEALING EXPERIENCE

“I was very nervous about going to the *mikvah*. I spent so much time focused on how I would prepare my ‘new but not improved’ body for immersion. I was anxious about removing my robe. When I finally immersed, I felt realigned. I felt peace and connectedness to G-d. Being in the *mikvah* waters helped me to have clarity. It was a crucial and timely healing experience.” — Amy

Using the *mikvah* can be a time of renewed healing. For some women, immersion in the *mikvah* waters is a custom associated with marriage that takes on added meaning after surgery and treatment. For others, *mikvah* can be more than just a monthly ritual. Some women find that immersion can be a meaningful way to prepare for treatment after a diagnosis of cancer or to mark the beginning of healing after the end of treatment. It may also be an opportunity to bring hope for the future.

Whether or not they have ever used a *mikvah* previously for *halachic* reasons, and prompted by a desire to connect with their spirituality as a result of a breast cancer diagnosis, some women may ask to use the *mikvah* as part of a healing ritual. Women facing breast cancer, in particular, may be struggling to connect physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This use of the *mikvah* is a special opportunity to regain some of those connections. Some women may wish to have extra time during immersion to fulfill this experience.



## HOW MIKVAH ATTENDANTS CAN HELP

“I hope that immersion in the *mikvah* will be a powerful and healing experience. But I feel hesitant about asking the *mikvah* attendant for extra time because I know that on any given night, the *mikvah* can become quite busy.” — Marcy

As a *mikvah* attendant, here are some simple guidelines that you can use to help a breast cancer survivor feel more comfortable:

- Understand the impact of breast cancer on the Jewish woman as detailed in this guide.
- Share this information with other *mikvah* attendants and staff who are in a position to make the *mikvah* experience more comfortable for women touched by breast cancer.
- Familiarize yourself with questions of *halacha* that may arise. This knowledge will avert the need for you to say “let me call the rabbi” when a woman is in your presence, easing her experience of feeling different.
- Consider scheduling special appointments to accommodate women with breast cancer who may prefer privacy when entering and leaving the *mikvah*, as well as additional time for preparation and immersion.

- Offer Sharsheret as a resource for women living with breast cancer so they can speak to other young Jewish women who have shared their experience. The opportunity to speak to another woman who has “been there” provides tremendous emotional support during an emotionally vulnerable time.

For more information about Sharsheret’s programs, please contact us toll-free at **866.474.2774** or at **[info@sharsheret.org](mailto:info@sharsheret.org)**. Sharsheret’s programs are free and are open to all women and men. All inquiries are confidential.

## THE HEALING EXPERIENCE OF MIKVAH : A STORY FROM THE SHARSHERET COMMUNITY

Rosalie, a woman from Indiana living with metastatic breast cancer, had heard about the idea of healing waters. She had never been to a *mikvah* before, yet she felt compelled to connect with the healing experience of this *mitzvah*. She felt a strong desire to tap into the strength of Jewish women throughout history who have immersed in these waters.

Rosalie spoke with a rabbi, a *mikvah* attendant, and a member of the Sharsheret staff. She asked that our staff member be her guide for this new experience and flew to New Jersey within weeks of making this decision. Her body bore the brunt of her illness; she had scars from the multiple surgeries that left her without a breast and she was visibly weak. As Rosalie prepared for immersion, the Sharsheret staff member too, needed to prepare spiritually and emotionally for the experience. Rosalie emerged from the room ready for immersion and the staff member held Rosalie's robe above her eyes so that she could immerse with dignity and privacy. Rosalie dipped her head beneath the waters and stayed submerged for several moments.

When she reemerged, she began to sing *Yedid Nefesh* (Beloved of the Soul). Rosalie was an opera singer; a soprano. Hearing Rosalie's voice reverberating off the *mikvah* walls

was one of the most magnificent sounds the Sharsheret staff member had ever heard. Rosalie asked her to sing as well, and as they sang together, she felt the light of Rosalie's soul shine brightly in the room. Our staff member often wonders how the other women preparing for *mikvah* that day were touched and changed by hearing Rosalie's voice. Once again, she held the robe above her eyes as Rosalie ascended the steps from the mikvah. Rosalie hugged her, and as she did, she felt Rosalie's renewed energy. Rosalie was grateful for this experience. As they both cried, she whispered in the staff member's ear, "For the first time in months, I feel hopeful. There is a plan."

Rosalie's *mikvah* experience is one of many stories from Sharsheret's community. Whether returning to the *mikvah* after breast cancer surgery or using it for the first time, women often experience a range of emotions. How a *mikvah* attendant responds to a woman who has faced breast cancer will often make the difference in how comfortable she feels. You can help make this difference.

# RESOURCE DIRECTORY

## **Sharsheret**

866.474.2774  
[www.sharsheret.org](http://www.sharsheret.org)  
[info@sharsheret.org](mailto:info@sharsheret.org)

## **Jewish Organizations Addressing Cancer and Health Related Issues**

### **Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies**

800.634.7346  
[www.ajfca.org](http://www.ajfca.org)

### **Chai Lifeline**

877.CHAILIFE  
[www.chailifeline.org](http://www.chailifeline.org)

### **Chicago Center for Jewish Genetic Disorders**

312.357.4718  
[www.jewishgeneticscenter.org](http://www.jewishgeneticscenter.org)

### **Hadassah, Women's Health and Wellness**

212.303.8094  
[www.hadassah.org](http://www.hadassah.org)

### **National Center for Jewish Healing**

212.632.4500  
[www.jewishhealing.org](http://www.jewishhealing.org)

### **Nishmat: Women's Halachic Hotline and Online Information Center**

877.963.8938  
[www.yoatzot.org](http://www.yoatzot.org)

### **Partners in Health/Bikur Cholim**

845.425.7877  
[www.bikurcholim.org](http://www.bikurcholim.org)

## **Fertility, Pregnancy, and Nursing**

### **The American Fertility Association**

888.917.3777  
[www.theafa.org](http://www.theafa.org)

### **A T.I.M.E (Torah Infertility Medium of Exchange)**

718.437.7710 (Helpline)  
[www.atime.org](http://www.atime.org)

## **Fertile Hope**

866.965.7205  
[www.fertilehope.org](http://www.fertilehope.org)

### **Hope for Two - The Pregnant with Cancer Network**

800.743.4471  
[www.hopefortwo.org](http://www.hopefortwo.org)

## **Resolve**

703.556.7172  
[www.resolve.org](http://www.resolve.org)

## **Managing Cosmetic Side Effects**

### **Best Face Forward® (A Sharsheret Program)**

866.474.2774  
[www.sharsheret.org](http://www.sharsheret.org)

### **Facing the Mirror with Cancer**

312.550.8485  
[www.facingthemirror.org](http://www.facingthemirror.org)

### **Lashes for Life**

800.452.9802

### **Look Good Feel Better**

800.395.LOOK  
[www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org](http://www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org)

### **Shop Well with You**

800.799.6790  
[www.shopwellwithyou.org](http://www.shopwellwithyou.org)

### **"TLC" (American Cancer Society Catalog)**

800.850.9445  
[www.tlccatalog.org](http://www.tlccatalog.org)

## **Mikvah and Ritual Resources**

### **Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters**

617.244.1836  
[www.mayyimhayyim.org](http://www.mayyimhayyim.org)

### **Mikvah.org**

718.756.5700  
[www.mikvah.org](http://www.mikvah.org)

### **Ritualwell**

215.576.0800  
[www.ritualwell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org)

The information contained in this booklet is intended to provide broad knowledge of available resources and should not be construed as an endorsement of any health care professional, organization, or program mentioned in the Resource Directory. All medical information should be discussed with a health care professional.

BOOKLETS  
AVAILABLE  
IN THIS SERIES

- Your Jewish Genes:  
Hereditary Breast Cancer  
and Ovarian Cancer  
.....
- Facing Breast Cancer as  
a Jewish Woman  
.....
- Facing Breast Cancer as an  
Orthodox Jewish Woman  
.....
- Facing Ovarian Cancer as  
a Jewish Woman  
.....
- Breast Cancer and the Ritual Bath:  
A Guide for Mikvah Attendants

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For information about this booklet and other Sharsheret publications,  
E-mail: [info@sharsheret.org](mailto:info@sharsheret.org)  
Call Toll-Free: 866.474.2774

