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Jewish ritual bath renovated for use

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PORTLAND — Southern Maine Jews who are seeking the waters of healing and rebirth in a traditional mikvah no longer have to travel for hours.

The last remaining mikvah, or ritual bath, in the area has been restored by Mikvat Shalom, a non-profit group made up of several sects of Maine's Jewish community. A grand re-opening is planned for Sunday, July 25 for the public to view the mikvah and learn about its uses.

"This basically brings the mikvah into a new era," said Eber Weinstein, board member and member of Congregation Beth Israel in Old Orchard Beach. "This is a big thing."

The mikvah, built in 1904 as part of Temple Shaarey Tphiloh on Noyes Street in Portland, was last renovated in the 1950s. The mikvah is no longer associated with the abutting orthodox temple, but is being leased by Mikvat Shalom. It reopened for use three months ago after being closed down due to disrepair and unhealthy conditions.

"It was unbelievable, down to the outer walls covered in black mold," said Mikvat Shalom president Ellen Froncek. "It's really a total renewal."

Renovations began in the late fall by King Weinstein of Old Orchard Beach and were helped along by a Portland-based Jewish Community Alliance grant. The walls and carpeting are new, and a bathroom and shower have been updated so that participants can prepare themselves for use of the mikvah.

"Now it is usable, functional and safe," said Mikvat Shalom board member Susan Cummings-Lawrence.

Because the Jewish Orthodox community is small in southern Maine, the mikvah is "used infrequently, but by people who routinely and traditionally use it," said Cummings-Lawrence.

For Orthodox Jews, one of the most common uses of a mikvah is by women, who must immerse themselves after their monthly menses before they can resume sexual relations with their husband, per Jewish law. Men use the bath to seek purity before major Jewish holidays, said Weinstein. It is also used for conversions to the faith.

"Anyone who wants to obtain a level of ritual purity must use it," he said. "There is a purity in water that brings spiritual cleanliness."

Prayer sessions that involve the bath usually last about a half hour, with attendants overseeing the ceremony, said Froncek. The mikvah, which is large enough to accommodate one person, combines city water and rainwater, which is heated and treated with chlorine.

"It needs to have natural, living waters," said Froncek.

The Portland mikvah is one of only two in Maine, with the other located in Bangor, said Cummings-Lawrence, as many of the area's ritual baths have been cemented over for lack of use. The Portland mikvah has survived because the Orthodox Jewish community there has survived, she said.

A mikvah can always be found in an Orthodox community, she said, whether in a synagogue or a private home, because it is an "absolutely essential part of traditional Jewish life."

"It's more important than an actual synagogue," she said. "No matter where Jews were, there had to be a mikvah and a cemetery."

The Portland mikvah is kosher for Orthodox use, but Mikvat Shalom board members also represent the Chabad, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and non-denominational congregations of the Jewish faith.

"It's a unique thing," said Cummings-Lawrence. "Our board represents just about every path of Jewish practice there is in Maine."

"When all the different branches of Judaism find peace together, they make the world a better place – everybody comes to a higher level of oneness," said Weinstein.

With renovations complete, Mikvat Shalom board members plan to focus on outreach and education of the traditional and non-traditional uses of a mikvah.

"We hope we can help people understand how it can enhance their lives," said Cummings-Lawrence, who said there is a national movement to find ways for Jews of liberal sects to use the mikvah.

Modern uses of the mikvah include for renewal in times of illness, pregnancy, divorce and other life-changing situations. The mikvah is intended for use only by practicing Jews and Froncek said the orthodox community has been accepting of non-traditional uses.

It is used to "mark a new beginning, have a sense of renewal in a spiritual sort of way," said Froncek.

Mikvat Shalom secretary Beth Strassler, who is an active member at the non-denominational Etz Chaim synagogue in Biddeford, said that few Jews who are not Orthodox know of the mikvah traditions.

"I'm excited to take a traditional piece of Judaism and expand it for other use," said Strassler. "We need to do a lot of education in Biddeford. People aren't used to this idea of a community mikvah. It's really a new concept."

The mikvah will be maintained and operated by the volunteers of Mikvat Shalom, which hopes to be supported by grants, membership dues and donations, said Froncek. Fundraising is underway to pay for the restoration work.

"It's really an experiment to see what the general Portland community will support," said Froncek. "We see it as a spiritual enhancement for the community, a place for healing and renewal of life."

The grand re-opening of the mikvah at 76 Noyes St. in Portland will be Sunday, July 25 from 3-5 p.m. Mikvat Shalom Board members will be on hand to discuss ritual uses of the mikvah and the vision of Mikvat Shalom. Light refreshments will be provided, and there will be a brief program, including words of welcome from area rabbis.

— City Editor Kristen Schulze Muszynski can be contacted at 282-1535, Ext. 322 or kristenm@journaltribune.com.

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Mikvat Shalom President Ellen Froncek displays the new renovated mikvah, a small pool used for Jewish rituals, in Portland, Tuesday. The mikvah is being leased by Mikvat Shalom, a non-profit group of Jews from various sects that is seeking to raise awareness of traditional and non-traditional uses of the ritual bath. - KRISTEN SCHULZE MUSZYNSKI/ Journal Tribune



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