I. Introduction:

One year ago today, on March 11th, 2020, shuls across the New York area started closing. COVID brought our society to its knees and contracted our world in the loss of safe and sacred public spaces. It took months for our synagogues and day-schools to gradually experiment with re-opening. But one Jewish space remained open throughout this global pandemic: the women’s mikveh. The mikveh was the exception, deemed too essential to close even when our entire city of New York was on lockdown.

Living through a pandemic makes everything more challenging, whether in the form of daily routines, religious gatherings, family relationships, school attendance, or playdates. The same is true in the realm of mikveh observance.

Women who observe taharat hamishpahah (Hebrew: the laws of family purity) experienced different realities during lockdown. In those first few months of the pandemic's progression across America, there was so much uncertainty about the transmission of COVID which led to questions about how and whether one could safely attend mikveh. Despite this, some women were able to continue using the mikveh and felt safe and supported by their local leadership. Many of them desperately wanted to continue having access to the mikveh to maintain the potential for physical intimacy and/or to continue trying to conceive. They received timely and clear communication, had access to individualized advice, and trusted that their local mikvaot were doing their best to ensure their health and that of others. The fact that mikvaot remained open and that so many women felt safe immersing reflects the tremendous and heroic work of so many religious authorities, medical experts, balaniot (Hebrew: mikveh attendants) and lay leaders.

But this is not the full story of mikveh during the onset of the lockdown. There were other mikveh-observant women who did not feel safe, confident, or supported. They agonized over their decisions around risk assessment – an often-lonely endeavor – without feeling that they had proper support or information to help them navigate this moment.

When we began to hear of the mikveh challenges women were experiencing during lockdown, from March to May, we reached out to our American networks – to friends, acquaintances and observant women in social media platforms that we frequent – and asked them to share their stories. In particular, we sought to understand the reality of those who were struggling alone and going through genuine distress, ‘ogmat nefesh, related to their mikveh use during this time.

We bring these stories to light to let women know that their pain and their efforts are seen, even while we recognize that this is not meant to be a comprehensive depiction of the experience of mikveh during lockdown. We also share them with the wider Jewish community and American Orthodox leadership in particular so that some good comes out of their challenges and so that we can take steps to ensure all women who attend mikveh have...
their needs met in the future. The voices of those who struggled should not be swept aside.

In this article we delineate the context for the pandemic-related mikveh challenges in the American Orthodox context, describe the difficulties women faced in mikveh observance during lockdown, illustrate the dynamics that female leaders had to negotiate, and explore how we can ensure that in both ‘normal’ and difficult times we have the right communal systems in place so that women are supported in their observance of this mitzvah.

II.  The Perfect Storm
As the pandemic broke, mikvaot were subject to many of the same dynamics as other institutions. As cases in New York started to climb in March, governments, religious organizations, businesses, and families were all scrambling to decide what to do with little guidance and many unanswered questions. Religious institutions were in the spotlight, as it became clear that religious gatherings were particularly susceptible to becoming superspreader events. Overnight, leaders of day-schools, synagogues, and yeshivot had to grapple with life-and-death questions under incredibly stressful and ambiguous circumstances.

Like most religious institutions in America, mikvaot are private institutions run by a combination of authorities: rabbinic leaders contributing halakhic oversight, professionals directing the daily operations, boards (often including philanthropists) and lay leaders supporting the mikveh in making decisions, local health departments issuing guidelines, and rebbetzins, rabbaniot, and Yoatzot Halacha often liaising with all parties involved.

The way a mikveh functions is, of course, different from a school or a synagogue. There are no necessary social gatherings inside a mikveh. Still, early in the pandemic’s outbreak there were important questions about its safety. There were concerns about whether COVID could be transferred in the mikveh’s waters (it cannot), whether it could be transferred via contact through surfaces (for instance, the railing women hold on to as they descend to the mikveh), or through aerosols in the air. While a woman immerses alone, she is greeted by an attendant, supervised during her immersion, and might encounter other women in the waiting room.

Mikvaot were subject to many of the same challenges in which all institutions were mired. Their specific purpose, however, introduced a unique set of difficulties.

First, as mikveh relates to matters that are deeply private - a woman’s menstrual cycle and a couple’s sexual life - its personal dimension were not typically the subject of public discussion. Even in communities where pandemic challenges around mikveh were discussed openly, women and men often kept their pain and anxiety concealed due to the private nature of this mitzvah. Yoatzot Halacha, rebbetzins, rabbaniot, maharats, and rabbis1 attest to the immense number of calls they received related to private mikveh matters that callers felt could not – due to their nature – be addressed in public forums. This was not the same for other communal discourses around pandemic-related questions like Zoom seders or virtual kaddish.

Second, because sexual intimacy without immersion is a severe halakhic transgression, the stakes of not being able to immerse in the mikveh are high. The inability to immerse or choice not to immerse during the lockdown meant that observant couples could not be physically intimate and had to contend with the tremendous challenges of trying to keep the proper harhakot – the laws of distancing that apply while a woman is a niddah, such as not touching – for a prolonged (and unknown) duration. Some couples even had to put their plans for having children on hold.

Third, the mikveh’s institutional decentralization meant that each had the freedom and the responsibility to figure out how to function during the lockdown. Unsurprisingly, COVID-related policy and guidelines varied widely across communities and mikvaot, leading to differing standards being applied and to confusion and delays in communicating information. We know from our contacts that already in early March women began asking – through WhatsApp messages, phone calls, and Facebook groups – whether going to mikveh was safe. Not everyone had clear information from their religious institutions, whether synagogues of mikvaot.

These factors shaped the way in which Jewish communities and mikvaot responded to the pandemic’s outbreak.

In March, April, and May, everyone – leadership included – was still scrambling to know what to do. As COVID-19 spread, American religious authorities worked to respond to mikveh’s unique challenges, communicating with their communities, especially the women, either through local Zoom convenings or through private one-on-one conversations. Publicly available statements about mikveh safety varied greatly based on community and location. The earliest American Orthodox institution that we know to have put out a general policy statement about the mikveh was the Rabbinical Council of Bergen County, New Jersey (the RCBC). On March 12, the RCBC published a short statement telling women to be in touch with local
mikvaot to ask about precautions and to abstain from going if they were sick. In this, the RCBC was an exception: few other national and local religious organizations made clear, publicly available policy statements about mikvaot at that date.

In the following weeks and months, mikvaot and other rabbinic and religious organizations released statements with guidelines about how to immerse in the mikveh. These guidelines differed in each community and changed over time. Nevertheless, throughout the lockdown, American Orthodox leadership – in consultation with medical professionals – overwhelmingly directed most women to continue attending mikveh.

III. Women’s Experiences
As our communities learned more about the dangers of COVID, religious women in our networks began to reach out asking to whom they should turn and what they should do. Should they attend mikveh? If yes, what was the safest way to do so? In March, as we indicated, some mikvaot put out guidelines and others didn’t, and the guidelines themselves differed greatly depending on the mikveh.

Due to so much uncertainty, many women faced wrenching decisions about whether to immerse in the mikveh during lockdown. Their stories are many and varied, based on the individuals and institutions involved, and they are neither easy to hear nor point to pat conclusions. But to not share their stories would miss an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and discover what can be learned from them.

One woman reached out to one of us, having immersed in the mikveh the week prior to being diagnosed with COVID. Back then, information about the virus’ transmission was extremely nascent, and many were anxious about it spreading through the mikveh’s water or through surfaces at the mikveh. She was frantic since there were no guidelines in place: what should she do to protect others?

Many women described being too scared and anxious to go to the mikveh. “I’m absolutely terrified to go to the mikveh right now,” said one. Another shared over Facebook messenger: “We live in a place with a significant outbreak, and I just haven’t felt comfortable going based on the scant/contradictory information we have about how the virus spreads and lingers in the air.” She believed mikveh officials were doing everything they could to keep mikvaot safe. But she didn’t trust all of her neighbors to adhere to the guidelines of the mikveh. “I’m still scared. It’s been two months, and I’m still niddah.”

Other women couldn’t go because of pre-existing health issues. Women who were immunocompromised – undergoing breast-cancer treatment, for example – were told by their physicians not to attend and thus remained niddah indefinitely.

Still others didn’t go out of concern for the health of others. We learned that some women living with immunocompromised relatives were asked or chose not to immerse in the mikveh. One woman described living with older family members who asked her not to go to the mikveh so that she would not compromise their health. To prevent getting her period and entering a state of being a niddah, she started taking hormonal birth control, which caused her to suffer debilitating migraines.

Other women faced agonizing questions over whether to go to the mikveh or not. Could a woman who worked as a health-care worker (or who was married to one) attend the mikveh, or was she considered to be endangering other women? Should a woman living in an area with an outbreak attend a mikveh elsewhere where it would be safer, or should she not because it could also mean potentially bringing the virus there?

And then there were the women who ultimately did choose to go to mikveh despite their anxieties around COVID. We know of women who drove for hours and even crossed state lines to attend a mikveh they hoped was safe enough. Through word of mouth and social media, women created whisper networks based on statements put out by mikvaot, reputation, and rumors, sharing information about which mikvaot had the best policies and which attendants were most likely to follow these carefully.

Some sought mikvaot with the most lenient guidelines. A woman told us her friend had tested positive for COVID and immersed a week following her symptoms in a mikveh that allowed her to do so. After learning about her friend’s immersion and becoming concerned about potential inconsistencies in mikveh guidelines, this woman decided to wear a mask to the mikveh, which at the time was not standard practice in general or in mikvaot.

Anxiety over attending mikveh didn’t stop after the immersion experience. One woman relayed her distress at an unintentional breach of privacy she experienced. The usual mikveh attendant was absent because she belonged to an older and vulnerable demographic. The well-meaning but new attendant was young and inexperienced and did not give her the privacy she was accustomed to during her immersion.
And then there were the stories of women who felt compelled to go to mikveh despite their wishes. One woman sent this message late in March: “I am currently immunocompromised because of meds I take plus have an immunocompromised father at home with me. My doctor thinks going to the mikveh at a time like this is very unwise while my rabbi has told me that I have to go. I would love someone who knows both sides of the coin to be able to discuss this with.” Other women went at the behest of their husbands despite their own concerns. Questions around risk assessment became routine aspects of mikveh observant couples’ relationships and placed tremendous emotional and psychological burdens on wives in particular.

Some women found themselves in truly unique circumstances, like the woman whose husband is a hypochondriac and insisted she quarantine away from him for two weeks after immersion. We heard of one woman who tragically suffered a miscarriage, resulting in an extended niddah status. At its conclusion she was too afraid to immerse in the mikveh, depriving herself of her husband’s comforting touch at this difficult time. And then there was the woman who told us of seeing a mother holding her newborn baby standing frozen at the entrance of the mikveh: she was crying, worried to step inside.

Perhaps the most tragic stories we heard were from women who faced heart-wrenching choices whether to delay their own fertility journeys during this pandemic due to fears of becoming infected with COVID or giving it to others through exposure at the mikveh. As anyone who has experienced infertility knows, timing matters tremendously in efforts to conceive - not only in terms of maternal age but also in terms of timing of conception. For couples struggling with infertility or attempting to conceive, choosing or being unable to attend the mikveh took on life-altering implications. One woman who got COVID while trying to conceive had to figure out if she could immerse and shared that “missing the mikveh felt like missing a life.” Other women made choices to delay their own fertility journeys during this pandemic, in part because they did not feel they could immerse in the mikveh. (It is worth noting that these painful disruptions were due to many factors, including that many fertility clinics were temporarily shut down during this time.)

In certain communities, some women argued that mikvaot should be closed entirely because of safety concerns, as synagogues had been closed. Other women vigorously opposed this because, as they argued, careful safety guidelines could make mikveh immersion possible. The calls for closure were especially painful for women experiencing infertility and desperately trying to conceive, who feared further loss of agency in an already painful process, should this option be eliminated.

The lengths women would go during the pandemic to immerse themselves spoke to the strong fealty to mikveh observance. The wife of a doctor working at the frontlines in the fight against COVID called mikvao until she found one willing to let her immerse. Others chose to immerse in natural bodies of water, ponds or rivers or oceans – a process rife with its own safety concerns, especially in frigid temperatures.

Many were upset at what they perceived as a lack of urgency from communal authorities around mikveh. Responding to an email regarding mikveh safety in late April, a woman posted on Facebook: “We’re reaching the one-month mark on the outbreak in NY and Israel, so at this point we’ve allowed every woman experiencing a monthly cycle to struggle with this issue alone. [This organization] put out clear guidelines for shul gatherings and life cycle events, as well as managed to organize a national fast and daily Tehillim starting three weeks ago. Why is this email only coming out now?” One woman confided, “I just felt men weren’t understanding what was going on… behind the scenes women are calling each other frantic.”

We learned of so much uncertainty, captured in the following message that one of us received: “I don’t know what to do??!!” We heard women express guilt for being too afraid to go to the mikveh and the acknowledgement that their shalom bayit, marital harmony, would suffer as a result. Women shared with us their yearning for the comfort of physical proximity and not being niddah. We heard women’s fear over their own and their family’s safety and confusion over the lack of information. We heard women who felt judged and ridiculed for immersing in the mikveh despite safety concerns of transmission. We learned of women who felt judged for being too scared to go.

We make these stories public because not all women had the infrastructure to share them with their leadership. By building public awareness around the experiences of women it is our hope we can all learn from them.

IV. Mikveh Leadership

The subjectivities of individual women considering mikveh immersion paralleled another set of challenges: that of leaders involved in facilitating the communal mikveh experiences.
Prominent among these were the balaniot, the mikveh attendants who served and continue to serve as essential workers on the religious frontline. Balaniot interact with anyone who comes to the mikveh, answer phone-calls, and supervise immersions. Overwhelmingly, however, they do not make mikveh policy: they implement it. During the global pandemic, while religious leaders, health officials, and mikveh boards tried to figure out mikveh guidelines, balaniot were left to enact them.

Some balaniot described their own experiences as difficult: they kept receiving rapidly changing information about safety in the mikveh and how women should immerse. One balanit shared how challenging it was to suddenly be thrust into the role of a public health expert. She described fielding questions for hours from concerned women, asking about a virus that the world was still learning about.

Balaniot dealt not only with questions about mikveh safety but also with requests to change mikveh policy. For example, most Orthodox mikvaot do not permit women to immerse during the day without express rabbinic permission. One balanit told us she initially told a woman, who was begging for a daytime immersion in order to avoid crowds, that she couldn’t come. After reflecting on the fear that women were experiencing, she changed her mind and called the woman telling her to come during the day to immerse.

Other balaniot described how following mikveh guidelines and policies was not always possible. A balanit might be instructed to have women immerse five minutes apart from each other as a preventative measure, but for a busy mikveh with 20 immersions a night even just five minutes was challenging to observe. Some institutions and communities even set up networks and WhatsApp groups for mikveh attendants to compare notes and support each other during this critical time.

All attendants (both salaried and volunteers) and mikveh employees risked their own health by continuing to work in-person during the pandemic, but those who were themselves vulnerable experienced additional challenges. Many are hourly workers and depend on their income from the mikveh for their families’ financial stability. Attendants who were older, immunocompromised, or pregnant all had to make excruciating decisions, not unlike those made by essential workers across America, not only about how to keep those coming to the mikveh safe, but how to protect themselves as well.

Besides balaniot, those in positions of communal religious leadership like yoatzot, clergy, mikveh board members, Jewish professionals and lay leaders had to guide people in unprecedented circumstances. They too experienced enormous amounts of stress trying to navigate these uncertain waters.

Some lay leaders and mikveh board members described the intensity of the moment: the immense responsibility they felt in helping to make decisions about how the mikveh would function, the stresses of trying to keep up with changing information, the need to respond rapidly to friends and fellows community members, and constant meetings and communication to learn more and to work collaboratively with other leadership during a chaotic time. The many women’s religious organizations and women leaders within broader religious organizations - both professionals and lay - worked tirelessly behind the scenes and publicly to gather information and address concerns about mikveh safety and ongoing mikveh attendance. Medical professionals - despite experiencing their own pressures of treating patients during the dangers of the pandemic - volunteered their time, serving as consultants to mikvaot, to clergy, and to individual women who wanted to know more about how to manage risks around mikveh attendance. One very public effort came in late March, when JOWMA, the Jewish Orthodox Women’s Medical Association, put out mikveh guidelines for mikvaot to use.

Religious leaders described the anxiety of guiding women around making choices related to mikveh. Their job descriptions suddenly shifted from providing pastoral, halakhic, and spiritual support to helping women assess medical risks. Clergy had to become experts about the chemicals used in the mikveh waters and the ever shifting guidelines from local and state governments.

We know of one leader who literally donned a wetsuit in the middle of March to test out her local natural body of water to ascertain whether it could be safe to immerse in it. For many, especially yoatzot, rebbeznis, rabbaniot, maharats, and rabbis, the work became overwhelming.

Others described the tricky dynamics involved in decision-making due to the nature of the communal structures governing mikvaot. The majority of American mikvaot have male halakhic leadership. Even if the mikveh’s board is made up of women, halakhic authority (and oftentimes funding) is determined by men. This dynamic played out in different ways during the lockdown.

Instead of speaking out themselves, some women encouraged male colleagues to publicly voice their concerns about mikveh safety so as to disassociate the
issue from schismatic concerns in Orthodoxy about the communal authority of women. Others tempered their public assessment of the situation. They were concerned that if they were to express hesitations about the blanket encouragement of women to go to mikveh it might be deemed a ‘feminist’ attempt to challenge the authority of rabbis and thus wind up exacerbating the situation.

Among themselves, female religious leaders debated how to talk about mikveh safety to those who asked. On the one hand, many communicated that mikvaot are safe – “safer than going to the grocery-store” – and continued supporting immersions. Others disagreed, pointing to the rapidly changing medical advice as necessitating qualified and calibrated advice around immersions.

Many worried about the consequences of telling couples at one of the most challenging and stressful moments in their lives that they must stay physically apart with no end in sight. Additionally, one leader told us her fear revolved around the potential closure of the mikveh, since public health strictures could make reopening them problematic. And what then of all the women who depend on the mikvaot or the couples trying so desperately to have children?

Another community leader told us of her struggles with how to advise her students who asked for her advice about how to immerse safely. She could explain what an ideal mikveh should look like in terms of public safety, but the many different guidelines that mikvaot had during this period suggested little unanimity: some mikvaot asked women to wear masks while others didn’t, and some established wait times between immersions while others did not require appointments. She could not guarantee, either, whether all guidelines were enforced, not to mention whether all mikveh attendees were honest in self-reporting their symptoms.

In closed listservs and private conversations around the relationship between public health and mikveh – and whether there was any room for leniency related to harhakot – two camps emerged. There were those who argued that because mikvaot could not be guaranteed to be safe, Jewish law must accommodate leniencies in how couples interact when a woman is a niddah (even as there were disagreements about what those leniencies should be). Others argued that Jewish law could not and should not budge with respect to harhakot, and therefore mikvaot must continue to be open and made as safe as could be reasonably expected. While this binary of linking mikveh safety with halakhic policy is not inevitable - i.e., people could have argued that mikvaot are not necessarily safe enough and still harhakot cannot be compromised - we saw the more binary disagreement emerge quite prominently in our networks.

A leader explained how the culture surrounding mikveh observance of public generalities and private leniencies made things more difficult. This results in much of the personal conversations and questions around mikveh happening behind closed doors, contributing to a reality in which many women are either too embarrassed to ask questions or do not feel empowered to do so.

V. The Way Forward

Much of the anguish that these stories around mikveh observance during lockdown convey mirrors broader struggles at a time of deep existential stress. But these women’s experiences demand a more honest reckoning. Times of social distress can reveal the strengths and the weaknesses of systems and institutions, and the mikveh is no exception.

Having heard these stories, how then should they inform our vision for what the mikveh can and should be?

There are several areas for improvement that we have identified that, if enacted, would bolster the health of the mikveh as an institution more broadly.

Communication: To begin, the pandemic revealed the need for consistent public policy and communication about protocols and guidelines to men and women alike. Communal leaders should discuss mikveh openly and in tandem with discussing other religious institutions and practices. This should not be a subject that remains hidden from view. Mikveh observance is both a routine practice for thousands of women and also a highly time-sensitive one. Women need to have real-time clarity on mikveh policies.

Better communication also means better interfaces for women to access information. Many mikveh websites are outdated on a technical level and often are not updated. In certain communities, the only way to find out what time a mikveh is open, for example, is by calling directly and trying to gather information. Instead of setting up systems where women have to ‘pull’ information about mikveh guidelines, communities must do a better job ‘pushing’ the information proactively using all available technical channels. It should be as simple and easy to access information about mikveh as it is to access information about where to say kaddish or how to run a seder.
That said, public psak and information in general cannot take all exigencies into consideration. Communities should encourage and invite women to ask questions about their individual circumstances and should give them access to authorities they trust to discuss their particular situation. There are already great models for this in many communities and we hope this becomes the norm.

**Soliciting Feedback:** To facilitate this, we need better methods to hear about women’s individual experiences vis-a-vis mikveh. Often, communal leaders will turn to those nearest to them – members of mikveh boards and the like – to learn what the experience of observant women is like in different realms of Halakhah (including mikveh). The experience of the pandemic has shown that more voices across a wider range of experiences need to be directly heard by those making decisions. This type of feedback should be collected by community leaders seeking to make mikveh experiences better.

More learning could be done through anonymous surveys or other portals to gather honest reflections about their experiences. A Yoetzet Halacha, or rebbetzin who works independently from those who run the mikveh can serve as an important address where women could give direct feedback about their experiences and their concerns. The privacy, dignity, and tzniyut of mikveh observance can be preserved at the same time as the concerns of women are heard and acted upon.

**Transparency & Trust:** The health of an institution depends to a large extent on how much its constituents trust their leadership. Transparency goes a long way towards building trust – especially when leadership is transparent about what they know and what they do not know (both in terms of Halakhah and medical knowledge). Leaders who were frank, and who spoke with integrity about their own understanding of Halakhah (for example, regarding the limits of permissiveness around harhakot) and the extent of their shifting understanding about transmission of the virus communicated to women that they could be trusted.

This also includes a culture of transparency about the mikveh’s infrastructure. Women who attend a mikveh should have easy and transparent access to know which individuals are on a mikveh’s board, how decisions are made, who the halakhic authorities are, who the medical committee is, how the mikveh is funded, etc.

**Education:** The pandemic has also revealed that there is a need for more nuanced niddah education for mikveh observant women. Due to the seriousness of transgressing niddah and the technical intricacy of certain laws, our communities have fostered a culture of dependency in which many women lack sufficient knowledge to make decisions on their own in areas in which Halakhah deems it appropriate for them to do so. During the lockdown, many women confronted a myriad of new questions and situations requiring personal decision making and would have benefitted from better knowledge of the laws of niddah and confidence in their application. We applaud those who offer rigorous kallah training and niddah refresher courses and hope these efforts will be expanded to reach all women who are interested in learning more.

**Leadership:** The tremendous challenges that the pandemic presented in the area of mikveh revealed the remarkable work of so many women in our communities, alongside Orthodox male leadership: yoatzot, rabbaniot, maharats, rebbeznits, and lay leaders (including medical practitioners) guided our communities during this critical time. Their contributions highlight the benefits of female leadership. Communities should celebrate, promote, and continue to support their efforts.

We hope that this article will generate continued discussion in our communities about these issues. We were moved to write it because we believe women’s voices and lived experiences must not only be heard but also shape the ways our communities function, especially spaces meant for women’s religious lives. Formulating ways to improve the systems around mikveh observance is imperative not only in times of crisis but for the wellbeing of religious women and their families, the institutional health of our mikvaot, and the daily flourishing of our communities.

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1 In this list, we group together many types of Orthodox religious leaders despite knowing they may see themselves as distinct groups from one another whether due to their training, their religious authority, and/or their hashkafah. We aim to be as representative as possible of the different configurations of leadership in our varied communities.
Is Remix Judaism for Everyone?

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Did in The New American Judaism, Jack Wertheimer noted that contemporary Jewish individuals and institutions “remix” their Judaism. In his words, “Jews across the spectrum tend to decide for themselves which mitzvot (commandments) they will observe and which they will ignore. From an outsider’s perspective these choices may appear arbitrary and inconsistent, though presumably they make perfect sense to the individual.” While Wertheimer noted this phenomenon with interest and interviewed many rabbis about their perceptions of congregants’ religious lives and resulting changes made within their synagogues, he spent little time speculating about how the internal process of remixing Judaism actually works for each individual and family unit.

Luckily for those of us who wish to take a closer look at that underlying question, Professor Roberta Rosenthal Kwall explores it at length in Remix Judaism: Preserving Tradition in a Diverse World. Taking the fact that “most American Jews do not believe strict religious observance is fundamental to their Jewish identity” for granted, Kwall aims “to open a dialogue with all Jews, and other willing listeners, about how to strengthen their connection to the teachings and practices of the Jewish tradition in a way that comports with the sensibilities of Jews who are not, and never will be, observant by conventional measures.”

Kwall’s goal of dialogue is laudable, and I will address below how her book also speaks to Jews already committed to Halakhah. But first, how does remix work in practice? Kwall argues that although Halakhah need not be strictly adhered to, the practices one takes on must retain their fundamental Jewish authenticity. She then lists three steps for remixing Jewish practices authentically:

1) Select rituals and/or traditions to bring into your life

2) Infuse those rituals and/or traditions with your own personal meaning

3) Consistently perform those rituals and/or traditions in a way that embraces their historical authenticity

“If these conditions are met,” Kwall writes, “it is highly likely that both the individuals and the communities of which they are a part will be successful in transmitting meaningful, specific elements of Jewish tradition as well as a more global appreciation for its beauty and relevance.” Throughout the book, she gives examples of remixing rituals and traditions across realms such as Shabbat and holidays, food, lifecycle events, Tikun Olam, and more.

When it comes to Shabbat, a day frequently appreciated by both Orthodox and liberal Jews, Kwall writes early on about individuals and families who light Shabbat candles long past nightfall, wanting to celebrate the experience of welcoming Shabbat and finding meaning in the tradition even when it is in technical violation of Halakhah. Some did this because the family first gathered for dinner after nightfall, and others did so because it just did not feel like Shabbat for them until they could be completely done with work. Another example is of those who make time for having Shabbat meals as a family, even when the food itself is not strictly kosher.

Overall, “even if Shabbat is not observed to the letter of the law, its celebration ... allows for a much needed break from our fast-paced existence by carving out sacred time and space on a consistent basis uninterrupted by electronics and other background noise. Shabbat facilitates time with loved ones and spiritual contemplation.” Even when remixed, Kwall writes that Shabbat and Jewish holidays should be appreciated for fostering feelings of differentiation from the rest of the week through disconnection with usual routines, joyful celebration of the experience, and consistent performance of select traditional activities.

Kwall’s description of Shabbat is actually quite inter-denominational. It’s similar to how many Orthodox Jews describe the purpose of the day of rest, largely echoes the emotional power of the day as articulated by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel throughout his popular work, The Sabbath, and is appreciated throughout the liberal Jewish world today. For example, Rabbi Arthur Green, rector of the rabbinical school at the pluralistic Hebrew College, follows nearly every step of Kwall’s remix formulation in advocating stronger Shabbat awareness amongst contemporary Jews. He writes that Shabbat may very well be the greatest piece of wisdom the Jewish people can offer to the world at large. But how can that be done when most contemporary Jews won’t even accept the rules of
the day as halakhically stipulated? Green answers that “Shabbat is not owned only by the strictly observant minority of Jews; it belongs to all of the Jewish people. If we are going to offer it to the world, we first need to find a way to observe it ourselves.” He goes on to list five “Dos” and “Don’ts.” The “Dos” consist of spending time at home, celebrating with others, finding something new or interesting to study or learn, taking personal time for yourself, and marking both the beginning and end of the Sabbath in a meaningful way. The “Don’ts” include doing anything related to one’s work life, spending money, using electronic devices, travelling commercially, and refraining from TV and computer entertainment. Such an experience of Shabbat is very much in line with Kwall’s remix approach in that he does not describe commandments, but ways to create a general Shabbat spirit.

It is clear that when it comes to Shabbat in particular, as well as to tradition in general, that remixing Judaism is something which is not only already being done but also seen as much needed across much of the Jewish spectrum.

Indeed, although at first glance the book is not obviously aimed at Orthodox Jews, who are generally taking their ritual cues from the Shulhan Aruk and robust ritual-centric communal norms, the idea of remixing should matter to the Orthodox community at large for three reasons.

First, as Kwall herself has written in an article about why American Orthodox Jews can and should care about whether liberal Judaism thrives, kiruv efforts, kosher food services, kosher caterers, and Orthodox-affiliated teachers are all more successful when the liberal communities surrounding them are viable. Ultimately, “the preservation of a rich and vibrant Jewish tradition for a greater number of Jews is critical for a flourishing Jewish future in the United States” even if those Jews are not viewing Halakhah in the same way that Orthodox Jews do. Understanding how and why they make the religious decisions they do, then, can continue to aid those professional areas and beyond within the Orthodox community. In that sense, Kwall writes in Remix Judaism that the book’s publication is a kiruv project in that it is intended to bring Jews closer to Jewish tradition, albeit outside of an Orthodox halakhic framework. She passionately argues that all who identify as Jewish have a stake in that enterprise because it will result in preserving a rich and vibrant Jewish experience for a greater number of Jews than ever before.

The second reason why this book should matter to Orthodox Jews is a moral or spiritual one. I direct readers to powerful words on the matter from R. Aharon Lichtenstein:

[D]oes anyone imagine that if every non-Orthodox temple were to shut down forthwith, that on the morrow the membership would flock, en masse, to the nearest shul or shitabel? If indeed temple attendance and affiliation are waning, and on the assumption that the absentees are beyond the reach of our own message, is there not, beyond competition, as much cause for dismay as for gratification? If we are concerned, as we ought to be, about the future spiritual destiny of our siblings, and if we are convinced that, in certain areas, a measure of comity could enhance it, might the option not be at least worthy of consideration?

I would argue that much of the comity that R. Lichtenstein wrote about above can be gained by appreciating Kwall’s work in Remix Judaism. Once we acknowledge that the people she writes about would likely not be compelled by Orthodox Judaism anyway, I’d hope most if not all Orthodox Jews would agree that some Jewish affiliation is better than none. From there, our understanding of how the decisions about which Jewish rituals to accept are made can be helpful not only for our own professional benefit, but to appreciate these individuals’ unique religious identities. They, like their Orthodox siblings, are ultimately trying their best to place Jewish tradition in conversation with the contemporary world in which they live. The more people who give traditional Jewish values a voice in the conversation of their lives, the better.

Finally, Kwall herself gives numerous anecdotes throughout Remix Judaism of Orthodox friends who gained from a remixed approach to Jewish tradition in their own ways. She briefly mentions, for example, the phenomenon of Social Orthodoxy — in which individuals select which rituals to observe or not to observe in ways that are not dissimilar from the non-Orthodox Jews written about throughout the bulk of the book. Even beyond that group, many (including R. Lichtenstein) have written about a lack of passion and spirituality that afflicts both the right and left of Orthodoxy. Understanding how liberal Jews remix their Judaism, I would argue, can inspire a more passionate and spiritual attachment to specific mitzvot even for Orthodox readers who merely seek new frameworks for old traditions rather than to break with the halakhic norms of their community.

Ultimately, there were two questions left in my mind after reading Remix Judaism. First, despite the value that Kwall’s
framework has for Orthodox Jews, can they really come to accept remix as prescriptive rather than just descriptive? Kwall is clearly optimistic on that front, arguing that Orthodox Jews should appreciate and support this endeavor. Such support would require Orthodox Jews to acknowledge that liberal Jews will always have different, often even opposing, ways of practicing Judaism. But Kwall argues that such differences are not only acceptable but vital to the continued health of the Jewish people. In her model, the left pushes boundaries in attempting to include needed change, the right pushes back to continue perceived authenticity, and those in the middle attempt to navigate between those poles as best they can. She writes, “Multiple perspectives strengthen, rather than diminish, the whole. When all sectors accept the inevitability of differences and appreciate the good faith function of each place on the spectrum, the Jewish people are at their strongest and are most able to maintain a sense of unity despite a lack of uniformity.”

I, however, find myself less optimistic. In response to a call from Asher Shiloni for secular Israeli kibbutzim to selectively reacquire Jewish traditions in a way that is similar to what is advocated throughout Remix, R. Aharon Feldman of Baltimore’s Ner Israel Rabbinical College (perhaps one of the most moderate ‘yeshivish’ institution in North America) wrote that “[the] suggestion that we pick, choose, and adapt religious symbols so as to preserve the atheistic ideals of the kibbutz is futile since it calls for preserving form without content. If, as [Shiloni] states, the kibbutzim are throwing out the baby with the bathwater, his suggestion is even worse than futile. It would still mean throwing out the baby, and would go on to replace it with an artist’s rendition of a baby.”

Given that he used similar language regarding the Conservative and Reform approaches to Judaism a few paragraphs earlier in the same essay, I have little doubt that R. Feldman would quickly extend such negative sentiments to those who opt for remix as well.

But it’s not just the yeshiva world that might find remix hard to fully integrate into its worldview. Even R. Avi Weiss, rabbi emeritus of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and founder of both Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and Yeshivat Maharat, who wasadamant about replacing the term kiruv with that of encounter since outreach done right should acknowledge the fact that “those reaching out have much to learn from those being reached,” spoke of “the ‘Shabbat pro’ [being] lifted through the spiritual joy of the learner” and his “beginner’s excitement.” Notice that even R. Weiss, known for his “Open” approach to Orthodoxy, still uses the language of “beginner” and “pro.” He continues to write that although the success of outreach should not necessarily be measured by making people fully observant of Halakhah, “even the observance of only parts of the Shabbat or dietary laws constitutes success as such is undeniably a step forward. A door slightly ajar offers greater potential than a closed one.”

Room for reciprocity or not, even this “Open” brand of outreach is seen as a means toward the end of inspiring full halakhic observance. Of course, there will be those who do not make it all the way, but the goal is to begin an upwards trajectory ending in Orthodoxy. This is quite different from Kwall’s approach, which does not see full halakhic observance as a realistic goal for the vast majority of American Jews and instead seeks to foster contemplation of “a pattern of practice that will enhance consciousness of Jewish tradition in order to maximize the ability to preserve and transmit” even if it is in violation of Halakhah as interpreted by the observant community. It may be easy for Orthodox Jews to pay lip service to the Jewish people being a symphony in which “all parts are needed in order to function well,” but actually participating in said symphony while thinking that most of the other players are hopelessly out of tune is much more difficult.

My second question after closing Remix Judaism is that of “why?” What is the draw to Jewish tradition that warrants remixing it at all? Kwall notes that in order for the attraction to Jewish tradition to be put in conversation with contemporary experiences, “people need to be in a place in their lives where they have the inclination to explore and the mental, spiritual, and physical energy and time to devote to a spiritually oriented enterprise,” but she does not specify where that inclination should come from initially or how to cultivate it in the first place. Though the book is teeming with autobiographical stories, Kwall does not fully articulate why traditional authenticity actually matters to her or why it should matter for others. At various points she tells stories where her family communicated a sense that Judaism was important to them; at one juncture she vividly recalls her father’s guilt about eating a non-kosher hotdog as a child. Still, I cannot imagine these episodes are easy for readers to connect with if they had no such experiences themselves.

In the past, thinkers who have articulated new approaches to living Jewish lives have offered confident answers to why tradition should still be in serious conversation with one’s identity. Reconstructionist founder and ideologue Mordecai Kaplan, for example, argued that the Jewish past should have a vote (albeit not a veto) in one’s religious life because all contemporary Jews fundamentally represent an extension of the same civilization as their ancestors.
Kaplan explicitly acknowledged that “as soon as a people loses its distinctive customs and folkways, its civilization begins to disintegrate”\(^\text{17}\) and therefore argued that some form of Jewish tradition must always exist in the lives of Jews. In a more tradition-minded vein, Rabbi Ethan Tucker of the Hadar Institute related to me that he explains the necessity of halakhic consciousness as fundamentally stemming from the fact that all Jews were bound to the covenant at Mt. Sinai. Therefore, “many if not most Jews experience cognitive dissonance when they are out of sync with the Torah, and Halakhah is the discourse by which we get in sync with it. Anyone who has ever felt they were a “bad Jew”—a set that is larger than what one might think—implicitly actually wants to be in conformity with something larger and covenantal.”\(^\text{18}\)

Even the above-mentioned Arthur Green, who thinks of himself as a religious humanist in the most universal sense and therefore does not see Judaism as having an objective claim on anyone’s life, mentions that he chose to write one of his most popular books in a way that was “clearly and unabashedly Jewish in its language.”\(^\text{19}\) This is because it is Jewish tradition which he knows best, most clearly speaks to his life experiences, and through which he could most clearly articulate in a helpful manner to the next generation of spiritual seekers. Although the ultimate choice of whether or not to maintain that specific religious language was left to his readers, Green still cogently explained why Jewish tradition could be important to his goals.

Kwall, however, seems to take for granted the idea that Jewish tradition should have something to say to all Jews, which is the same as what many Orthodox approaches do. She does not ask if someone should view themselves as being within a Jewish context or decide to put Jewish tradition in conversation with their life, but only how they should go about adopting and adapting Jewish practices. Because of this underlying assumption, she fails to articulate why her view should be shared by her readers in the first place. Therefore, although people who read Remix Judaism already valuing what Jewish tradition has to say to them will find many useful ideas to bring into their lives, I worry that those who read Remix without already holding such a conviction will not be convinced to start doing so unless particular examples in the book speak to them on an individual level.

At the end of the day, though, Remix Judaism is a wonderful book that well articulates how Jews outside of the halakhic fold can adapt Jewish rituals and traditions to their lives in a way that inspires personal meaning, empowers greater connection, and allows for transmission across generations. This is, no doubt, a worthwhile endeavor. Though its ultimate vision of all streams of Judaism operating peacefully side by side may be too rosy for mainstream Orthodoxy, the book is no doubt a worthwhile contribution to anyone’s library.

The author wishes to thank Yosef Lindell for his thoughtful editorial assistance.

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3 Ibid., 4-5.
5 Ibid., 21.
6 The desire and perceived need to remix Shabbat observance in particular is already one taken seriously by Jews who are not strictly observant. See, for example, organizations like OneTable and the Reboot Sabbath Manifesto.
9 Kwall, 18.
12 Ibid. Emphasis my own.
13 Kwall, 74
14 Ibid., 18.
15 One potential exception can be found within the words of R. Aharon Lichtenstein:

Surely, we have many sharp differences with the Conservative and Reform movements, and these should not be sloughed over or blurred. However, we also share many values with them - and this, too, should not be obscured. Their disappearance might strengthen us in some respects but would unquestionably weaken us in others. And of course, if we transcend our own interests and think of the people currently served by these movements - many of them, both presently and potentially, well beyond our reach or ken - how
would they, or klal Yisrael as a whole, be affected by such a change? Can anyone responsibly state that it is better for a marginal Jew in Dallas or in Dubuque to lose his religious identity altogether rather than drive to his temple?


This statement, however, is much more of a *bideavad* assessment of reality than a *lekhathila* endorsement of non-halakhic practices.

16 Ibid., 191


18 Personal correspondence of the author.