

WATER RITUAL AFTER A FIRE

BY LISA KANEFF

Fire changes things permanently. The intense heat opens the pores of plastics and metals and seeps into its inorganic skin. The rapid cooling after seals it in. The fire changed me, too. It ripped me open, touched my heart and my soul, and then it, too, got sealed in. The smoke in my lungs was proof. My shriveled fingers, too. The charred bottoms of my feet. It changed me inside and out. I will never be the same. Never.

The laws of kashrut, I learned, say that things that are used in fire must be kashered using fire. But I am not of fire. I am of water - the water of my mother's womb, the puddles I splashed in as a child, the tears I've shed as an adult in joy and sorrow.

So today, one year after the fire, I will begin the process of becoming purified by the living waters. Today will be the transition -- from the year of trauma to a year of healing and we will mark it using the rituals of havdalah.

Havdalah, with each of its ritual objects, will help me rename and reclaim my experience. The ritual will have three parts, each including a sensory experience and an immersion.

First, we will light a candle. The candle, as rigid as it is, as strong, must be held in place or else it will fall over. Ann, as the person who held me up from the moment I entered your home as a friend, teacher, and sister, I'd like you to hold the candle today. While a fire destroyed my home, I reclaim this flame as a light, illuminating the night and guiding me on my way. And to represent this healing from the physical pain, I will immerse my hand in the mikvah water.

[READING before immersion]

In gratitude, I come today to celebrate the blessings in my life.
I honor those who have helped me along the way and give thanks for their supportive presence.
As I prepare to immerse in the waters of the mikvah,
I appreciate the journey that has brought me to this moment.

[IMMERSE HAND]

Now, we will smell something that I find to be very sweet: coffee. Not only is it sweet, it warms my heart. It is familiar and it lifts me up. It is over coffee that I met my dear, sweet friend Rachel, a woman who warms my heart and lifts me up. Coffee was the first thing I had to drink that morning, made fresh by a neighbor who snuck into the building. It was the sweetest smell, breaking the wall of acrid stench that wafted from my apartment. I will never forget that stench, the one that woke me up before the fire started, and the one that accosted me after my home burst into flames. But coffee, it is equally powerful. Its roasted nature defines it, and yet it is still sweet. To represent the day of the fire and the last time I left my home, I will now immerse my house key in the mikvah water.

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[READING before immersion]

Water is God's gift to living souls,
To clear us, to purify us,
To sustain us and renew us.
As I immerse this token of my past into mayim chayim, living waters,
I begin a new cycle of my life.
May this immersion help me move from what has been
And may my heart be open to what is yet to come.

[IMMERSE KEY]

Finally, we will share something sweet. I renovated my kitchen so I could cook, something I love. It is my meditation. My joy. My pride. It connects me to my community and lifts up the skills passed down from my mother and grandmother. I refuse to lose that joy. Today, even though my kitchen is not yet complete, I want to share with you a sweet bite. And by dipping my silverware -- passed down from my grandmother -- into the mikvah water, I take a step toward reclaiming the space that I love, my kitchen.

[READING before the immersion]

To take the first step
To sing a new song --
Is to close one's eyes and dive into unknown waters.
For a moment knowing nothing risking all
But then to discover
The waters are friendly
The ground is firm
And the song --
The song rises again.

[IMMERSE SILVERWARE]

As we end the ceremony, let's pass the candle around. If you'd like to give me your hope for my year ahead when the candle gets to you, please do. Then, when it gets back to me, I will hold it for a moment of silence, and extinguish it in the mikvah water.