The Pink Flamingo Mikvah
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

Shabbat Shalom. It was called the Pink Flamingo, though it was painted dark brown and yellow. The sign out front indeed had a pink flamingo on it lit in bright pink neon, in fact if you looked you would realized it had not one but two of the tropical birds on it, they would alternatively be illuminated first in the seated, then in the familiar one legged standing position. The major feature of this family run motel on Lake Tahoe's South Shore, to which my family would make an annual pilgrimage each summer for a weeklong vacation was in fact only tangentially connected to the motel. There in the north east end of the parking lot stood a giant little man, a bigger than life Bob's Big Boy, towering over the parking lot and casting its shadow over the small swimming pool where I spent much of my days.

The Pink Flamingo Motor Lodge, was my family's summer vacation getaway. Just four hours, from our home in the Bay Area, or five hours depending on how slowly and cautiously my Dad

drove the steep, winding roads of highway 80 through the mountain passes. It wasn't much to speak of in terms of luxury or plush décor. It was more your ice machine, noisy a/c unit, towels so thin you could strain tea through them kinda place. It was clean, but it didn't glisten, The Pink Flamingo didn't flaunt its cleanliness or anything else for that matter.

But for all that it wasn't is also was, it was something very special in my family. Particularly for my dad as I recall, it had a magical power to transform and rejuvenate. A week in Lake Tahoe at the Pink Flamingo, no matter how he did at the slot machines, and depending a little bit on how my brother, sister and I behaved was like a spiritual rebirth, it was like immersing in the waters of the Mikvah; the ritual bath that Jews have used for generations to mark life's transitions and passages.

You enter into the waters of the Mikvah by walking down seven steps, one for each day of creation, because the waters of the Mikvah, Mayim Hayim, living waters are connected with the waters of creation. As you descend each step your create and

uncreate something. You plunge below these living waters, as though you are in the womb of Judaism. Under the water or before you immerse according to our tradition you have God's full attention prayers offered in the Mikvah are like those rendered directly by the mouth of Moses, they go straight up to the highest reaches of heaven. Rising from the waters you immerge reborn, ritually washed of all your troubles, ready for a fresh start, emboldened to create and discover and try again, not only in early pursuits but in the pursuits of the soul and heart that defy description. The spiritual strengthening that comes only from having been in the presence of something scared.

My dad would enter that run down motor lodge, what I look back on and call the Pink Flamingo Mikvah, with all the stress and aggravation that came from running a retail men's clothing store chain (yes my family is in the shmata business), he would immerse in the mountain air, the waters of the not very well heated motel pool, descend the steps leading to the casino, the buffet (where our families normal rules of kashrut were discarded for the week, in

observance of the other commandment, thou shalt not turn away from all you can eat Jumbo Shrimp!) and he would emerge 5 or 7 days later forever changed.

He was dad again, relaxed (or as relaxed as he ever got), funny, playful, even and I can only say this now as an adult because as a kid it just freaked me out, he was romantic. Which still for my dad meant little more than holding my mom's hand as they walked in public, but you could tell they had found each other's souls again.

The proof of course of the transformation, the rebirth, the renewal was on the ride home, my Dad a dedicated listener of KGO AM News Radio, where every 30 minutes they tell what they just told you 30 minutes ago. Would instead for the ride home switch to a Jazz station, put on the ball game, or even from time to time let my teenage brother Jeff pick the station, though that seldom lasted the whole song.

The transformation this mystical place had upon him lasted only a few weeks, maybe a month or so before the stress of retail

clothing crept back in on his life. But for a period of time he was different, he was changed, he was alive in ways he and all of us had forgotten, indeed we all were. The Pink Flamingo was our family Mikvah, our ritual bath. It was just a motor lodge in a beautiful mountain setting, but we brought to it our harried and stressed out souls and it refreshed them in the living waters of a gentle and familiar embrace.

Where do you go for renewal and transformation? Where do you escape to in hot summer days to revitalize your family, to nourish your soul, to seek the divine? Where do you bring your tired out, worn out souls yearning for a rebirth, a fresh start?

For countless Jewish children throughout the country the answer is Jewish summer camp. In small towns and beach side communities, on dusty hill sides and mosquito infested farm lands, across our nation Jewish kids, from school age to teen-age make a sacred journey to holy sites, in holy lands that are known to only those who have preceded them. They immerse in the spiritual waters of camp Shabbat services where everyone dresses in white,

the sacred moments of Havdallah sung in intertwined circles while looking up at the sky to find the three stars that signal its start and Shabbat's end. They step gleefully into dinning halls, carbo load on camp food from a menu that never heard Atkins, or anything that didn't go well with Ketchup. They bang the tables and sing Birkat Hazamon, the blessing after each meal, they dance in the aisles, yell and cheer Hebrew songs, in words they cannot translate but whose meaning to them is beyond the words they sing. They enact puppet shows about the Torah portion, use the skills they have honed in Hebrew School to lead services for their peers, they play basketball, baseball, ultimate Frisbee with Rabbis and Cantors who wear tie-dyes and Birkenstocks and a yamulka. They do all these things and so much more and they come away having immersed in a Mikvah of Judaism, wrapped in the warm embrace of life lived by Jewish time, by camp time.

In these next few weeks our kids will start to come home form camp. And along with their bags of laundry, lists of screen-names, autographed t-shirts, and for some new loves of their life,

and many will also come home loving Judaism in a way that they did not know before they left. It probably won't last too long, but for a few days, maybe a week or so, it will seem odd to them that their family eats with our saying the Motzi, that Shabbas arrives without a great process lead by guitar from their room to the dinning room table. They'll look longingly out the backyard window, and wonder what it would be like to do Havdallah standing around the pool. They have immersed in the waters of a Mikvah, and have been transformed and changed.

As many of you know I am a Rabbi today, because of my own Jewish camp experiences of my childhood, and I have a theory, after talking with so many of my colleagues who credit their entrance in to the rabbinate to the same, so many of us became rabbis because we wanted to hold on to that Jewish feeling you get at camp, the warm embrace of our tradition one feels in that unique and special Mikvah and have endeavored to recreate it in some vain in our congregations.

This past summer, as I do every summer, I went back to camp to work as a rabbi in the BBYO Kallah program that I grew up in. This summer was different, in that instead of going back east, I stayed here in LA, our camp took place at the UJ, where me, about 30 teens from all over the country and an exception staff immersed ourselves in a study of Jewish community and contemporary issues for three weeks. As happens every year at camp, I learned so much more from my students, the campers than they could have hoped to learn from me. And as happens every year upon my return I realize that I have been transformed and at least temporarily changed by the profound experience of life lived on Jewish camp time. This my first Shabbat back from camp, is a difficult one, not because I don't want to be spending it with you, indeed I missed you, my congregation, but because I wish you could have spent those shabbatot with me. I want to take you to this special Mikvah, immerse each of you in the healing rejuvenating waters of Jewish summer camp. But even more than taking you all back to camp, my hope and prayer is that you seek

out and find a Mikvah of your own, that we each discover a sacred and holy place that we can retreat to in these last few weeks of summer, a place that nourishes your soul, and provides a respite from the pressures of our daily lives. And then my prayer, as it was for my father on the drive home form Tahoe, as it is for our young people as they return these weeks from camp, is that you make that feeling of transformation and renewal last as long as possible. There is a custom in Judaism that when you immerge from the Mikvah you don't towel off the waters, but let the stay on you so that you take some of the Mikvah with you. My hope and prayer is that we heed this example, that once we find our place of spiritual renewal and emotional recuperation, and emerge form it whole again that we take some of it with us, keep it fresh in our daily lives, make it last as long as possible, and when we can't feel neither the water or the effects of the waters on our souls any longer, then we get ourselves back to camp, the Pink Flamingo, or whatever our personal Mikvah is and immerse again. Few are fortunate enough to live year round at camp, but camp and all that

it symbolizes can live year round inside each of us, we just have to water the memory of it from time to time to help it grow and flourish.