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Mikveh Mysteries, Solved

OR *Why is it sometimes spelled "Mikveh" & other times "Mikvah"*

By Philologos

In American Jewish English, it would hardly seem to matter which way to spell the word. In either case, one says "MIK-vuh" in accordance with the Eastern European pronunciation of Hebrew, with the final vowel having the value of the English indefinite article "a," so that how one spells it is little more than a technicality.

This, however, is not the case in Israeli Hebrew. Here, the two spellings of the noun, both formed from the biblical verb (used only for water) le'hikavot, "to gather," not only have different vowels but are pronounced differently, too, one being mik-VEH, with the "eh" like the "e" in "fetch," and the other mik-VAH, with the "ah" like the "a" in "father." Moreover, this difference has grammatical consequences. "Mikveh" is a masculine noun and takes a masculine adjective, while "mikvah" is feminine, so that, for example, "a large ritual bath" is mikveh gadol but mikvah g'dolah.

To complicate matters further, both forms are acceptable. "Mikveh" is the older form and is what one finds in the Mishnah and the Talmud, whereas "mikvah" is more common in later rabbinic literature, such as the Shulhan Arukh. And so, as a rule of thumb, linguistic purists tend to say "mikveh," observant Israelis tend to say "mikvah" and many people, including most secular Israelis, prefer to fudge the issue by saying "MIK-veh," resorting to the Eastern European pronunciation as do American Jews. And what happens, you ask, if they then have to qualify the word with an adjective? I can only say that they try not to. As far as they're concerned, all "mikvehs" and all "mikvahs" are alike.