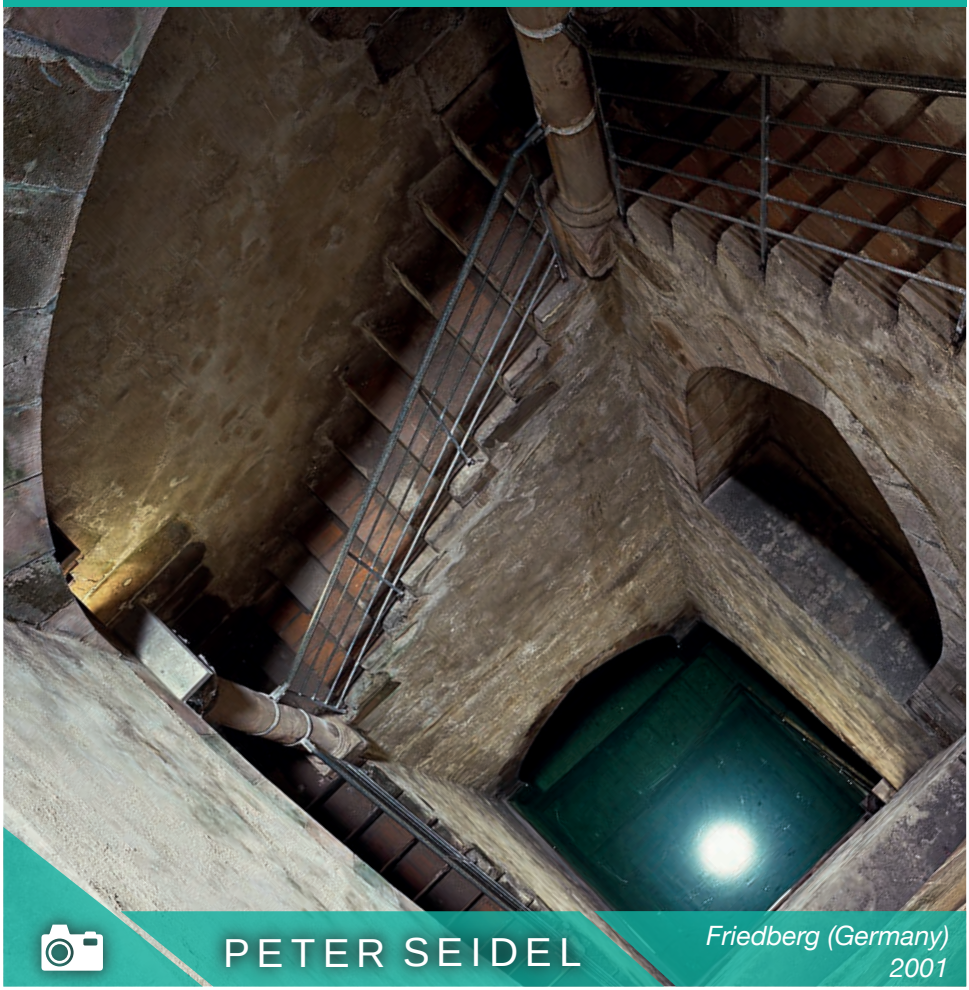
Entirely pure

Jewish women and ritual baths



PETER SEIDEL

Friedberg (Germany)
2001

Museum of Jewish History

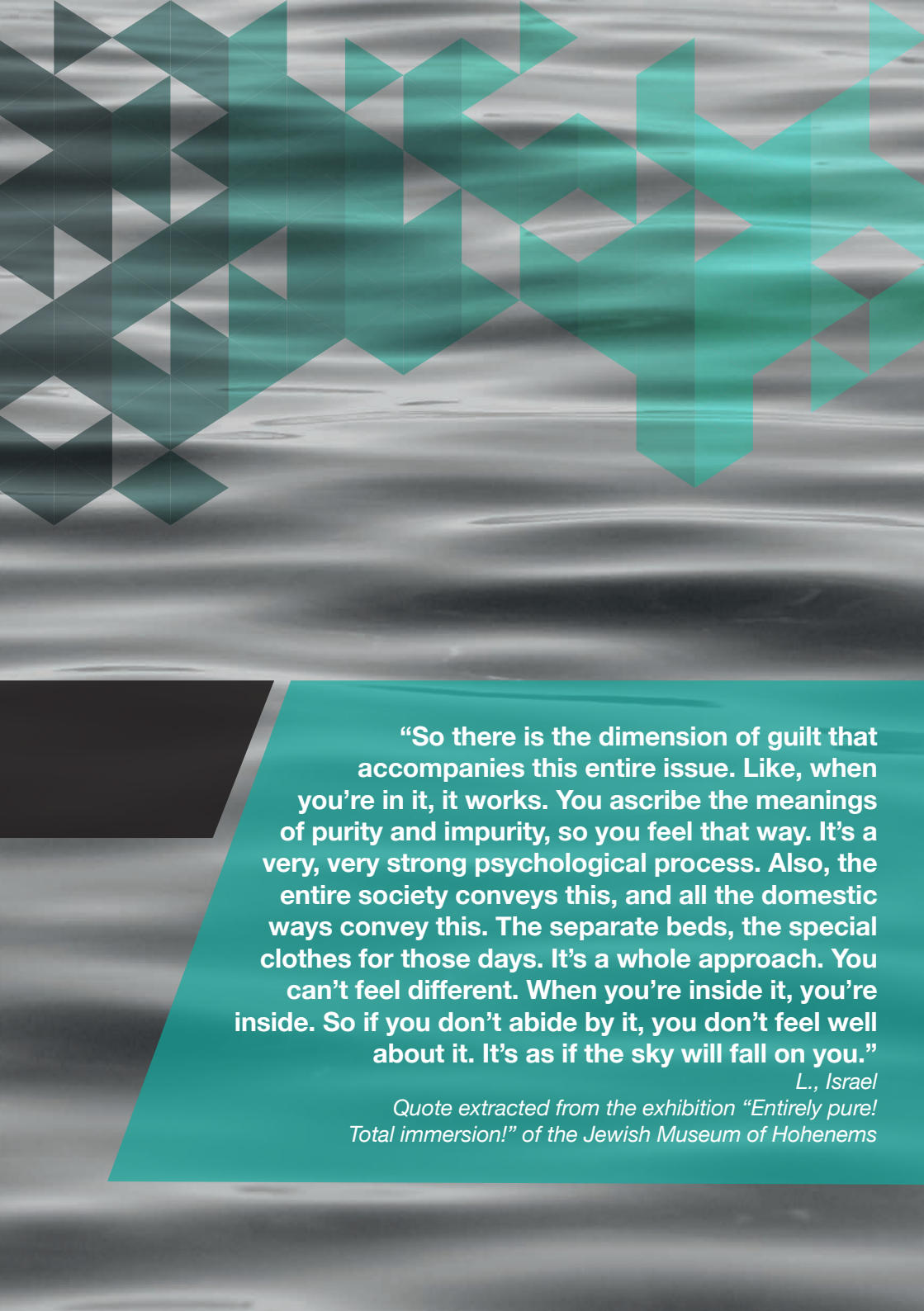
12 April - 30 September 2014

A completely pure space

In Jewish culture, ritual baths (mikva'ot) have long held a sacred identity on par with synagogues. However, due to their intimate character, these spaces have largely remained in the dark.

The baths shown in this photographic exhibition belong to different periods of time, ranging from antiquity to the present day, and are scattered across Germany, Austria, Catalonia, France and Italy. Many of the baths pictured here had long been forgotten, while others remained in use until quite recently, and a few of them are still used by women in the Jewish community. The mikveh in Girona, which dates from the 15th century, was only recently discovered in an archaeological excavation in the Jewish quarter.

In a photographic exhibition that is the first of its kind, Peter Seidel shines a light into the sacred architecture of Europe's mikva'ot. The artist takes what has traditionally been a private ritual and transforms it into something tangible and vivid across the barriers of space and time. Through these photographs, the architectural space of the baths becomes, conceptually and ideologically, a completely pure space.



“So there is the dimension of guilt that accompanies this entire issue. Like, when you’re in it, it works. You ascribe the meanings of purity and impurity, so you feel that way. It’s a very, very strong psychological process. Also, the entire society conveys this, and all the domestic ways convey this. The separate beds, the special clothes for those days. It’s a whole approach. You can’t feel different. When you’re inside it, you’re inside. So if you don’t abide by it, you don’t feel well about it. It’s as if the sky will fall on you.”

L., Israel

Quote extracted from the exhibition “Entirely pure! Total immersion!” of the Jewish Museum of Hohenems

“As a secular Jewish woman, I don’t even think of going to the mikveh. My great-grandmothers must have been the last two women in our family who have visited a mikveh —once, on the occasion of their wedding. I feel culturally connected to Judaism and through my family and their history, but not through religious practice.”

S., Berlin

Quote extracted from the exhibition “Entirely pure! Total immersion!” of the Jewish Museum of Hohenems

Peter Seidel

Worms (Germany)
1994



A symbol of Jewish women's identity

The mikveh is an ancient purification ritual that Jewish women have historically observed in specific moments of their lives: after their menstrual cycle, after giving birth, and before the wedding night, among others. It is a silent and private ritual, which is currently observed by Jewish women around the world.

Jewish women have passed this ritual down from mothers to daughters for over three thousand years. The most prominent orthodox Jewish communities usually have a mikveh, generally located in the vicinity of the synagogue. Immersion is considered a religious obligation so powerful that some women have been willing to face prison or death in order to continue the tradition.

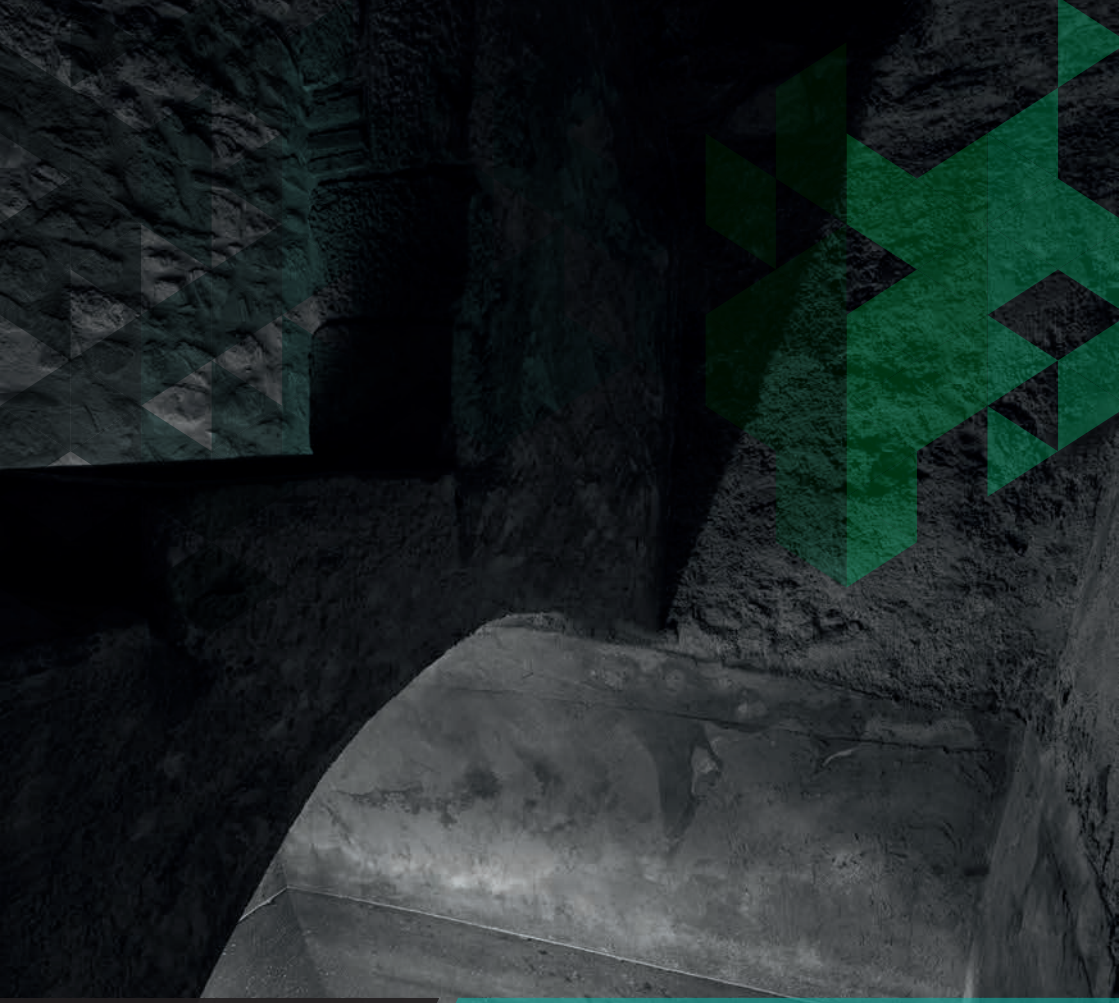
The ritual of mikveh is a profound and deeply-rooted part of Jewish identity. It provides an opportunity for spiritual cleansing and personal transformation. This purifying bath represents a dialogue between a woman and her body.

The mikva'ot of medieval Girona

During the 14th and 15th centuries, the mikveh of Girona was adjoined to the synagogue and it's been documented that the synagogue complexes included "men schools, women schools, hospitals and baths." During the 13th century, however, Jewish women carried out this act of purity in a room at the city's public baths, according to Salomon ben Adret, the rabbi of Barcelona at that time.

This mikveh was filled by rainwater collected on the roof that flowed to the pool through a system of channels. This design was in accordance with the Mishnah, which states that "water should reach the pool through a drainage system from its origin." During the 14th century, Girona's mikveh was fed by the Onyar river and was located in front of the wall of Ballesteries, on what is today Força Street. Unfortunately, nothing remains of the original structure. The last ritual bath used by Jewish women in Girona, between the years of 1435 and 1492, was located on the other side of Força Street. It was part of the synagogue, which was located northeast of what is now the Bonastruc ça Porta Center and near Sant Llorenç Street, formerly a public street in the Jewish quarter.

A recent archaeological dig, along with research into historical documents, have led to the discovery of the remains of the water drainage system and other components of the city's Jewish ritual bath. They were located in the vicinity of the current-day Museum of Jewish History.



J.M. Oliveras

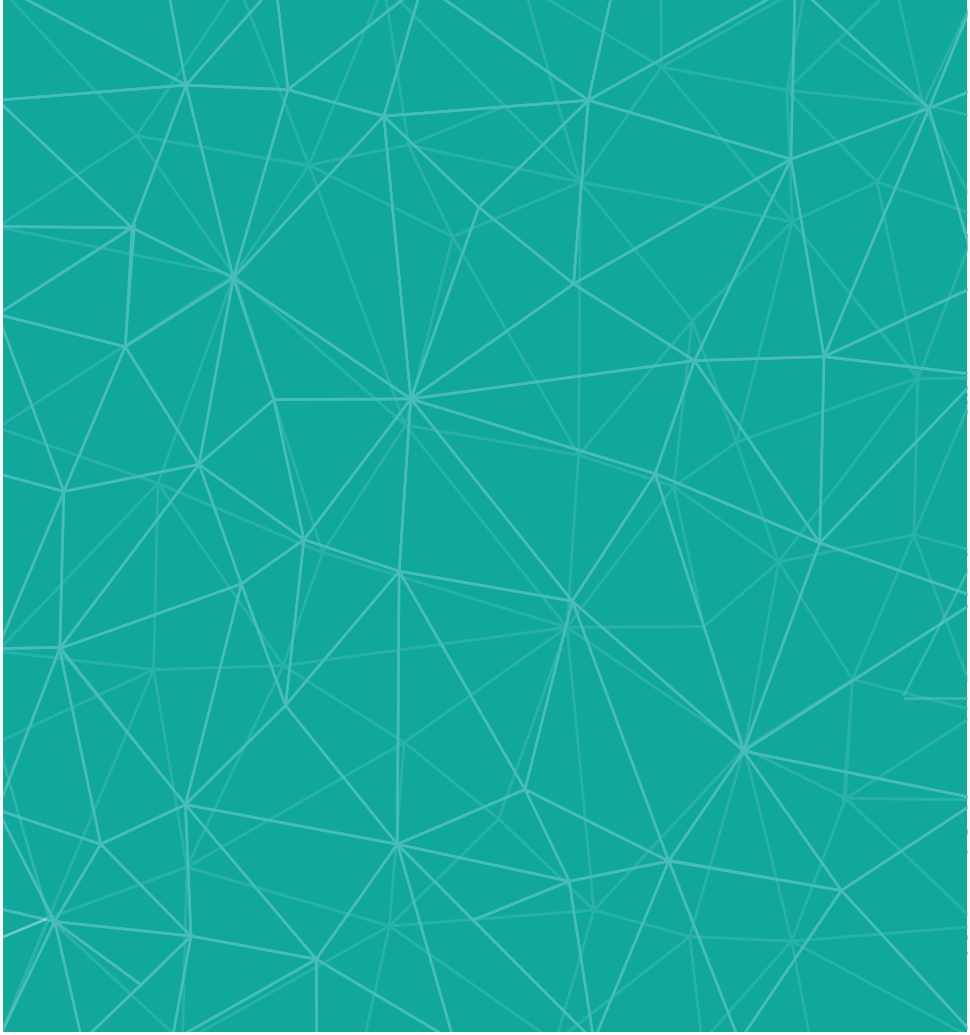
Girona (Catalonia)
2014

“Out of curiosity, I visited our community’s mikveh before my wedding. I only vaguely remember a narrow, not very appealing room and a slight repulsion. The vibrant name mikveh rather brings to my mind places like Besalú, Speyer, or Masada. Voilà, my way of immersing into Judaism.”

K., Zurich

Quote extracted from the exhibition ”Entirely pure! Total immersion!” of the Jewish Museum of Hohenems

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Curators: **Peter Seidel and Sílvia Planas**
Coordination: **Culturània S.C. - Cookingirona**
Graphic design: **MidWest Studio**
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