

For me, one of the really bright spots of the last couple of years was discovering my swimming group. One random morning during the height of the pandemic, I was running by myself along the path near Lee St. Beach and saw a bunch of people coming out of the water. I stopped and asked them if they swam every morning. “Yep, every weekday morning at 6:00, every weekend morning at 7:00. You should come join us!” they replied. This was the beginning of my triathlon journey, and I was eager for the opportunity to pick up some tips and overcome my apprehension about open water swimming. So the next morning I showed up, and for the next 2 years or so, I’ve continued to show up just about every day and it has been a wonderful and, dare I say, transformational experience.

Lately I’ve been feeling very grateful for my swimming group and the chance to swim in the lake every day, and I was really just looking for a way to sneak that into a dvar torah, and then it occurred to me that there are a lot of interesting parallels between open water swimming and the experience of the High Holy Days. I know this sounds like a stretch, but stick with me. And the advantage is that you don’t have to get wet or sandy.

The first parallel is the power of the group. Unlike running, where during easy runs you can while away the time chatting with friends and during track workouts commiserate with other runners after each interval, swimming feels like a solitary endeavor. You are face down in the water staring at the bottom of the lake, and only catch a glimpse of other swimmers through your peripheral vision when you breathe to the side every 3 or

4 strokes or when you glance up to sight. But the way the swim group works is that we swim for about 15 minutes and then stop at a designated spot, tread water, and wait for everyone else to catch up. We chat for a couple minutes, and then continue on, swim for another 15 minutes or so, and then regroup again. Everyone looks out for the other members of the group and makes sure they are OK, especially when it's wavy. This was so helpful for me when I first started swimming in the lake, and was the key to getting over my hesitation about swimming in such a large and unforgiving body of water.

In the same way, during the High Holy Days we pray silently as individuals during the amidah, and then come together as a group during the rest of the service. Even when we stand as individuals, we can see each other through our peripheral vision and feel the strength and the support of the community.

The 2nd parallel is the opportunity for introspection. Some of my peak running experiences have been long conversations with friends during marathon training, bombing down hills while trail running, or the exhilaration of running really fast with some awesome music turned all the way up in my headphones. But with swimming, there's none of that – no music, no conversation, no distractions. Just you and the rhythm of your breathing, the strokes of your arms, and the beats of your legs.

Sometimes this feels like monotonous torture where time slows down to a crawl. But most times it feels liberating – no cell phone, no email, no text messages, no Slack. If someone needs to get a hold of you, too bad because you're in the middle of the lake. Unlike a pool where you have to turn every 25 yards, in the lake you can swim in a

straight line for miles. Sometimes I let my mind wander, but most times I try to concentrate on my form and technique. When it really clicks, it can be a deeply meditative, zen-like experience.

Similarly, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur give us the opportunity for serious introspection. With all of the distractions of work and family and life temporarily removed, we have the opportunity to really think about who we are, what we value, and who we want to become. These long days in shul afford us the chance to pause and reflect on what went well, what didn't go so well, and how we can improve. Not just for a passing moment, but for a long while where we can settle in and devote quality time to deep thought.

The 3rd parallel is that the lake is never the same twice. Some days the lake is super smooth, like glass; the water is warm and the sky is clear and it's a perfect day. Some days the water is rough and the waves toss you around. Some days there is a current and you're swimming upstream. There are a couple of different websites that provide data on water temperature, air temperature, currents, wave heights, etc., but you never really know until you get there and actually get into the water.

Likewise, we daaven the same liturgy and read the same stories every year, but they always land a little differently. Maybe this year I notice a detail I didn't before, or the story has a different resonance because I'm not the same person I was last year. Sometimes there is comfort in the familiar, and sometimes there is joy in finding

something new. And sometimes there is the same wrestling with the text and trying to find meaning or reconciliation with a difficult passage.

One of the most spiritual experiences in my life happened during a swim in the lake. We started at Lighthouse Beach before sunrise and finished at Lee St. Beach an hour and a half or so later. Starting in the cold and the dark for the longest swim I had ever done was quite intimidating. But once we started, muscle memory took over. Then the sky began to lighten and I started to notice the sun peeking up from over the horizon. First it was just a couple millimeters. And then a few more. And every time I would breathe to my left, every 6 strokes or 30 seconds or so, the sun would be a couple centimeters higher. By the time we finished, the sun was blazing high in the sky and it was a glorious day. It was a powerful experience not just to see and appreciate the majesty and beauty of the lake from the shore, but to be in it and to feel viscerally its breadth and its power.

My hope for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur this year (for myself and for all of you) is to be similarly in the moment and fully present. To cut everything else away, to focus on just my breath, my strokes, my kicks. To think about whether I have lived up to my full potential, whether I am the best husband, father, and friend I can be, and what that even means.

Don't get me wrong – I am a mediocre swimmer at best. Most of the people in my swim group are stronger and faster than me. But the power of the group gives me the

courage to start and pulls me along. In the same way, I trust the power of the community at Kol Sasson to give us the courage to start and carry us along on our spiritual journey.

In this week's parasha we read "This commandment that I command you today – it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in heaven for you to say 'Who can ascend to the heaven for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Nor is it across the sea, for you to say 'Who can cross to the other side of the sea for us and take it for us, so that we can listen to it and perform it?' Rather, the matter is very near to you – in your mouth and your heart – to perform it."

Both figuratively and literally, the lake is **right there!** You just have to have the courage to start. And if you want some company, my swim group meets every weekday morning at 6:00 and every weekend morning at 7:00.