

Some of you know that since my sabbatical I have taken up swimming. I discovered swimming by accident.

When my kids were little I had to put on my own swim suit to get them into the water for their swimming lessons at the JCC. If things went well, I would do laps in the open lane. One day I swam 12 laps, the next week 14. No big deal but after a while I noticed I felt more awake and energized on days I swam and I started going when the kids didn't have lessons.

In the past I had always found swimming boring, but perhaps because I was also learning about meditation, I found the experience of being in the water to be peaceful and even spiritual.

I should get this out of the way, as a swimmer I have no great ability. If you want to know something about how to be a good swimmer don't ask me. But as a rabbi it is my job to think about *teshuva*. *Teshuva* is the work of aligning our actions with our best intentions and I find it comes up a lot as I swim laps.

Seven things I have learned about *Teshuva* while swimming:

1. Don't be self-centered.

The truth is, no one really wants to hear about swimming. It took me a little while to realize that for the most part when people asked about my swimming, they were just being nice. This question is just so kind when I think about it. It usually means that whoever I am talking to is really trying to communicate something like,

I care about you and want to connect enough to inquire after your interests. It is a shame that in response to such kindness I often would obliviously launch into an answer about all the recent details of my swimming life. This is not such a nice thing. I have learned that the thoughtful thing to do after a brief response is to ask the person I am talking to about what they care about. If they truly are interested in swimming, which is rare, they will come back to it.

Teshuva requires that we start by taking responsibility for ourselves but we aren't supposed to stop there. Our internal gaze and focus is meant to be transformative so that we can change the way we impact others. If you aren't at all interested in swimming, keep in mind that almost everything if we pay attention to it, teaches the same lessons. Running, hobbies, your vacation, your job, raising kids. The important part is paying attention

2. Balance is more important than strength

Body size is not a great predictor of how well someone swims. It didn't take me long to realize that there are swimmers who in one way or another didn't appear to be in great shape who could swim much faster than folks who were slim and muscular.

For almost a year I swam with no instruction. I used my arms like giant propellers attached to a surfboard. I kicked furiously. Over time, I found that I was able to swim longer and longer distances, but my speed remained slow. It turns out that swimming hard isn't as important as balance. With proper technique the body moves more into alignment and glides more easily through the water.

Teshuva is about finding balance. For most of us the goal isn't to never be angry, but to be angry less and to balance that anger with compassion. Judaism teaches that we should mindfully search for balance. Even good things like humility and *tzedaka*-giving financially, can be over done.

Sometimes we get so caught up in striving to do better that we don't stop to consider how to find balance? We expend extraordinary effort doing what we have already done but with more energy and we wear ourselves out. Instead we need to consider, how can my behaviors move more into alignment so that I can appropriately glide through challenges.

3. Everyone in the world is our coach

It is hard to imagine that I could have figured out any of this on my own. As a gift, a friend paid for me to meet with a swim coach.

(As an aside, I am sure this was at least in part so that I would stop asking her if she had any swimming tips – another reminder that no one, even other swimmers, really wants to hear about exercising.)

The coach not only taught me better technique, but she was able to see what I was doing in ways I couldn't. One thing she would tell me to do (and she told me this for years) was to lift my elbows higher out of the water. It could be pretty dispiriting on a day when I thought I had been doing this really well to hear her tell me I had a long way to go, but she was right. She could see my elbows and I could not.

The people in our life, who give us feedback, sometimes with kindness and tact and sometimes so harshly that we have to work hard to consider the message – they are our coaches. They may not always be right but they see us in ways that we cannot.

Part of the work of *Teshuva* is to assume that we can learn from everyone. To mindfully consider the messages that come to us from others. In particular, when people we love and trust tell us through words or actions that we need to do something different, it is a good sign that we have more work to do.

4. Who you surround yourself with makes a big difference

There are days when the other swimmers in my lane are slower than me. On such days it seems like I finish each set of instructions with ease. I have time to wait for others to catch up and I feel pretty good about myself as a swimmer. There are other days when I can barely keep up with swimmers in my lane. I am at the back of

the line and just catching up when the next set of laps begins. Over time I noticed that I could swim at the exact same pace and feel radically different about myself and my ability, because I was judging myself in comparison to whoever happened to be in my lane.

The self-satisfaction that I feel when others are swimming more slowly and the self-judgment I feel when others swim faster than me often has nothing to do with the reality of my own effort, technique or progress.

It is our nature to judge ourselves in relation to those around us, but when it comes to *teshuvah* we need to be able to find independent measures of our own progress. Some teachers suggest that we should actually write down the things we have done well or not so well each day, so over time we can notice trends and notice progress. This is called *heshbon hanefesh* - an accounting for the soul. And like good accounting it is supposed to give us a more honest measure of our moral challenges and progress.

Also, since we are bound to measure ourselves in relation to those around us any way, it really is important to consider who you are spending your time with. Maimonides taught that it is natural for a person's character and actions to be influenced by the norms of their friends and associates. Therefore we should make a point of to be in the company of good people.

5. Leading is harder than following

In my swim class we are all divided more or less by ability into different lanes. In each lane the faster swimmers are supposed to be in the front and the slower in the back. Sometimes I have to work hard just to keep up at the back of the lane. But sometimes, I can help lead. And you know what, it is much more challenging to be the first person at the front of the line leading than to be second in the line following. I don't know how much is about hydrodynamics and how much is psychological, but leading is harder.

When it comes to *teshuvah* there is no shame in following. If someone you know is great at helping others, or giving *tzedakah* or fighting for social justice and you can improve your own effort by joining them and following their lead, that is great. Go for it.

But sometimes you will find that you are the best person to lead. That there is no one but you who can do the right thing in this circumstance or that you are in some way uniquely qualified to help others do what is right. And you know what, it is harder to be at the front of the line or to blaze a path. It requires having confidence in your own abilities. It means accepting that you will work harder. But it gets easier and you learn faster and you get stronger when it is your turn to lead.

6. Everything matters but I can usually only focus on one thing at a time.

It seems obvious but every part of our body is interconnected. I have learned what I do with my arms or where I position my head, how high I lift my elbows or how I swivel my hips – all these things impact how I swim. Ideally the body should move gracefully, with the fluid rhythm of a great dancer.

But though everything matters – most of the time I find the best I can do is to carefully focus on one aspect of swimming at a time. So I focus on my breathing for a lap or two, then my stroke and then my alignment and so on. After a while I try to do it all at once, but I am really relying more on muscle memory and in some ways just hoping it all kicks in. Concentrating on everything at once more closely resembles trying to just stay aware of what I am doing without letting my mind wander.

This year, the synagogue will be engaging in a practice called *Tikkun Middot* – repair or strengthening of our ethical character traits. We will as a community work to strengthen traits like humility, kindness, organization, honoring others and trust. And though all of these things matter and they are all inter-related we will work on them one at a time.

Each month, we will have classes and talks, readings and practices that we can bring home with us to help us to focus on just one of these traits. It is not that we will forget about kindness when we enter the month of patience. But by having worked hard on this technique and this ethical muscle in particular we will be more able to use it when it is called for. And since everything really is connected, the work you do on one trait will inevitably help you when turn to the next trait.

7. There is a lot to learn if you really pay attention

All last year I was studying this *Tikkun Middot* curriculum. Experiencing for myself what it felt like to work on these soul traits that I would be teaching to the synagogue. So for a month at a time I would be trying really hard to pay attention to honoring others or being kind or patience. I was surprised how week after week, the interactions I had in the pool, which were often only a few seconds long, were the ones I most noticed.

No matter which *middah* I was working on the quiet of the pool and the lack of outside stimuli between laps helped me to notice that even very short interactions could be improved. I had to figure out, how can I remain polite and respectful as we figure out who should lead and who should follow? Or, when being asked what lap we are on, I might notice the difference between turning to face someone while answering and turning away when answering, so that I could begin my next lap more quickly. These aren't the most important things in the world but for that hour, in that lane it can make a difference.

More importantly by choosing to be mindful of one single character trait, I found I had the opportunity to learn about it no matter what I was doing. That spiritual

practice didn't have to be tacked on as another task but could be a part of my activities all day. Maybe swim class isn't the most important place to practice faith or trustworthiness. But noticing how much I could learn even from these very brief and simple interactions, helped me realize much room for improvement there must be in the more complex relationship and emotionally rich places of my life. Not only that, my efforts to pay attention to these characteristics in the pool spilled out into the rest of my life.

Mordecai Kaplan the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism taught that the Torah we study within the synagogue walls should impact our lives outside the synagogue.

So whether you swim or run, walk the dog or paint, study the sports page, cook or eat at fine restaurants, play poker or just have a deep commitment to napping – I encourage you to look at that activity and ask yourself, what does this thing that I am already doing have to teach me about the rest of my life? How can I make what I am already doing my spiritual practice? And how can I use this hobby, passion or habit to practice being a *mensch*, to deepen the character of my soul?

Wishing you a sweet year! Leshanah Tovah!