

# Swimming Against the Current

**Rosh Hashanah, Second Night 5787**

Broward Central Synagogue

Jewish tradition, beginning with the Ten Commandments, speaks frequently about the obligations children have toward their parents: *"Honor your father and your mother."* Children are called upon to respect their parents and care for them. But the Talmud reverses the question. What obligations do parents have toward their children? The Talmud lists several: **a parent must bring a child into the covenant (Brit Milah), teach the child Torah, help the child prepare for marriage, and teach the child a profession.** And then it adds one surprising requirement: **A parent must teach a child how to swim** (b. Kiddushin 29a).

**How to swim?** Why would swimming appear alongside Torah and earning a living as one of the fundamental responsibilities of parenthood? Long before I encountered this passage in rabbinical school, my mother used to tell me about her summers at Camp Ramah in the mountains of Córdoba, Argentina. She remembered **Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer** insisting that no child should return home from camp without knowing how to swim. He considered it so important that he personally taught swimming lessons.

**Why was swimming so important to a rabbi in Argentina in the 1970s? Why was it important to the rabbis of the Talmud almost two thousand years earlier?** Living in South Florida, surrounded by swimming pools and canals, we understand the simplest answer immediately. **Swimming can save your life.** That was true in the world of the Talmud as well. Babylon was crossed by rivers and canals too. Another Talmudic passage even discusses the dangers involved when children had to cross a river on their way to study (b. Bava Batra 21a). So the first meaning is very practical: **Teach your children to survive.**

But I think there is another kind of swimming our children need to learn. And so do we. There is a great difference between floating and swimming. Anyone who has been to a water park knows the **lazy river**. You sit comfortably in a tube. You lean back. You do almost nothing. And somehow you keep moving. It is wonderful. The only problem is that you have absolutely no control over where you are going. The river has already decided that for you.

**That is floating. And there are moments in life when floating is exactly what we need.** We cannot fight every current. Sometimes we need to rest, conserve our energy, trust others, allow ourselves to be carried for a while. And especially in a world as turbulent as ours, there are people using every ounce of strength simply not to sink. We should never dismiss that. **Sometimes staying afloat is itself an achievement. There are seasons of life when surviving, breathing, getting through the day, keeping our head above the water is enough.** But when we have the strength to choose again, floating cannot become an entire philosophy of life. Because when we float, the fact that we are moving can create the illusion that we are choosing. We are going somewhere. We are covering distance. We feel movement beneath us. **But movement and direction are not the same thing.** If the current is carrying us toward the wrong place, remaining comfortably afloat is not enough. **At some point we have to swim.**

### **What Does It Mean to Know How to Swim?**

To know how to swim, in this deeper sense, is to develop the capacity to move through the world without allowing every current around us to determine our direction. It means learning how to think independently. It means distinguishing between evidence and popularity, between a fact and an interpretation, between something being difficult and something being false, between two things that appear similar but are not the same. It means resisting the temptation to make everything black or white, all or nothing, friend or enemy, sacred or evil. Swimming means learning to argue. To question. To investigate. To compare. To make distinctions. To change our minds when the evidence requires it. To hold two truths in tension without forcing one of them to disappear. And sometimes, to stand alone.

A person who knows how to swim does not need the water to be still. That may be the most important point. The goal of education cannot be to create a world without currents for our

children. We cannot do that. **The goal is to prepare them to enter complicated waters without drowning intellectually, morally, spiritually, or Jewishly.** A parent can hold a child in the pool. A teacher can show the strokes. A rabbi can teach the sources. A community can provide boundaries and memory. **But eventually the hands have to let go. And then the question becomes: Can they swim?**

## **The Kosher Jew**

The great Sephardic sage Hakham José Faur used this image memorably. He described a **“kosher Jew”** as someone capable of swimming against the current. And he connected the metaphor to a fascinating passage in the Talmud (Chullin 51a). The Talmud asks how we can determine whether a bird that has fallen hard into the water is still physically intact, and for that reason *kosher*, apt for consumption. The rabbis answer: **Watch how it swims. If it swims upstream, against the current, then we know that it possesses its own strength. But if it simply travels downstream, that proves very little.** Perhaps the bird is not swimming at all. Perhaps the water is doing all the work.

What an extraordinary image! Movement does not necessarily indicate strength. You can travel very far while doing absolutely nothing. **You can spend an entire life advancing professionally, socially, economically, technologically—and still never ask whether the direction in which you are moving is actually one you chose.**

Similarly nearly two thousand years ago, Philo of Alexandria found almost the same metaphor in the Torah’s laws of **kosher fish**. The Torah requires permitted fish to possess fins and scales. Philo imagines the fish without them as helplessly swept away by the stream, while the kosher fish possesses the capacity to face the current and resist it. For Philo, that fish becomes a symbol of perseverance, courage, and self-control (*On the Special Laws* 4.110–112). **It is easy to be carried toward temptation, fashion, or simply the easiest path. Learning to swim like a “kosher fish” means developing enough physical, intellectual, and spiritual strength to move differently when necessary.**

## **Abraham, Moses, and Jonah**

Our first ancestor becomes the great rabbinic model of swimming against the current. **Abraham is called *Avraham Ha-Ivri*—Abraham the Hebrew.** The Midrash plays with the word *Ivri*, connecting it to *ever*, a side: *the entire world was on one side, and Abraham was on the other* (Bereishit Rabbah 42:8). That does not mean Abraham disagreed with everyone simply because he enjoyed being different. The rabbis imagine something deeper. Abraham lived in a world in which idolatry and competing divine powers were taken for granted. **He was capable of looking at what his civilization considered obvious and asking: But is it true?** The Jewish imagination sees Abraham breaking his father's idols. **But the more important idols he breaks are intellectual: assumptions, commonplaces, ideas everybody around him had stopped questioning. Abraham does not merely cross a river geographically. He crosses a way of thinking. He swims against the intellectual current of his world.**

And then there is **Moses**. His story literally begins in water. As an infant, he is placed in the Nile and carried by the current into Pharaoh's palace. In a sense, Moses begins his life floating. The river carries him somewhere extraordinary: security, education, privilege, power. And he could have continued floating. He could have accepted the life into which the current had delivered him. Instead, Moses goes out and sees the suffering of the slaves. And once he sees, he cannot unsee. The current of the palace says: Stay comfortable. Don't become involved. This is the way Egypt works. These people are not your responsibility. Moses refuses. **The child who was drawn out of the water eventually draws an entire people out of slavery. But first he has to resist the current that brought him into comfort.**

And then there is **Jonah**, perhaps the most reluctant swimmer in the Bible. Jonah receives a mission to go to Nineveh, to confront a city he does not want to confront with a message he does not want to deliver. **Perhaps he fears failure. Perhaps he fears success. Perhaps he does not want to be the lone prophet standing before an entire city telling them that they must change. Whatever the reason, Jonah refuses to swim against the current.** He runs in the opposite direction. He gets on a ship and tries to escape his calling. But then the story does something almost humorous: Jonah escapes into the sea, is swallowed by a great fish, and eventually the very waters from which he tried to flee deliver him back toward his mission. The fish spits him onto dry land,

and Jonah must go to Nineveh after all. **Sometimes we choose to swim against the current. And sometimes life itself refuses to let us keep floating away from what we know we must do.**

**Abraham** swims against intellectual conformity. **Moses** swims against moral indifference. **Jonah** teaches us what happens when we know the direction we must take but are afraid to swim there. In different ways, all three remind us that Jewish life begins with the courage to choose a direction.

## **The Jewish Mind**

This may be one reason Jewish tradition developed such an unusual culture of questioning. **Open a page of Talmud.** It rarely resembles a textbook in which an authority announces an answer and everyone else copies it down. The page argues. Interrupts. Questions. Objects. Distinguishes. Brings another source. Challenges that source. Preserves the minority opinion. Sometimes it concludes without resolving the disagreement at all. The great student is not simply the student who remembers the teacher's answer. **The great student knows how to ask a *kushia*—a question strong enough to force everyone in the room to reconsider what they thought they knew.**

Two towering Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, coming from very different Jewish worlds, understood this as a central task of Jewish education. **For Hakham José Faur, the danger was *mental assimilation*: a Jew might continue performing Jewish rituals while allowing every important idea inside his or her head to be supplied by the surrounding culture. Externally Jewish, internally carried by the current. Abraham Joshua Heschel expressed a complementary idea: Jewish education should not merely produce people who know the text, but what we might call “text-people”—human beings whose encounter with Torah has entered their character, their choices, their way of seeing another person, their response to suffering, power, wonder, injustice, and God.**

The purpose is not simply that Torah changes what we know. It must change who we become and how we act. Jewish education therefore cannot merely protect us from the currents of contemporary life. It must give us enough Torah, intellectual independence, and spiritual depth to enter those waters without allowing the world to do all the thinking for us. That is learning how to swim.

## Not Against Everything

But we need to be careful. Swimming against the current does not mean automatically opposing whatever everyone else believes. That is not courage. Sometimes that is simply another form of narcissism. The majority is not always wrong. A minority opinion is not automatically wise. Not every unpopular opinion is prophetic. Judaism does not command contrarianism. It demands discernment—the ability to distinguish.

Sometimes the current is moving toward justice, compassion, knowledge, equality, or human dignity. Then resisting it simply because it is the current would be foolish. At other moments, the current moves toward cruelty, fanaticism, conformity, superficiality, or lies. Then floating becomes dangerous. Wisdom means knowing the difference. Knowing when to swim with the current. When to cross it. When to rest within it. And when conscience requires us to turn around and swim against it with everything we have.

## Ten Currents Around Us

So at the beginning of 5787, perhaps each of us should ask: Where in my life am I actually swimming? And where am I merely floating? There are countless currents around us. Let me suggest ten.

**First: the current of immediate reaction.** Something happens and within thirty seconds we are expected to post, forward, condemn, defend, declare which side we are on. Pirkei Avot begins with an instruction that sounds revolutionary today: *Hevu metunim badin*—be deliberate in judgment (Pirkei Avot 1:1). **Sometimes swimming against the current means refusing to be rushed into an immediate opinion.**

**Second: the current of certainty.** We are embarrassed to say, “I don’t know.” Yet the Talmud teaches: *accustom your tongue to say, “I do not know”* (b. Berakhot 4a). There are questions about medicine, economics, Israel, law, science, history, and politics about which most of us simply do not know enough. “I need to learn more” is not weakness. **Sometimes swimming against the current means admitting the limits of what we know.**

**Third: the algorithmic current.** Our phones learn what makes us angry, frightened, and engaged, and then give us more of it. Repetition begins to feel like evidence. Popularity begins to feel like truth. The Talmudic instinct asks: *Mena hanei milei?* How do you know? Who is the source? What evidence would convince me that I am wrong? **Sometimes swimming against the current means stepping outside a current designed specifically for us in social media.**

**Fourth: political tribalism.** American politics increasingly invites us to choose a team and outsource our conscience to it. But Torah warns: “*You shall not follow the majority to do evil*” (Exodus 23:2). No party owns Torah. No movement deserves our conscience. A mature person should be capable of saying: My side is right here and wrong there. Otherwise our tribe is thinking for us. **Sometimes swimming against the current means to be able to criticize a decision of your own party or to admit that the other political party could be right on some specific policy.**

**Fifth: the current of dehumanization.** Political disagreement increasingly becomes moral excommunication: not mistaken, but evil; not wrong, but monstrous. Judaism permits fierce disagreement. The Talmud is built upon it. But beneath disagreement remains *B’Tzelem Elohim*. Moral clarity does not require erasing another person’s humanity. **Sometimes swimming against the current means refusing to hate on command.**

**Sixth: the current surrounding Israel and antisemitism.** We should not allow slogans to replace knowledge of Jewish history, Zionism, Israel, October 7, or the complexities of the Middle East. But discernment must work in both directions. Not every criticism of Israel is antisemitism; not every accusation of antisemitism is false. Sometimes there is ignorance, sometimes legitimate criticism, sometimes a double standard, and sometimes antisemitism is simply antisemitism. Loving Israel also requires the maturity to defend its existence and security while maintaining enough intellectual independence to evaluate particular policies and leaders. **Sometimes swimming as a Jew means refusing both demonization and simplification.**

**Seventh: the current of the Judaism we inherited.** Sometimes we continue something because “that is how my parents did it,” and sometimes we reject it for exactly the same reason. Neither is enough. **Jewish movements and institutions that once courageously swam against the**

**current can eventually begin floating within currents of their own creation.** Honoring the Judaism of our parents does not mean freezing it. Torah is inherited. Our responsibility for living and interpreting it cannot be.

**Eighth: the current of influencers and the perfect life.** Influencers tell us what to eat, how to sleep, how to parent, how to invest, how our marriage should look, and which new product will finally transform us. Some ideas are excellent. Others are nonsense. Some are simply marketing disguised as wisdom. Expertise matters. Evidence matters. **The fact that something is viral tells us how well it travels, not whether it is true.**

**Ninth: the current of productivity, money, and visibility.** Our culture constantly asks: How much do you earn? What is your title? How busy are you? How many followers? Judaism responds with a radically different vocabulary: *B'Tzelem Elohim*. Human worth is not measured by résumé, bank account, university acceptance, or Instagram profile. **Sometimes swimming against the current means remembering that our value cannot be measured by what the world can count.**

**Tenth: the current inside ourselves.** Perhaps this is the strongest current of all. Some currents were created by our own previous decisions. A profession. A relationship. A resentment. A way of responding when we are hurt. A story about who we are. Perhaps once we chose deliberately, but over time the swimming became floating. Years pass, and we stop asking: Is the person I am becoming still the person I want to become? **Sometimes the current we most need to resist is the life we ourselves have placed on autopilot.**

### **Teshuvah Is Changing Course**

And now we arrive at this sacred morning of Rosh Hashanah. Because the great possibility of these days is *teshuvah*. Return. To return means that the direction in which I have been moving does not have to determine the direction in which I will continue. **Teshuvah is the Jewish refusal to believe that momentum is destiny.**

The fact that I have been angry for ten years does not require an eleventh. The fact that I have believed something all my life does not make changing my mind a betrayal. The fact that I chose this direction twenty years ago does not mean I am forbidden to look again at the shore.

We cannot practice teshuvah while insisting that every previous decision must be defended. **Sometimes swimming against the current means standing against everyone else. But sometimes it means standing against ourselves: against our pride, against our need to be right, against the story we have repeated for so long that we no longer ask whether it is still true.** There is enormous courage in saying: I was wrong. I learned something. I see it differently now. I need to apologize. I need to change. I need to begin again.

That is not failure. That is teshuvah. That is swimming.

## **The Shofar**

And perhaps this is what the shofar does. Maimonides says that although the shofar is a biblical commandment, its sound carries a message: *Wake up from your sleep. Examine your actions. Remember your Creator. Return in teshuvah* (Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4). For an entire year, the currents carry us. Schedules. News. Politics. Social media. Work. Ambition. Habit. Influencers. Fear. Expectation. Then: *Tekiah*. For one moment, lift your head above the water. Look around. Where am I? Where am I going? Did I choose this direction? Am I still choosing it? Or did I once choose it and then spend twenty years floating?

The shofar does not give us a GPS. It does not tell each person exactly toward which shore to swim. It does something more fundamental. It wakes us up enough to realize that there is a current. And that we still have a responsibility to choose our direction.

## **The Blessing of the Fish**

If the shofar tells us to wake up and choose our direction, Jacob's blessing tells us what kind of swimmers we hope our children—and we ourselves—will become. At the end of his life, Jacob

places his hands upon his grandchildren Ephraim and Manasseh and says: *Veyidgu larov bekerev ba'aretz*—*May they multiply like fish throughout the land* (Genesis 48:16).

Jacob is blessing continuity. May my grandchildren carry the names of Abraham and Isaac. May the story continue. But perhaps the image itself gives us another blessing. **Fish live surrounded by moving water. They cannot escape the current. Neither can we. But we can learn how to swim like a school of fish.**

Our children and grandchildren will live in waters we cannot predict. They will confront technologies we cannot imagine, political movements that do not yet exist, new forms of antisemitism, new challenges for Israel, new understandings of identity, new forms of Jewish community, new moral dilemmas, new currents. We cannot decide which waters they will enter. **And we cannot swim for them. But we can teach them how.**

We can bless them, like Jacob, to become fish whose eyes remain open to the waters around them and, returning to Philo's ancient image, fish with fins strong enough not simply to be swept wherever those waters happen to move. **Fins to swim with purpose and direction and scales to be protected by a strong identity.** That may be one of the deepest blessings a Jewish parent, grandparent, teacher, or community can give.

Give them Torah deep enough that they know where they come from.

Give them questions strong enough that they will not believe everything they hear.

Give them a Jewish identity confident enough that disagreement will not frighten them.

Give them humility enough to say, "I don't know" and courage enough to say, "I disagree."

Give them enough integrity to say, "I was wrong."

Give them a relationship with Israel deep enough to defend it when it is demonized and mature enough to think about it rather than merely repeat slogans.

Give them enough knowledge to recognize antisemitism when they encounter it—and enough judgment not to confuse every uncomfortable criticism with hatred.

Give them a community strong enough to know that swimming independently does not mean swimming alone.

Give them roots deep enough to know who they are. And fins strong enough to navigate changing waters.

Because fish may swim independently, but they also swim in schools. Perhaps that is community: not everyone moving identically, not surrendering our own direction, but knowing that we do not have to navigate the waters alone. And since it is Rosh Hashanah, after all, perhaps even the **gefilte fish** on our table can remind us of something more profound than we usually give it credit for.

Jacob's blessing is not only for our children. We are those fish too. Adults can spend decades floating. We can wake up one day and discover that our political tribe chose our opinions, algorithms chose our information, institutions continued practicing a Judaism designed for another generation, social media shaped our desires, the marketplace defined our worth, and old wounds chose our reactions.

Rosh Hashanah asks us to wake up. To lift our heads above the water. To open our eyes. To look toward the shore. And to choose again.

And perhaps this year we should be gentle with ourselves as we ask the question. Some of us are ready to swim strongly against the current. Some are only beginning to change direction. And some, after a very difficult year, may still be trying simply to keep their heads above the water. There is dignity in all three.

May we have the strength not to sink.

May we know when we need to float.

May we know when it is time to swim.

Shanah Tovah,

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