



Matzah and Humility & Learning to Swim

GOLDIE GROSSBAUM

“Don’t let go of me! Promise you won’t let go of me!” — were the shrieking sounds heard from the pool during swimming lessons.

But it wasn’t from a scared five-year-old learning to swim.

It was from a grown mom of 11; it was from 44-year-old me. I was tackling my fear and learning how to swim.

And I was terrified that my swimming teacher would let go of me as she held me in a back float, which to me felt like a very dangerous activity.

I’ve dreamed about knowing how to swim for years, but it just seemed impossible.

I obsessively made sure all my kids had lessons and learned to swim, but that didn’t help me know how to swim.

This summer I was determined to make my dream a reality, to finally master swimming, treading water and all.

And I was scared.

“I really don’t know how to swim,” I explained to my swimming teacher that first day. “Like really *really*. Don’t let go of me.”

“That’s okay, I’m going to teach you,” she calmly reassured me.

But I had to make sure she really understood me; adults tend

to think that everyone knows how to swim and misinterpret “I don’t know how to swim” to mean “I’m not a great swimmer.”

But that’s not what I was saying.

I can’t lift my feet off the floor of a pool. It’s as if they’re glued down.

And if you let go of me, I will sink to the bottom. I am sure of this, because my brain believes that water can’t hold me up.

There’s a lot of work I need to do, both inner and outer. It’s not easy to change your belief system.

It starts with her holding me in the back float position while I hang on to her for dear life.

She keeps her word and doesn’t let go.

I’m so scared.

I feel so vulnerable.

“I’m never going to master this,” says a little voice inside of me.

“Be quiet! Yes, I will!” counters the other voice.

And so begins the battle of the inner voices customized just for swimming lessons.

At lesson number four, I feel a moment of bravery.

“You can let go of me for two seconds,” I tell my teacher, as she once again holds me in a floating position.

I don’t sink.

Humility isn't just a suggestion; it's a necessity.

The water actually can hold me up.

We slowly work up to one minute of floating.

"I can do this," I keep repeating to myself.

"You've got two voices in there," my swimming teacher tells me. "The chimp brain and the professor brain. Your chimp keeps telling you that you don't know how to do it. Listen to the professor, it's more logical!"

I look at her in wonder—how does she know this deep Chassidic concept, that we all have two voices inside of us, both fighting to be heard?!

I now see it in a new light.

When I'm swimming, the rest of the world doesn't exist. Every part of my being is immersed in cooperating and is synchronized to learn this new skill.

And because it's only about swimming, I find it easier to pinpoint the chimp.

I'm floating. I'm in a state of disbelief that I've reached this milestone.

Now I am faced with the best challenge; how do I get my legs to go back to the ground? How do I stand up from the float?

My swimming teacher breaks it down to bite-size pieces, which is not an easy task when it's something she's been doing without thinking for decades.

I slowly lower my feet. Allow myself to sink a little.

I've got this, I can do it.

Then I grab her and start flailing.

The chimp. It ruined it. It popped in last second and told me I couldn't do it. And once I heard it, it became right. I couldn't do it.

I practice again. This time, more than focusing on the method, I focus on the chimp. On ignoring it. On answering it back before it can scare me.

I repeat the motions. And then it clicks. I can stand back up from the float. I'm elated.

"You think I can really learn to swim? And tread water?" I ask my patient swimming teacher for the 100th time.

"Absolutely!" she says without a moment's hesitation.

I can float on my stomach. I can move in the water. I can swim a few feet.

Each accomplishment is exhilarating, but always colored by doubt: Will I really be able to master more than this?

Side breath. I need to learn side breath.

It's not working. I'm getting water in my mouth instead of air.

My chimp wants me to give up and honestly, I'm ready to agree with it. This is too hard.

My professor leaps in; you've got this. You can do it!

And my swimming teacher never stops believing in me, believing that I can do this.

I come home from lessons exhausted, less from the physical work and more from the mental work.

And then it happens: The next piece clicks.

I can swim across the pool and do side breath. My swimming teacher is proud of me, and, quite frankly, so am I.

Lesson 20 rolls around. Now I know that I will be able to tread water. I've made it this far. The chimp voice is getting so weak, it has to look for new ways to attack.

And then, at lesson 23, what seemed impossible actually happens.

I swim across the pool. I take a side breath. I flip to my back. I flip back to my front. And with my teacher's guidance, I tread water.

I've succeeded.

My swimming dream has come true.

I can swim!

It doesn't matter how old you are, you're never too old to learn something new. And to be humbled.

With Pesach on my mind, to me the word humble is synonymous with matzah.

Nobody needs an explanation for why matzah symbolizes humility; when you see it, you know it.

There's so much talk about humility on Pesach, but there's something I understand now more than ever.

Humility isn't just a suggestion; it's a necessity.

When we can deflate ourselves just a bit, when we open ourselves up to vulnerability, we can achieve things we never thought possible.



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