

Rabbi Leah Cohen

Teshuvah in the Pool

This as you know is called Shabbat *Teshuvah*, the Sabbath of Turning and it always falls between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. So we are in this extended holy stretch of time, but today we are also resting. We are resting and turning. What does that mean, what does that actually look like?

The whole *teshuvah* project is hard to do. It is difficult to engage in new behavior and cease our old ways. But imagining what that action in the year ahead would be like is not so much the emphasis of these next twenty four hours. Rather as the name Shabbat *Teshuvah* suggests, it is the actual turn that we are focusing on now.

When it comes to turns perhaps the best place I have found to seek wisdom is in the pool. Pools all have a specific length, whether in yards or meters, 25 or 50, when you get to the end of the lane, you have to turn in order to keep going. Outside the pool, we could go on indefinitely – sinning, gossiping, lying, cheating, ignoring and denying without ever having to turn around. It might not be the best life, but we could do it. However, in a pool when you get to the end of the lane, you have to turn. If you don't turn, there is no going forward. Swimming in pools affords a lot of practice at turning. That's good because things we practice we tend to get better at or at least have more experience with.

When do you know that it is time to turn in a pool? And how do you do it? The answer is not when you get to the wall. By time you get to the wall, you HAVE to turn, you have no choice. This is a bad position to be in. On land, this looks like hitting bottom. This is when you have no choices left- your relationships are in ruin, your work is in shambles, your life makes no sense, the pain of living outweighs the ability to go on. That's hitting the wall.

The time to think about turning is long before you get to the wall. In the pool there are some helpful markers telling us when to turn. This morning I was swimming with a person who was new; she did not know the markers. She was afraid. We were working on backstroke and she thought she was going to hit the wall. So she held her head up which made her swim in an awkward position. She had to work harder and was not moving as well she could be. Afterwards, we talked. "Do you see those flags overhead going across the width of the pool," I said. "Count your strokes from the flags and you will always know when you are close to the wall. Soon it will be instinctive and you will never get hurt."

We get markers on land too, little flags that tell us we're getting close to the wall. Losing our temper, nagging health concerns, not keeping our promises, feeling depressed or afraid - if we miss these flags we'll soon hit the wall. Noticing these flags, lets us know that it is time for *teshuvah*.

Another thing I have noticed with adult swimmers is they sort of fall into two camps, those who swam competitively as youth and those who came to it later in life. Adult swimmer children can do flip turns. Not always elegantly, not always fast but they understand how to do it

and their bodies are accustomed to it. So when they decide to turn, their bodies just seem to carry them through.

Not so with those who learn as adults. Another person I swim with who is quite fast, can't flip. He always touches the wall and pushes off. We have swum together for a long time so I asked him why he doesn't just learn how to flip turn. "I have tried" he says. "I get water up my nose. I get very bad vertigo. I am so dizzy and disoriented it takes me half a length to recover and then before I know it I am at the wall again. So I have given up trying."

I think the same is true of turning on land. Skills we practice a lot and do often become a fluid part of who we are. How easy is it to admit we are wrong? How ready are we to forgive? How willing to take risks in confronting others or engaging in meaningful exchanges?

If we do this often we do not become locked into an inflexible position. We all know people who are constantly "going to the mat" on something, or getting "boxed into corners," or who constantly declare "over my dead body will blank...." Making a change for those kind of people would definitely be very disorienting.

The thing about turning if you watched the Olympics or have ever seen people who turn well in your home pool is that it looks effortless. It appears as one continuous motion from the swim into the turn right back into the swim. Coming off the wall in the opposite direction, good turners pick up forward momentum, they don't just change direction. They use the turn to their advantage. How do they do it?

You may think that the mechanics of the turn is in the arms that pull them over, or the legs with their much larger muscles that propel them through. But in truth that is not how a turn begins. Two things start a turn. The first is the idea. You're swimming along, head down, plowing away and the brain sends you the message it's time to start thinking about turning.

Like a swimmer counting strokes to the wall, looking at the days on the calendar and seeing that the High Holy days are approaching, we realize it is time to change directions. We get the idea to turn in our heads.

But the action of the turn, begins in the gut. Literally, it is a motion that is initiated in a subtle sensation in the core, almost like a gentle sit-up, that gets the whole body moving in the right direction. The head, arms and legs just follow through what the gut determines.

This is how we turn in real life too. Our legs will not carry us to places we shouldn't be. Our hands will not grab what does not belong to them. The eyes and the mouth will follow along too, once the gut is firm. You can try it right now. Just send energy to your mid section and squeeze there for a second. That is what will feel like. That is the will that starts the turn, on land or water. There is no point of flailing about in the motions of turning, till first we set our gut intention.

But are there any wrong ways to do *teshuvah*? Can we turn incorrectly? The answer surprisingly is yes. This happens very clearly in the pool. It is a DQ. You can literally be disqualified from the race and all your efforts will not count because you did the turn wrong.

If you are watching a swim meet you will see officials walking along the side of the pool and some stationed at both ends of the pool. These are stroke and turn judges. I am trained as one of them. What we do is make sure that the swimmer is using the correct technique as codified in the international laws of swimming. People sometimes run into trouble on the turns.

Each stroke has a legally prescribed way of turning, how you approach the wall, how you change directions and how you come off the wall. Young children who are just getting started will often do illegal turns. This happens most often in the more challenging strokes. It feels horrible to disqualify a nine year old who has just swum a hundred meters of butterfly.

As they climb out of the pool and see you standing there, they usually know they are in trouble. Sometimes they start to cry. It is very sad. You have to tell them they are disqualified and explain what they did wrong. "You didn't touch the wall with two hands on your turn with the butterfly stroke, you glided too long into your backstroke turn, etcetera." They don't get a second chance to do that race; they are rarely able to overturn the verdict; they almost never protest; sometimes they feel so dejected they don't want to swim ever again. But in the end, they can only accept and learn from their mistake.

Why this is ethically challenging is because little children make innocent illegal turns. They often do not know what they did, they certainly did not do it on purpose and rarely does it give them any advantage. But as I have been told, if you do not correct them when they are young, they keep making illegal turns all their life. You are actually helping them become better swimmers as they get older if you DQ them now.

And that is the truth of life. Because by time a child is a teenage swimmer, if they have been swimming since they were little, and they are very good, they are no longer turning illegally innocently. There is a reason there are legal and illegal turns. Illegal turns can give a swimmer an unfair advantage. When hundredths of a second count, the distinction between a legal and an illegal turn matters. For a seasoned swimmer an illegal turn is rarely a bad habit that did not get corrected earlier. Sometimes it is a careless mistake, but most often it is an intentional choice to gain an unfair advantage over others. That is why it is a disqualification.

So what would be an illegal turn on land? How could we do *teshuvah* in such a manner that our turn actually disqualifies us? When we use *teshuvah* to deceive, when we create the illusion that we are remorseful and truly want to change, while knowing in our hearts that we are only doing this to gain an unfair advantage over another, this is a disingenuous *teshuvah*.

The real challenge is that there is only the tiniest distinction between a legal and an illegal turn the more seasoned one becomes, on land or water. A little child might say they don't want to misbehave anymore. They are really, really sorry and will never do it again. By later the same day, they might start doing the same thing again, and we have to DQ them with a time out. But we also make an allowance for the gap between their intentions and their actions. They are inexperienced in turning their lives around.

But for those with more life experience, we must not create the illusion of turning our behavior around if that is not our sincere intention. We would be deceiving others and ourselves. The gap between our intentions and our action would disqualify our *teshuvah*.

The easiest way to explain this is to talk about the breast stroke turn when racing. In the breast stroke, when approaching the wall, it is necessary for the swimmer to make a two handed, simultaneous touch on the wall before leaving the wall. As you can imagine, when surface touches surface it creates drag and slows things down. So the goal is to touch both hands very quickly in order not to lose too much time hanging on the wall.

Over the years people have developed ways to do this with increasing speed, culminating these days in something called the brush stroke. It means that both hands do touch the wall and they do it at the same time, but one of the hands just barely brushes the wall. Turning with the brush stroke is ripe for deception. You can see why. If only the smallest part of the second hand has to brush against the wall, it would be easy to simply sweep past the wall, losing little momentum, and thereby gaining an advantage in speed.

In judging turns, you cannot disqualify someone for what you think you did not see, only for what you definitely did see. You cannot say, "I think I did not see both hands touch at the same time." You must say, "I saw only one hand touch and specifically it was the left one." If you cannot say that, the benefit of the doubt goes to the swimmer. One might sneak an illegal turn past once in awhile, but sooner or later we get caught.

With Yom Kippur starting in only four days we are rapidly approaching the the wall. On this Shabbat Teshuvah, let us look for markers to guide our turns. May we set our intentions and follow through with acknowledging our errors and making amends. And may our *teshuvah* be executed with integrity that we might qualify for forgiveness from others and a life of blessings from the ultimate Judge.

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah