

Swimming Against the Tide

Category: Devarim, Ekev

What are our obligations to our children?

A Father's Obligation

One of the biggest summer sports is - obviously swimming. For some reason, even though Jews in general, aren't the top in sports, but when it comes to swimming, you hear lots of Jewish names. Some say that Michael Phelps is Jewish. Mark Spitz, another swimming superstar is Jewish; in general, you hear lots of Jewish names among swimmers.

Do Jews flock to swimming more than other sports?

The Talmud (Tractate Kiddushin 29a) tells us that there are several mitzvos that a father is obligated to do for his son. The first of these mitzvos is to circumcise him.

A Jewish father is obligated to give his son a bris. But since it so happens that sometimes the father is not a mohel, the father asks the mohel to circumcise his son for him. That's why there is the custom for the father of the baby boy to hand the surgical knife to the mohel and say, "I hereby appoint you my representative to circumcise my son."

What is the source for the Jewish father's obligation to circumcise his son? Avraham Avinu: our Patriarch Abraham. The verse in Genesis states: "And Avraham circumcised Yitzchak his son," from which we learn that every Jewish father is obligated to circumcise his son.

A Jewish father's next obligation is to redeem his son. According to the Torah, every first-born son must serve in the Beis Hamikdash in Jerusalem, the Holy Temple. However, if the father wished to keep his son, he would have to redeem him from a Cohen, a Temple priest. Now today, since we have no Temple, the custom is that all firstborn boys are redeemed. If a Jewish father's first child is a boy, and the boy is delivered naturally (not by C-Section), then his father is obligated to perform the Pidyon Haben, the Redemption of the Son ceremony: to

give a Cohen five shekels (or their equivalent) and thus redeem his son.

The third obligation about which the Talmud tells us is for the father to teach his son Torah. We learn this from this week's Torah portion, Eikev.

In our Torah portion, we read the second paragraph of the Shma prayer. Last week we had the Shma's first paragraph. But this week, we read, "*V'haya im shamo'a*" — "and it will be, if you listen to My mitzvos..." The portion is talking about observing all the mitzvos, and it says: "And you shall teach it to your sons," which teaches us that fathers have an obligation to teach their sons Torah.

The story is told of the Alter Rebbe, the first Rebbe of the Chabad movement, that when his son reached school age, he summoned one of his followers and told him: "I am obligated to teach my son Torah, and you are obligated to support your wife and children. Let's trade! I'll help you support your family and you teach my son Torah."

People constantly blame teachers for all the problems in education today. But the truth is that the obligation to educate our children—at least the obligation to teach them Torah—rests on us, the parents. That's why, at the end of the day, it is our responsibility and no one else's.

A father's next obligation is to marry off his child—to find him a spouse.

Just as a person is personally obligated to get married, so too, a father has the obligation to marry off his children—he must do everything in his power so that his kids get married. Perhaps we should save on the lavish Bar Mitzvah parties to focus on the obligation to do whatever we can to marry off our kids. This too is learned from Avraham Avinu.

The Torah tells us at great length how Avraham bound his servant Eliezer by an oath to find a match for his son Yitzchak, putting all his resources at his disposal for this purpose. The next time your kids tell you, "don't mix in—it's my decision and it's not your business," tell them that "we have news for you—it very much is our business!"

A father's next obligation is to teach his son a trade. A father is obligated to give his son a skill set—because without that, he'll turn to illegal means and become a criminal, as Rabbi Yehudah states in the Talmud: "Anyone who doesn't teach his

son a trade is as if he taught him robbery.”

Finally, we come to the Talmud’s last item in its list of fatherly obligations: to teach his son how to swim. He has no obligation to teach him any other sport—not tennis, not lacrosse, not baseball or soccer. Just swimming.

The simple reason for this is as Rashi explains: “Perhaps he’ll be traveling by boat and the boat will sink, and he’ll be in danger if he doesn’t know how to swim.”

In Talmudic times, many cities and towns were built by riverbanks. Besides providing drinking and irrigation water, this allowed commerce and people to flow easily from place to place. However, the barges and rafts of those days were not particularly safe, and it was quite common for them to capsize—which is why, the Talmud tells us, father needed to teach their kids how to swim.

Against The Tide

But there’s a deeper lesson here. The Baal Shem Tov teaches that life is like a stormy sea—which is why every parent is obligated to teach his child to swim in its waters.

Fish are famous for swimming upstream against the current, so much so that there’s a saying, “only dead fish go with the tide.” A robust, thriving fish swims against the current.

So too, it’s not enough to just teach our children to swim. A Robust, thriving Jew swims against the current too, not intimidated by others.

In life, people may mock him: “When did you suddenly become so religious? Now you can only eat kosher?! What happened to you?” Anyone who starts keeping a new mitzvah that he or she never previously kept knows how hard it can be to swim against the current.

My grandfather was a chassid who endured impossible odds to remain religious in the early days of Communist Russia. He spent his entire life going against the tide. When he wrote his memoirs, he entitled it “*Neged Hazerem, Against the Tide*”— because that was his very existence.

The best thing a parent could do for his child today is to teach him to

swim—against the tide.