

Stroke by Stroke: The Power of Agency
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This past year I was fortunate to enjoy a three-month sabbatical. Though long overdue, I couldn't pull away in recent years—be it the Covid pandemic, significant staffing changes, or the tragic events of October 7. It was around this time last year, as I stood here davening with you over the High Holidays, that I realized I needed to pause. I needed to ground myself. And so, at last, I did.

One of the greatest gifts of my sabbatical was that I began swimming. It was love at first stroke. There was something powerful, nurturing, and freeing about being in the water. And also, something surprising—even profound.

In those first months, an unexpected thought would recur. As I pushed off from the pool's edge, I would find myself thinking: *You're swimming away from your grief*. And as that inner voice grew constant—though never louder—I leaned into it, realizing how much loss I was trying to escape.

I was swimming away from my nephew, who was killed heroically on October 7, defending one of the only bases not conquered on that dreadful day. I was swimming away from the weight of leading—of trying to lead—our community through these trying times. I was swimming away from the sermons that had to hold together the pain of our people and my personal grief, sermons that needed to stay values-driven while steering clear, as best I could, of politics.

“Swim away, Yonatan. Swim away,” the voice kept saying to me. And for a time, it felt so good.

After my nephew was killed, we found his journal. On one page he had written a list of aphorisms to look at “when things get hard.” Among them were: *Be the best. Be a model. Set an example*. And one more: *Go in all the way. Litrof be'rabak*.

About two or three months into my swimming practice, my mindset shifted. As I completed my laps, I heard a new inner voice: “Yonatan, *titrof be'rabak*—go in all the way.” At first, that meant one more lap. Then five. Sometimes ten or twenty more. *Go in all the way*.

Over time, it became clear: I had started swimming *from*—as a way of escaping. But at some point, I began swimming *towards*—as a way of living. I had started by swimming with my nephew's death, but eventually I found myself swimming with his life and with newfound purpose.

It is this insight—my shift from swimming *from* to swimming *towards*, from moving *from* to moving *forward*—that I want to share with you today.

In truth, the seeds of this insight were already present at the very end of my nephew's shiva.

About a day or two after shiva ended—now almost two years ago—my parents and I had an errand that took us through Holon, the city of my childhood and the city where my parents first

met as teenagers. As we drove in, one of us suggested stopping by my grandparents' old neighborhood—the home where my mother grew up and where I spent so many Shabbatot as a young child. My father's parents had lived just a few blocks away as well.

The suggestion to visit their home felt instinctive, almost as if the wheels of the car turned on their own. In the face of such a tragic loss, it seemed we had to pay homage to these streets, to the homes where my parents grew up as young immigrants to Israel, to the place where they first walked to school together in eighth grade.

When we reached my grandparents' building, we were stunned to see that the intercom still bore their names: *Meir and Sara Halwany*. My grandfather had passed away more than five years earlier, my grandmother more than a year before—and yet here they were. They were home.

The door to the building was unlocked. At the time, rockets were still being fired into central Israel from Gaza, and many buildings were left open so that anyone caught outside could run into the shelters. We went inside and made our way downstairs, to the building's shelter.

My mother paused. "We sat in this very shelter during the Six-Day War," she said. I don't think she had seen it since. And now, here we were again—back in the same shelter.

The memory that stayed with me most from that visit was the pain of leaving the building and realizing: my grandparents had fled Egypt in 1955 to the safe shores of Israel, only for their great-grandson to be killed by Hamas terrorists. The biblical dimension of my family's personal Exodus—from Egypt to Israel—suddenly felt diminished, even tarnished. A story that had so deeply shaped my identity seemed rewritten, or at least cast in a very different light.

But in time, we learned more about Yoav's courage that day. What he said to those he commanded. The heroic choices he made as he went into the line of fire. The fact that his base was one of only two that were not overrun. And even more than that, the words he wrote as he lay dying: "*The best twenty minutes of my life.*"

My sister and brother-in-law have said that knowing Yoav, they are certain he died knowing he was protecting them and the people he loved. They have also said that, given the choice again, they believe he—and they—would make the same choice. The alternative, to refuse to fight, as some soldiers on his base did, would have been an abdication of who he was—and perhaps, in the long run, of his very sense of self and sanity.

Focusing on Yoav's agency and choice tells a very different story. My grandparents fled Egypt and came to Israel in part for precisely this reason: so that here, as Jews, we could choose. So that we could determine how and when to fight for our lives and for those we love.

In one telling, Yoav was killed. In another, Yoav saved lives. One story is passive. The other story is centered on personal autonomy and agency.

The seeds of this dual insight are deeply present in the way we Jews have told the foundational stories of our people's formation.

Rabbi David Hartman points out that the people of Israel have two constitutive moments: the Exodus and Sinai. Each tells a very different story about who God is and who we are as a people.

Regarding the Exodus story, Hartman writes: *“One of the dominant theological motifs found in the biblical account of the Exodus from Egypt suggests that human beings are basically helpless before God. The Children of Israel do nothing to warrant their redemption, nor do they cooperate prominently in their deliverance. In this model, God suddenly breaks into history and, from a non-people, creates an elected community.”*

By contrast, Hartman explains that *“The story of Sinai suggests a very different model of history. The giving and acceptance of the Torah does not present a picture of God’s single-handed redemption of powerless slaves, nor of unilateral divine fiat [...]. Sinai is rather an experience of mutuality in which God speaks and humanity listens, decides, and responds. The Law implies God’s enduring confidence in humanity to carry and live out a divine vision for the world.”*

According to Hartman, Sinai introduces a covenantal relationship in which *“failure or success depends upon human agency and will. It says that humanity has the capacity to implement right behavior in its individual and collective lives.”*

In the Exodus, we escaped from Egypt. After Sinai, we began moving towards Israel.

During the Exodus, we were acted upon—victims of forces beyond our control. At Sinai, we became actors in the drama of our own lives. Through the law, we accepted our own agency.

In one model, God said: *“Let there be Israel.”*

In the other, God invited us to *become* Israel.

Hartman emphasizes that constitutive moments *“provide us with a set of memories upon which to draw. To organize and understand our experience through the lens of our traditions, we select from this store of memories those events that can serve as principles of integration.”*

I have been thinking of these core memories in light of October 7 and the war that followed. Are we at an Exodus moment—or a Sinai moment?

One telling echoes the Exodus motif: that October 7 was the greatest massacre of Jews in a single day since the Shoah; that the suffering in Gaza reflects the cruelty of Hamas toward its own people; that any critique of Israel is simply another manifestation of antisemitism.

Another telling leans toward Sinai: that October 7 represents the greatest failure of the sovereign Jewish state; that while Hamas bears ultimate responsibility for the fate of Palestinian civilians, Israel must nevertheless be held to moral scrutiny and accountability for its military actions and governmental policies; that not every opposing voice is rooted in anti-Jewish bias.

These two frameworks challenge us in different ways.

I for one, need to acknowledge, that it is hard to swim *towards* when one is still swimming *from*. It is hard to speak of Israel’s constitutive obligations while hostages remain hidden underground.

It is hard to challenge Israel's political leadership while Israel is under constant attack from what often feels like a coordinated chorus of hateful detractors.

Hartman himself acknowledges the difficulty of choosing a narrative:

"While these two models may be seen to coexist and in some ways complement one another, we are still left with the question of which to rely upon as the dominant constitutive paradigm of our relationship to history and to hope."

And further: *"The choice of which memory or memories to view as constitutive depends to a large extent on collective historical, as well as personal, context."*

My own sense is that most of us lean too heavily in one direction, rather than striving to tell these two stories together.

Certainly, there is real danger in overstating our agency, in failing to hold Hamas accountable for their crimes.

And yet, the danger of seeing ourselves merely as passive victims is just as great. Israel must hold itself accountable—precisely because we wish October 7 to remain Israel's past, and not its future.

On a personal and on a national level, *teshuvah* is an invitation to examine our stories—to mend them, and even to retell them. As we seek to move forward, we must ask: are we bound to always repeat the past? In this moment, are we merely victims, or can we also become agents of our fate? Is history predetermined, or can we break the fixity of this hour?

That, after all, was one of Zionism's greatest revolutions: the decision by Jews in the Diaspora to assert their will and agency as a people. It would be tragic if, in the wake of October 7, Zionism came to embody not strength of will but its abdication.

Individuals like my nephew Yoav urge us to embrace this moment with courage. Israel as a state can only be worthy of his sacrifice—and of the sacrifice of all those who made similar choices—if we, too, embrace this moment with clear-eyed heroism. We are called to go all in.

The way we grieve for the past, and the stories we choose to tell as we envision the future—Exodus or Sinai, swimming from or swimming towards—these narrative choices will define who we are, as individuals, as a community, and as a nation.

We're all tired. And this is very trying.

But this is also just the first lap.

Catch your breath.

Claim your courage.

Choose your agency.

Create your story.

Our swim must go on.