

BERKSHIRES - NEW ENGLAND

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Unless you teach him how to swim, I won't take him back home again!" This was the warning supposedly issued by my late father, Professor Nahum M. Sarna, z"l, to his good friend the camp director, Rabbi Raphael Arzt, when he brought me to Camp Ramah in New England in 1968.

I had already been a camper at Palmer for two previous years. I had also been a camper for a year at Ramah in the Berkshires in 1964. Yet, through one ruse or another, I had always managed to evade swimming. The lake at Palmer was cold and forbidding. I preferred the library.

My father, who took seriously the rabbinic requirement that he teach his son to swim, and who lamented that he himself could not even float, was determined that I would learn to swim one way or another. Ray Arzt proved equal to the challenge.

The head of swimming was given strict instructions, and a special class was set up consisting of exactly two non-swimmers: myself and the late George Orentlicher (later the Latin valedictorian of Harvard). Swimming, at least for the two of us, became mandatory.

We tried our best to stay on the dock. George and I (who were good friends) mustered any number of persuasive arguments why we should learn other things, be in other places, not endanger our health or risk our lives, and so forth—but all to no avail. The instructor had her orders, and Ray did not want to have to take care of me all winter.

So, after our ritualistic pleas were turned down, the class got down to business. Each of us had to jump into the water ("I know it's cold, jump in anyway"), practice our strokes, and swim laps. By visiting day, we both had made substantial progress. Ray made certain that my parents took notice.

As the camp season wound down, the instructor decreed that George and I would swim across the lake. I prayed daily for rain, but the morning set for the ordeal dawned cloudless. I said *tefillot* with special fervor that day—who knew if I would ever get to say them again? Bunkmates wished us well, and we jumped in.

As it turned out, the instructor was not nearly so reckless as I had feared; she followed us in a boat. But the boat was off limits to us, and there being no other option, we had to swim. Crawl, sidestroke, backstroke—somehow, we managed to show off all of them and to propel ourselves to the inevitable destination. Huffing and puffing, we climbed out. The longest swim of my entire life was over.

“Congratulations,” the instructor exclaimed, “you have now passed two levels of swimming: advanced beginners and low intermediate. You can swim!” Our campmates applauded, the instructor beamed, and Ray himself later commended our achievement. On the closing day of camp, my father inspected the two Red Cross swimming cards and happily took me home.

And then, thirteen years later, came the sequel. I was a young assistant professor by then, living in Cincinnati, Ohio. My townhouse abutted a pond. On *Hol Hamo'ed Sukkot* of that year, I invited some friends to my sukkah, one of whom came with a young child. The child broke away from her mother, raced to the side of the pond, and fell in. She struggled in the water.

Without pausing to think, I kicked off my shoes, jumped into the pond, and rescued the child; she was under water for only a few seconds. To this day, she credits me with saving her life.

“Whoever saves one life, it is as though he saved an entire universe,” the Talmud teaches.

Thanks to my father, Ray Arzt, and the wonderful Camp Ramah swimming instructor, a universe was saved.