



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



Teach Her to Swim ... And to Run

By: Rabbi Adam Greenwald

Dear Gracie,

In a few days, it will be my second time celebrating Father's Day as your dad. What a gorgeous and, at the same time, heartbreaking year it has been.

Last Father's Day you could not yet walk or talk, and now I watch in amazement as you run, climb, sing, and speak in clear, full sentences. This morning, we took a stroll together down a nature path. You picked up a long stick and tapped it against the ground as we walked, counting forcefully with each tap: "One! Two! Three!" You continued until you reached "eleven," and then started over again. Our prayer book talks about *nissim b'chol yom*, everyday miracles, of which this was surely one.

Of course, all this growing has taken place against the strange, bleak backdrop of the pandemic that has lasted most of your lifetime. For as long as you can remember, this has been the state of the world. This year, you did not attend synagogue or school. You did not travel on an airplane or eat inside a restaurant.

It is only in the past couple of months that you have started to spend time with more adults and other children. For most of the past year, it was just the three of us—you, me, and Mom—staying inside together, day after long, tedious day, trying our best to be safe.

For as tough as it has been, I admit that there have been some bright moments of life in "COVID-land." In no other world would I have been at home to witness your first steps and your first words, to be a part of your waking up, falling asleep, and so many other little moments in between almost every day. My own (truly fantastic) father, your Papa, was not able to do that with me. His father

was not able to do that with him. But I got to spend this precious, irreplaceable time with you, and for that, I will always be grateful. As I reflect on this Father's Day, no gift could be more valuable than this.

If I'm really honest, there was a part of me that was grateful that we could keep you tightly wrapped in our little bubble for a bit longer than we would have otherwise. There was a way that quarantine felt a lot like the first months after bringing you home from the hospital. We barely went out or had anyone else over. Our whole job was to watch over you. I remember the hours upon hours I would swaddle you so tightly in a blanket and walk you through the house, tucked securely in the crook of my arm. In some ways, this year felt like putting you back into that sweet bundle, holding you close and keeping you safe, as the world churned in chaos just outside our door.

I know, though, that keeping you permanently wrapped up tight is not what parents were put here to do. The Talmud teaches that a parent's essential job is to prepare their children to go out into the world, including offering the highly specific requirement to teach you how to swim (Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 29a). The medieval commentators tend to read that provision quite literally, with Rashi (1040-1104) drolly stating the obvious "that in the event of a shipwreck, it is useful to know how to swim."

However, I cannot help but read it much more expansively: the commandment to teach one's child to swim is about a fundamental recognition of the limits of my power as a parent. I cannot be at your side every moment, and there will come a time soon enough when you certainly would not want me to be. My job is to give you the skills, strength, courage, and character to safely venture into the world on your own. Life under lockdown has meant I could put off that job for a little while, but as life continues and more becomes possible every day, my real task as your dad now truly begins.

Maybe it has already begun. A couple of weeks ago, we were sitting together on a big lawn in a park. You began to wander away from me, exploring other patches of grass and searching for interesting rocks and sticks, and carefully eyeing the bigger kids at play. My first instinct was to get up and trot along beside you. But I stayed put and just watched. You ventured farther and farther, fully engrossed in your expedition until you almost reached the other side of the lawn. Then, you suddenly turned back, gave a huge smile, and came running until you collapsed into my arms in a fit of giggles. A few moments later, you stood back up and were off and running again. It was so very sweet to behold.

- Dad



Rabbi Adam Greenwald, is Vice President for Jewish Engagement at American Jewish University, where he directs the Maas Center for Jewish Journeys and the Miller Intro to Judaism Program. He also serves as Lecturer in Rabbinics at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. Rabbi Greenwald was ordained by the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in 2011. He is married to Anne Hromadka, an art curator and consultant, and they are the parents of a spirited toddler, Grace Cecilia.

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