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The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Houseboaters

It's one of those moments in your life that you never forget:

My parents, sister and I were house-boating along the Trent-Severn Waterway in



Canada. It is an exquisite series of lakes and rivers connected by a series of locks and canals. The locks take your boat up or down between various bodies of water at different levels. It's an amazing feat of engineering – a waterway system started in the middle of the 19th century, completed in 1920, comprising

some 240 miles connecting Lake Huron to Lake Ontario, northeast of Toronto.

I am not sure why my parents thought this would be the right choice for a sixteen year old boy and a ten year old girl with no boating experience whatsoever, but it was an adventure.



Back to that moment.

It was the first night. My mother and I had done some shopping and were walking back to our rented houseboat when I heard in the distance: “Help, help!”

I turned to my mother: “That sounds like *Abba!*”

And sure enough, it was my father.

My mother and I ran down the hill. Stuck between the huge pontoon of the boat and the concrete of the dock, my father was in danger. I was able to pull him out and grateful that I could.

* * *

Fast forward almost thirty years.

That trip left such an indelible mark on me that I had been waiting for all my kids



to become strong enough swimmers and old enough to enjoy taking such an excursion. Sharon and I decided this would be the summer; we had an amazing adventure. Our boat was 43 feet long and 14 and a half feet wide; while it could have used a bit of updating, it was comfortable,

with three mini bedrooms and a mini bathroom. The kitchen and main room were nice

and there was an awesome waterslide from the upper deck straight into the water.



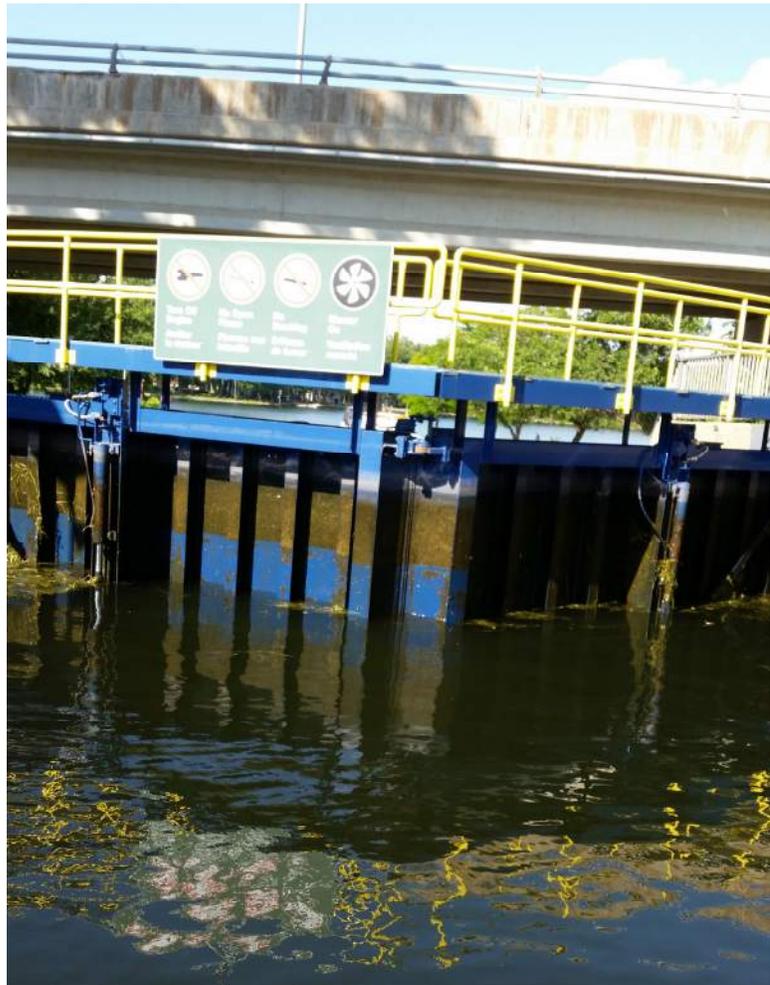
Each day we went on different adventures – stopping at an island, taking a hike, swimming, and, of course, navigating the boat. We all took turns steering and making sure we were on course with the GPS. We enjoyed wonderful weather and docked at beautiful locks including twice at a secluded lock between two islands that was accessible only by boat.

Halfway through the trip, we were pulling into a lock, when we encountered a problem. The doors to the lock were closed – that wasn't the big problem – that happens half the time and when it does, you simply pull over to the blue line where boats wait to enter the lock. Sharon was in the front and Talya in the back; I was steering and the boys were helping, well, sort of....

Sharon got the front line and tied the boat to the cleat. At that point, I was supposed to turn the wheel of the boat to the

right and give the engine a bit of reverse so the rear of this long boat would swing into the shore enabling Talya to tie up the back tightly. I put the throttle into reverse....

Nothing happened.



I tried again.

Nothing.

Luckily, we were moving quite slowly and Talya was able to jump off. Together with Sharon, they stopped the boat's forward momentum.

I figured the reverse not working was a fluke.

A couple of minutes later, we were moving slowly into the lock. Here, you do not tie up your ropes, but merely thread them around rubber hoses so the boat can move up or down freely.

Again, Sharon was fine with the front rope and the Lockmaster, a friendly park-ranger type person, yelled at me "Give her some reverse, captain."

Now I have to say, it is fun to have people calling you "captain." All those years of watching "Gilligan's Island" as a kid must have rubbed off on me! But, this was a slightly different use of the word; here, it kind of meant that the lockmaster did not really think I knew what I was doing.

And it was pretty true.

Captain or no captain, I could not get it into reverse. Luckily, the lock-master, Sharon, Talya and I got the boat to stop. Another man at the lock who saw what had happened called the owners of the boat – they were responsive and said that we should pull over and they would send a repair team in less than an hour. All we needed to do was to steer the boat carefully out of the lock and onto the left side.

Of course, we needed a clear path – no boats in our way. With no reverse, we were a 20 ton wrecking ball that could damage any of the nice smaller boats around. Sure enough, we were in luck: no boats were blocking the spot we needed. Sharon

moved to the front left and Talya was on the back left and all of us knew what we were trying to do – just drift slowly into the spot, stop our momentum and get tied up until the repair team arrived.

We navigated out of the lock and the small boat in front of us was making its way into the open water. Suddenly, that boat shifted course and swung around, taking the last cleats, just the spot we were heading for.

I screamed out to them: “We have no reverse! We have no reverse!”

They heard me, but I had to make a split-second decision. I did not want to hit them so I quickly cut the wheel to the right, avoiding them. They moved, but by then it was too late, we were on our way into the middle of the next lake. Sharon and I breathed a sigh of relief – we had avoided an accident!

But not so fast!



As we turned around, we saw that Talya was still on the dock. When we had started to pull into the spot, she jumped off to help us stop; but when we suddenly pulled away, we were too far out for her to jump back on board.

We had left our daughter.

We had abandoned our child.

My mind flashed back to rescuing my dad thirty years ago. While then I had saved my dad, now I had left my daughter.

What was going on in her mind? The words of the 27th Psalm popped into my head: “*Ki avi v’emi azavuni* – when my father and mother leave me....”

Oy.

Not a good feeling....

* * *

That week on the houseboat with a crew of just the five of us was an incredibly rewarding and exciting vacation. Today, I want to share a few lessons that we learned from the experience and I hope they will be helpful to you as well.

With apologies to Stephen Covey, here are: the Seven Habits of Highly Effective Houseboaters.

1) Don't Panic

First and foremost, don't panic. It turns out that panicking does not help, especially on the water. Let me just say that this is not always my forté. I come from a long line of worriers and panickers. So, my first inclination was to scream: “We have no reverse! Oh my God – we are going to crash!”

And I may have yelled a bit, but I did try to stay calm.

Even though I was steering a 20 ton boat without any brakes or reverse, I realized that fear-driven panicking was not going to help.

During this time of year, we recite the 27th Psalm that I just mentioned; it opens: “*Adonai ori v’yishi’i mimi ira; Adonai me’oz hayai, mimi efhad?* Adonai is my light and my help. Whom shall I fear? Adonai is the strength of my life. Whom shall I dread?”

How true.

Whenever we are faced with difficult, panicky moments, we have to reassure ourselves. Things will be alright.

Even when we know that we do not know what will happen, there is no advantage to panicking.

Don't panic.

2) Go Slow

Second, go slow; go really slow! Here's a shocker: most accidents are caused by going too fast (soon to be overtaken by texting while driving!). That is true not only in a car or boat, but in life. We often move too quickly and that's when trouble ensues.



During our mini pre-boarding boating lesson, we were told over and over again to go slow; it made perfect sense. The slower we went, the more time we had to react to

something or someone in the water (like the kids who fell off the inflatable that was being pulled by a motorboat right in front of us).

Going slow allows us to be thoughtful, and that is vital to our sanity and success in life. Speaking for myself, I rush around too quickly. Now, sometimes, I have a fast-moving idea that I am pursuing, but often the zooming around causes me to spill something, drop my phone, cut my finger, forget what I needed to do or send an email to the wrong person. Often rushing causes problems that take longer to fix than the time we have supposedly saved. Our tradition was so concerned about going slowly that it created an entire day for it. We are supposed to experience the world at a slower pace on Shabbat. An entire day without work, shopping, cell phones, and computers may be the greatest gift we can give ourselves. And then, we can tread a little more lightly and slowly upon the earth.

Go slow.

3) Change Direction Carefully

Third, change direction carefully – turn the wheel slowly. When you start turning the steering wheel of a boat, very little occurs. The boat does not react like a car and simply turn on a dime. It moves slowly – I remember a number of occasions when I turned the wheel a bit, seemingly without results, so I started to turn the wheel more and more.

Suddenly, the boat started to turn more quickly and we veered off course.

Turning a wheel slowly is a good metaphor for change. Change happens best when it is measured, when it is done thoughtfully.

Quick turns just mess everything up. Turning quickly in anger is especially problematic. When the speaker in the 27th Psalm begs God: “*Al tat b’af avdekha* – don’t turn from your servant in anger,” it’s a lesson for us as well.

On the penultimate day of our excursion, we were entering a lock. No problem, I had done that at least 15 times. I thought all was well, but then I realized that we were way too far out in the water so I started to turn my wheel quickly to the right. Actually, too quickly; we were heading for the wall. So, I started to overcompensate in the other direction.

The lockmaster yelled out to me: “Captain, stop turning your wheel!” She was right – I was making all these fast course changes; I was also making a mess.

Instead of turning so much, I should have simply let the water take us – go with the current – forcing these turns was not helpful.

So it is with change, we should make it carefully and slowly, realizing that sometimes we need to wait to see the change that takes time to occur.

This is one of the areas where Judaism shakes things up. Until our tradition made its debut, most people felt that they could not change, that they were stuck and their fate was sealed.



But Judaism says, “No, you can change – it isn’t easy, but it can be done.” And then we were given this entire season – a time when we can work on changing ourselves. And it wasn’t meant to be done quickly, but slowly, incrementally, over time.

This holds true for the tradition itself – we are constantly updating it, but we do so slowly, thoughtfully, to avoid moving off course too quickly.

Change direction carefully.

4) Watch Your Wake

Fourth, watch your wake. Throughout the waterways, there were signs warning boaters to watch their wake. In some congested areas, this was for safety; in other areas, to protect the fragile eco-system of the shore.

Now our boat was not fast – perhaps the fastest we went was eight miles an hour, but, due to its size, we left a large wake behind us.



Here, we are given a great lesson for these *yamim noraim* – these days of awe. We all leave a wake. Sometimes, it is good; other times,

not so much.

If we take the time to turn around and see what we are leaving, what kind of impact we are having, that can profoundly shape our lives.

After our week of boating, we headed to Hamilton, Ontario for Shabbat to visit my cousins there. My cousin Morty is an Orthodox rabbi who founded the Hamilton Orthodox community, which he has now passed on to his son, Rabbi Donny Green.

Over Shabbat, Morty told me the amazing story of how he built the first part of his shul some 50 years ago; illustrating the power of the ripples we leave behind.

Picture the scene: Morty (who is married to my mother's first-cousin) was 24 at the time, weighed 120 lbs, and looked like he was 18. He walked into a bank to see the manager for a \$500,000 loan – not a small sum of money, especially 50 years ago.

"What do you want to do with half a million dollars?" the loan officer asks.

Morty responds, "I want to build a house of worship." He was afraid to say a synagogue.

The loan officer continues, "Well, what type of house of worship?"

"A Jewish-type of a house of worship."

"What does that mean?"

He blurts out, "OK, an Orthodox synagogue!"

The loan officer leaves and returns in what seemed like an hour; he responds, "I will help you."

Although grateful for the loan, Morty asked him, "Why do you want to help me?"

The loan officer explains, "There was a Jew who owned a store, the general store, in northern Ontario where I grew up, an observant Jew, and there was a tragedy in my home – a fire, and I lost my father; my mother was left with five little children.

“This observant Jew called my mother and said, ‘I want to see you,’ so she went to see him in the store. He said, ‘As long as I have this store, you’ll have food for your children and clothes for them to wear.’”

The banker says to Morty, “Fifty years have passed and now, I have the opportunity to repay that Jew!”

We may not see it immediately; it may take generations. But it has an impact. We all are making waves, ripples in the water – sometimes consciously and at other times, we do not even realize it.

Watch your wake.

5) Sharing the Wheel

Fifth, sharing the wheel.

Each day we traveled along the water and the kids took turns steering the boat.

At first, I was frightened. Would they steer us into a rock? Into an oncoming boat?



I stood behind them and gently placed my hands over theirs while they learned how to steer the boat and keep it on course.

Psalm 27 models this for us by asking God: “*Horeini Adonai darkekha* – teach me

your way, *Adonai*.”

Within a short time, they figured it out, incorporating the GPS readout to keep the boat on track.

So, I moved back into a chair behind them, letting them take control of the wheel. It struck me how much that moment was a microcosm of all parenting.

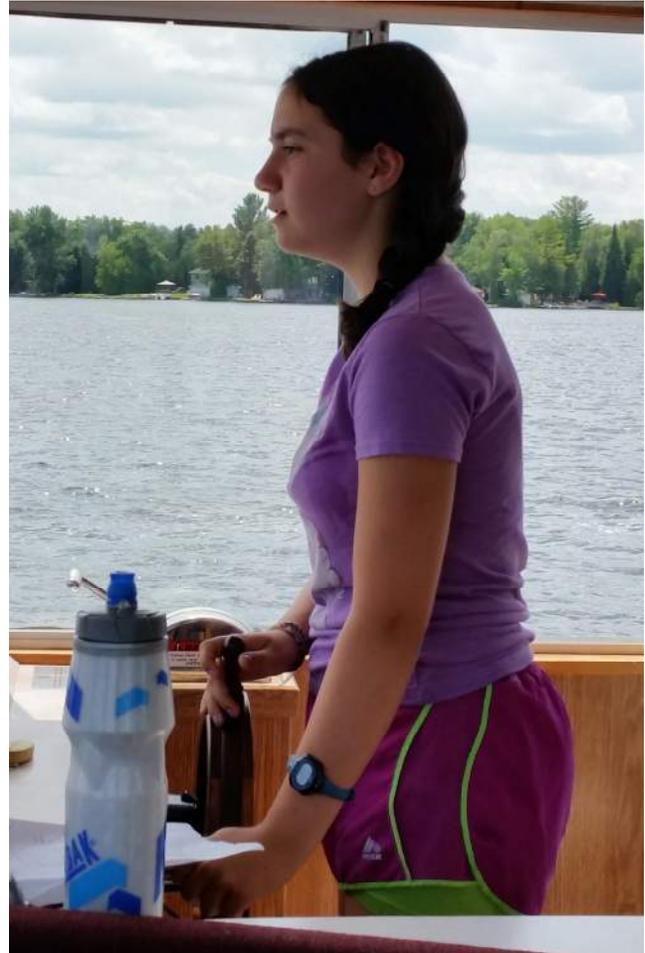
We try to help our kids steer, but before we know it, they are driving themselves. And it all happens so quickly....

The great Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote that children are like missiles that we send into the future. If we are lucky, we can direct them to a general area, but they fly on their own.

Being a parent, grandparent, mentor or a teacher – we all learn how to gently direct, while we share the wheel.

6) Team Work

Sixth, the importance of team work. Perhaps one of the best aspects of the trip was that we had to work together. While that is true in day-to-day life – shopping, cooking dinner, setting the table, clearing, etc., here, it was even more pronounced.



We could not get through a lock unless there were at least three people working together. That was a very concrete part of the trip and we all had to master it in order to proceed.



When we all worked together, it was great; when we didn't, we got into a bit of trouble. It was interesting to note that when we got off the water or when we were back at home, we lost some of that teamwork.

It's hard to keep that up!

Perhaps that's why it was good to have a concrete challenge, a concrete area where we had to work together. Getting in and out of the locks provided just that.



Our tradition is quite focused on team work and community. Time and time again, the needs of the community, of the team, take precedence over the needs of the individual – and that can be challenging.

But, at the same time, it's important to celebrate the team and laud teamwork.

7) No Brakes in Life

Seventh and finally, there are no brakes in boats or in life.

And, you may have been wondering what happened to Talya. Now, since many of you have seen her, you know it all turned out OK, but for a few minutes, as we were drifting without her, we were pretty upset. While we floated along brake-less, we thought that another boater would bring her to us or we could take our mini-inflatable with its one oar and bring her over or she could always swim.

While we were trying not to panic, it took us a couple of minutes to sort things out; we tried to yell to her reassuringly that we would be there



soon (now that I think about it, it may not have been that reassuring!)

We eventually decided to turn the boat around and slowly return to the lock and carefully dock there. And that is what we did.

It's important to think about what you do when you have no brakes.

Those are the tough moments.

I know that we do not leave anyone behind.

The reality of our lives is that there are no brakes, meaning we cannot prevent all accidents, all calamities.

Life does not have brakes and, often, there is no reverse.

The best that we can do in those moments is to rely on what we have learned. We don't panic, we go slowly, we change direction carefully while we watch our wake; we can share the wheel relying on our team to help us even when there are no brakes.

But sometimes even that does not help. In those moments the best we can do is remember the closing of Psalm 27, the Psalm that carries us through this season:

“Kaveh el Adonai, hazak veyameitz lee-bekha vekaveh el Adonai – Hope in Adonai, be strong, take courage and hope in Adonai.”

Sometimes
there is little we
can do except
hope – *kaveh* –
while we may
have been having
our small-time
challenges on our



houseboat, the real world is filled with major challenges. We have health issues, we have financial problems, we have losses; there is great concern for Israel, for the Middle East, for disease and hunger.

Sometimes, we can be overwhelmed by it all.

But we can always hope. No matter what happens – a Jew never loses hope – we never lose *tikvah*. There is a reason that word became Israel's national anthem.

Hope is wired into our DNA. Even when things are bleak, we focus on the positive.

That's why even our *haftarot* of rebuke, the prophetic sections dealing with calamity were edited so we do not end on a note of despair. The rabbis always added a few positive verses, even if they had to skip ahead to another section, ensuring that the last feeling was uplifting.

There are times when we cannot control what happens – and we need to rely on God, or, in the words of Psalm 27, to have “Adonai gather us up – *Adonai ye'asfeinee*” when we feel abandoned.



learned on the water or land.

Shanah Tovah!

Let us all
be blessed with
a new year
where we can
apply the
lessons life
teaches us
whether they are