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CROSSING THE CHANNEL

This month Avishag Turek became the first Israeli woman
to swim the English Channel. She now tells of the great
challenge and the reason for taking it on

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COVER

WHERE TIME IS IRRELEVANT

The first Israeli woman to swim the English Channel tells about the challenge

• TALI KORD

Earlier this month, Avishag Turek, 42, from Kibbutz Shefayim became the second Israeli and the first Israeli woman to successfully swim across the English Channel. She swam for 13½ hours to span the 45 km. from Dover to Calais, an amazing feat no matter how you look at it.

Crossing the channel is considered one of the world's toughest swimming challenges and Turek managed it on her first try. Her accomplishment was meaningful not only for the wide community of open water swimmers in Israel, nor only for the Make a Wish Israel foundation for which she raised money as part of this project. More than anything else, it was an unexpected personal accomplishment, 20 years in the making.

Turek was born and raised in Shefayim and swam competitively from an early age. She loved the water and practiced swimming vigorously, and yet something psychological kept her away from reaching the accomplishments she set out for.

"I was under so much stress during the competitions, I just froze. I couldn't do anything about it," she recalls. "It was very disappointing; feeling like my body is strong and yet my mind can't keep up with it."

As a teenager she realized that her dreams of record breaking were not getting any closer, so she decided to just stop it all. She still kept herself around water as a lifeguard and as a sports trainer in the IDF and working in summer camps, but she didn't consider that swimming. This went on for 20 years.

"When I was about 37 I decided to take my oldest daughter to swimming lessons. I would sit by the pool and watch her, and I would see older people there, too, older than me, swimming. At that point I still said to myself, 'don't even think about it.'"

Around the same time her younger daughter, only a year old, was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes. Turek quit her job in Ramat Gan, knowing that she couldn't keep working so far from Shefayim with her daughter's condition.

She was out of work for six months and found that being unemployed opened her mind to new things. In Turek's case, a new-old thing in particular: swimming.

"Around that time I met Ori Sela, who has all kinds of crazy ideas, and he convinced me to try open-water swimming," says Turek. "He really worked with me from A to Z. There's no teacher quite like him."

She had no experience with sea swimming at the time – how to work with the high waves, how to navigate. "I would never have gone back to swimming if it weren't for him," she insists.

After working through some smaller challenges, she decided to gift herself

26.21x30.51	3/5	עמוד 9	the jerusalem post - magazine	08/2017	59931704-8
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‘When I was about 37 I decided to take my oldest daughter to swimming lessons. I would sit by the pool and watch her, and I would see older people there, too, older than me, swimming. At that point I still said to myself, ‘don’t even think about it’

24.51x19.37	4/5	עמוד 10	the jerusalem post - magazine	08/2017	59931708-2
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‘As the mother of a diabetic child, I know all about the dark places you sometimes get to in being a parent to a child who’s different. One day I was approached by Make A Wish Israel. Even before they had a chance to explain what exactly was involved, I already knew I was in’

(Photos by: Alon Korek, Itay Orenstain, Hanan Ulner)





26.65x30.62	5/5	11	עמוד	the jerusalem post - magazine	08/2017	59931709-3
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'My agreement with them was that I never asked what time it was and they never told me. We decided that time is irrelevant'



with something truly special for her 40th birthday: swimming a full marathon, 42 km. and 195 meters.

"On my 40th birthday I went into the water and swam from midnight to 4:30 in the afternoon, from Givat Olga to Tel Aviv. All along the way my friends would join me for short sections. This was a Wednesday, a workday, and they took time off so they could support me and accompany me. It was so touching."

That challenge was followed by pool accomplishments, with Turek breaking several swimming records. What her mind had failed to help her attain as a teenager was now finally possible. She realized it was just something she had to get out of her system, and now was the time to focus on a personal, non-competitive challenge.

She remembers vividly what one guide used to ask during a course she had taken: "Who among you believes that the sky's the limit?" Of course everyone raised their hand.

So, he continued: "Well, that's bullshit. Why limit yourself at all? What you should be saying is: The world is open for me."

Turek has carried that notion with her ever since. "I really liked that because it's true, there are no limits – we're the ones limiting ourselves. I believe that good energy summons good things. If you have a goal, something you want to be a year from now, and you can imagine yourself doing that thing, really see yourself there – work for it and it will happen. You just need to be able to imagine it."

AFTER SUCCESSFULLY completing her birthday marathon, Turek knew that for her next challenge she wanted to give back to society. She set out to cross the English Channel, which had been swum by one Israeli, Prof. Eitan Friedman, in 1993. Since then, some have tried, but none succeeded.

She knew her success in this project would mean a lot to her community of swimmers, who all donated to her Headstart campaign; but she wanted it to mean even more. The way to do that revealed itself almost coincidentally ("I say 'coincidentally', but there's no such thing as coincidence!" she laughs.)

"As the mother of a diabetic child, I know all about the dark places you sometimes get to in being a parent to a child who's different. One day I was approached by Make A Wish Israel, and I was asked to give an inspirational talk, and all the proceeds would go to the foundation. Even before they had a chance to explain what exactly was involved, I already knew I was in."

She liked the idea of giving something to other athletes, but even more than that she loved that the cause makes children's dreams come true.

"These kids are at a point where they have to believe that life is worth living, that it is meaningful and worth fighting for," says Turek. "What better way to show them that than to help them fulfill a dream?"

Her crowdfunding campaign for the project also raised money for the foundation, and she had additional help from the Speedo bathing-suit company, which sponsored her and provided her bathing suit with the foundation's symbolic star printed on it.

In practicing for her swim, Turek would go swimming in the cold for long hours, six or eight hours a time every two weeks. She practiced for about a year, even swimming in other places around the world in order to get used to colder, harsher waters.

Crossing the channel has additional rules of its own: swimmers cannot touch the escorting boat and the escort cannot touch them. They can't even touch the stick the escort uses to hand them a bottle of water.

Channel swimmers can't do it alone. Turek had three friends with her on the boat while she was swimming, each of them encouraging, navigating, even joining the swim toward the end.

"Alon [Korek], Itay [Orenshtain] and Hanan [Ulner] were on the boat, right there next to me, which was amazing," says Turek. "My agreement with them was that I never asked what time it was and they never told me. We decided that time was irrelevant."

Only in hindsight did she realize just how true that sentiment was.

"The currents can take you this way or that – you can never know what's going to happen. Some people like to talk about records, the shortest crossing and so on, but you can't really compare, because every swim is different."

"It depends on the swimmer, on the sea that day, on the wind... A friend of mine, a 50-plus-year-old woman, crossed the channel in 28 hours and 44 minutes. Time is irrelevant."

After some 10 hours of swimming, her friends on the boat realized that unless she picked up the pace, they would lose the advantage of the high tide, which would cost her an additional few hours of swimming. They weren't sure how to let her know.

"The end was fragile. Alon came down to the water to swim with me, and he was swimming really hard and fast, but I was already tired after spending 10 hours in the water, so I told him to slow down. He said fine – but picked up the pace again anyway."

Eventually she took the hint and had no choice but to give it her all. They swam together for an hour, then she swam another hour alone. For the final hour, "Itay joined me and just before he got in the water he said: 'This is the money time. You have one more hour before low tide hits.'"

"I swam so hard. It was very difficult. I went from 2.6km/h to 4.3km/h. I knew this last hour was critical, and I kept telling myself, 'You can't disappoint all those children.' I was so afraid I was letting it slip through my fingers."

Because of the strong currents in the channel, swimmers don't swim directly toward their goal but have to approach the shore at an angle. The direct distance between the two beaches is 33 km.; Turek swam 45 km. and some swim even longer distances.

"You can't just swim straight. So even if the beach in Calais is only 2½ km. away, you know you actually have 4½ km. to go. How am I supposed to do that in one hour?! It's really far. But I just told myself I have to give it my best now, and a while later I saw Hanan waving to me with both arms, saying we'd reached a gulf on which the tide isn't felt, so I could go ahead and slow down."

Her last 600 meters felt like they took forever, she says – about three times what they would take her under different circumstances – but she made it to the shore of France.

TUREK SEES her success as the success of an entire community, including all the friends who helped along the way, her coworkers in the Shefayim Hotel, and of course her supportive partner Ariel and their two daughters, now six and 11 years old. Perhaps most touching of all were their responses to their mother's accomplishment.

"My older one enjoys swimming, but she's very social, and she can already see the sacrifice swimming requires. She will find her meaning elsewhere. But she did take a lot of interest in the idea of donations and giving back. She even wants to take on her own project with Make a Wish Israel."

Her younger daughter still wants to be a swimmer when she grows up, says Turek. "The other day reporters came in to film me for a story, so I told her I couldn't take her to her swimming lesson that day. She looked at me and said, 'But mom, how else will I become a swimmer like you?'"