

# A Mitzvah with a Somali twist

By: George Kun July 26, 2015



I could hardly think of a more relaxing, liberating, body and soul pleasing activity than a solitary paddle in my kayak. Today was my day. I put my boat on the water just at the beginning of the sunset. A wide shiny golden strip, the sun's reflection on the mirror calm lake, was adding an eerie fairytale feel to this already perfect scenery. Then suddenly, I noticed a large flock of geese, just landing on the far end of the lake and forming a compact live island. How nice... Before I even started paddling, another flock, this time of seagulls, came out of nowhere and formed their own very white live floating island. The two bird islands appeared to be quite territorial, with no sign of getting close to each other or mixing, just showing an arm's lengths respect to each other.

I was briefly overwhelmed by a feeling of "intrusion" into this lovely bird sanctuary, but then I thought it would be worth a try to see if a lonely representative of the human species would be accepted or peacefully ignored or tolerated to do his own thing. So I started paddling and picked up the pace, enjoying each paddle stroke and watching my boat gliding so smoothly in this pristine, undisturbed environment. By some miracle, there was not a single small motorboat on the horizon, not even small fishing boats in sight.

Then suddenly everything changed. I heard some child screaming and voices nearby, but did not see immediately where they were coming from, because I was paddling into the sun and was partially blinded. They were yelling in an increasingly loud voice: "Sir!, Sir!!, Sir!!!". I thought it could not be for me, since I rarely look or feel like a "Sir", and definitely not when I paddle. I was wrong. Sometimes, one can become "Sir" not by appearance but by necessity, so I turned my head towards the sound and I saw a tiny inflatable rubber boat that could be called with some good will, a kayak. I quickly came close and saw two boys inside, maybe aged 8 and 12, sitting and facing each other, while awkwardly holding some small plastic single blade paddles. My heart melted, because they looked so scared and clueless. They were also extremely cute, with handsome dark faces, big eyes, and rich curly hair. Later I found out that they were brothers, and came recently to Canada from Somalia. The older asked me immediately: "Sir, can you please help us to get to the shore?" I replied promptly that I could, but they will have to calm down, not be scared anymore and follow exactly what I was going to tell them and that everything would be OK. This time the younger boy replied: "Yes Sir". I looked around, and their boat was about 400 m from the shore docks, almost in the middle of Lake Wilcox. Then I realised that they did not have any life jackets, and I decided to leave that conversation and lesson for their parents, once we'd make it to the shore. I thought it was not a good idea to scare them even more, better concentrate on getting back quickly and safely.

The boys followed my instructions religiously and successfully. I got the little boy to turn around so they would no longer face each other, but rather, sit one behind the other. Then I showed them how to hold the paddle "canoe style", not with both hands on the shaft, how to paddle on opposite sides, how to "pull" the water with the concave side of the blade, and how to keep the boat straight, paddling at the same time, and how to recover from excessive turns.

I was absolutely amazed about how much easier it is to teach kids than adults, and how quickly they picked up everything I told them to do. I was also giving them occasional pushes with the tip of my kayak, so we made it back to shore quite rapidly and with no incidents.

The boys' parents were eagerly waiting on the public dock, somewhat calmed down since they witnessed the "rescue" operation from the distance. The mother, a young tall beautiful woman dressed in traditional Muslim attire with a black Somali style hijab, was thanking me repeatedly with tears in her eyes. The man thanked me too, but then turned quickly to lecturing his sons in a rather loud voice and words that sounded harsh and seemed to upset the kids.

Before I returned to continue my practice, I interrupted the man and told him that I wanted to tell him something, both as a parent and a kayaker. He did not finish yet blowing his steam and was not quite ready to accept any kind of lesson or advice, but I went on anyway. I told him that the boys were too young to be let alone in a boat, that they must wear life jackets, and that they should learn basic paddling skills before venturing on water. Before the man replied, I

quickly added that it was getting dark and that the calm, nice, lake could very easily get windy and unfriendly. I mentioned again that inexpensive life jackets can be bought at Wal-Mart and that he was lucky.

The man looked distressed and was visibly struggling with how to properly respond to my "lecturing", but after a subtle and very helpful elbow jolt from his wife, he thanked me again both for my help and my advice...

They boys were already out of their rubber boat and standing shyly on the dock. As I was paddling away, they suddenly started waving at me with both hands up and yelling again: Thank you Sir!