

Fish Out of Water

Joanne Levy

Reading level: 2.9

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Book Summary

Twelve-year-old Fishel (Fish) Rosner doesn't like regular "boy" things. He hates sports and would rather read or do crafts than climb trees or ride dirt bikes with his friends. Fish also loves to dance. But everything he wants to do is considered "girly." Fish doesn't get why that's a bad thing. He's just interested in different things than other boys. When he asks his Bubby to teach him to knit, she tells him to go play outside. When he begs his mom to take him to Zumba, she enrolls him in water polo instead. Why does everyone else get to decide what Fish should or shouldn't do?

Author Biography

Joanne Levy's love of books began at a very early age. Being the youngest among four children, she was often left to her own devices and could frequently be found sitting in a quiet corner with her nose in a book. Now that she's a grown-up, Joanne is most often at her computer, channeling her younger self into the books she writes for kids who enjoy reading in quiet corners. She also likes to knit, but not dishcloths. Joanne lives in Ontario with her family.

Key Themes

- Gender Stereotypes
- Knitting and Crafts
- Bullying
- Judaism
- Charity
- Sexism
- Family

Read-Aloud Suggestions

- p. 10—“I love ice cream...” Fish is surprised to get pushback when he asks his grandmother to teach him to knit. Especially because of *why* she won’t teach him.
- p. 23—“By lunchtime, I was getting pretty nervous...” Fish discovers even his best friend has strong, negative opinions about who should knit.
- p. 61—“Later that night, we were all at the kitchen table...” Fish is faced with a situation where he can either admit he didn’t go to the activity his mom had signed him up for or cover up his actions with a lie.

Discussion Questions

1. Fish faces pushback from friends and family, even though he knows in his heart that the things he wants to do shouldn’t be “for boys” or “for girls.” Have you ever felt or been told you shouldn’t do something for the same reason? What happened? How did you feel?
2. Fish struggles with finding a charity (bar mitzvah) project that’s meaningful to him. What would your charity project be and why?
3. Why do you think Seth was so angry about Fish wanting to learn how to knit?
4. Fish didn’t tell his family that he went to Zumba instead of water polo—was he justified in that? Should he have told them?
5. What character do you identify with most in this book? Why?
6. There is mention of stereotypes in this book. Discuss other stereotypes and why they might be hurtful.

Activities

1. Create a new cover for *Fish Out of Water*.
2. Research beginner books or videos about knitting and give it a try.
Note: you can find inexpensive needles at a dollar store or borrow from a friend! If you’d like an easy beginner project, there’s one for a bookmark on the author’s website (joannelevy.com).
3. Ms. Harper wears a dress with math equations on it that is a tribute to Hedy Lamarr, the actress and inventor. Research Ms. Lamarr and her inventions.
4. Create a commercial or ad inviting all kids to take up knitting. Be creative and convincing.
5. As part of his bar mitzvah, Fishel has to choose a mitzvah—good deeds—project. Research a good deeds or charity project you might enjoy and that would be meaningful for you. Make a plan, then do it.
6. Write a list of what you think is in bus driver Karla’s giant purse.
7. Write a song or poem about what you think it means to be a fish out of water.

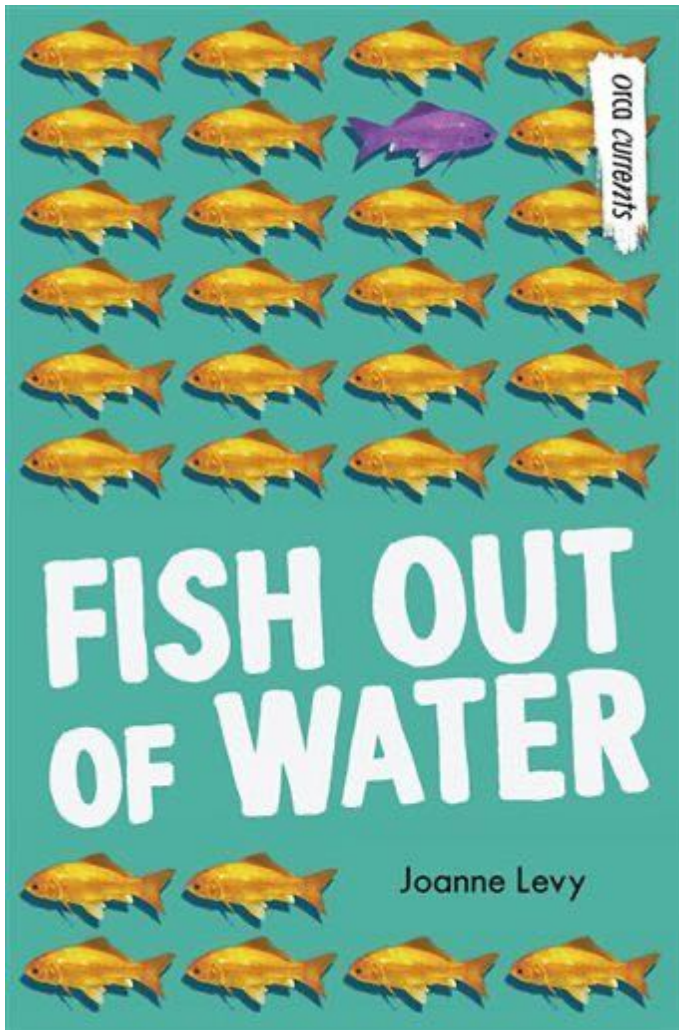


Examine the phrase, “A fish out of water”



1. What does this **literally** mean? What happens when a fish is out of water?
2. What does this **figuratively** mean? What are people talking about when they say a person is “a fish out of water”?
3. Draw or write about an example of when a person might be “a fish out of water”.

4. Draw or write about a time when you have felt like “a fish out of water”.



5. This is the front cover of the book you will be reading. In what ways does the design match the title?

6. The blurb on the back cover reads:

Twelve-year-old Fishel (Fish) Rosner doesn't like regular "boy" things. He hates sports and would prefer to read or do crafts instead of climbing trees or riding dirt bikes with his friends. He also loves to dance.

But all his interests are considered "girly." Fish doesn't get why that's a bad thing. He's just interested in different things than other boys. When he asks his Bubby to teach him to knit, she tells him to go play outside. When he begs his mom to take him to Zumba, she enrolls him in water polo instead. Why does everyone else get to decide what Fish should or shouldn't do?

Make some notes about what you learn about the story from the blurb.

- Who is the main character? _____
- How old is the main character? _____
- What is the main character interested in? _____
- What problem does the main character have? _____

Fish Out of Water

Chapter One



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. What does the main character do every Sunday?

Does he enjoy this activity? Yes No Why?

2. What does the main character call his:

Grandmother: _____

Grandfather: _____

These names are from the Jewish culture. Do you know of any other names that people use to call their grandparents?

3. What flavour of ice cream does Fishel's grandfather ask for?

4. What is Fishel's grandmother "famous" for?

5. What are Fishel's favourite colours?

6. A bar mitzvah is a special Jewish ceremony that celebrates a boy's 13th birthday. For girls it is called a bat mitzvah. What are some of the things that Fishel must do to prepare for his bar mitzvah?

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7. What is Fishel's best friend's name? _____

What is his friend's plan for his good-deeds project?

8. At the end of Chapter One, Fishel comes up with "a really amazing, perfect, super-special idea" for his good-deeds project. What do you think it is?

Personal Connection & Extension Questions

1. Draw or write about something special that someone has handmade for you. Share as many details about it as you can. Who made it? Why is it special?

2. If you were asked to complete a good-deeds project, what would you want to do? Draw or write about what you could do to "give of yourself to your community".

Fish Out of Water

Chapter Two



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. What does Fishel's grandmother say when he asks her, "I want to learn how to knit. Will you teach me?"

2. What activities does Fishel's grandmother suggest he try instead?

Why do you think she suggests these activities?

3. What is Fishel's little sister named? _____

4. Who is Darren?

5. What does "JCC" stand for?

What activities does Fishel's mom register her children in?

Daughter: _____

Son: _____

Is Fishel happy with his mom's decision?

Yes No Unclear

6. What is Fishel's favourite television show?

7. What is "Zumba"?

8. What reason does Fishel use to try to get out of going to the JCC activity?

Personal Connection & Extension Questions

1. Draw or write about a class or activity that you have participated in. Did you get to choose it for yourself, or did someone sign you up for it? What parts of the class or activity did you enjoy? What parts did you not enjoy?

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2. Fishel is frustrated that certain activities are thought of as “girly” and others are thought of as “manly”. Draw or write a list of activities that seem to fit into these categories. You can use examples from the book, but try to think of others too.

<u>“Girly” activities</u>	<u>“Manly” activities</u>

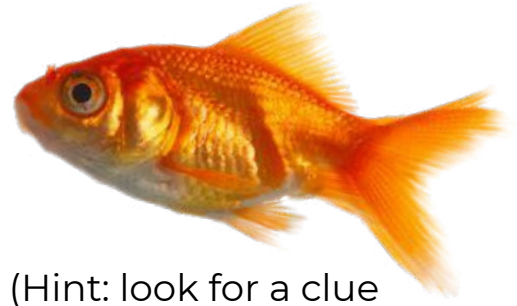
3. In your opinion, should Fishel get to choose what activity he does?
 Yes, Fishel should get to choose. No, his parents should decide.

Try to think of 3 reasons to support your point of view.

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Fish Out of Water

Chapter Three



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. What time of year does this story take place? (Hint: look for a clue on page 19.)

2. Fishel and Seth have a “regular” seat on the school bus. Where do they normally sit?

3. How does Seth respond when Fishel says he would prefer to try Zumba than water polo?

4. When does Fishel have to announce his mitzvah project plan to his rabbi?

5. Fishel sees a sign on the wall at school that excites him. What does it say? →

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6. Why does Fishel want to go to the knitting club?

7. Is Seth supportive of Fishel? Yes No Unclear

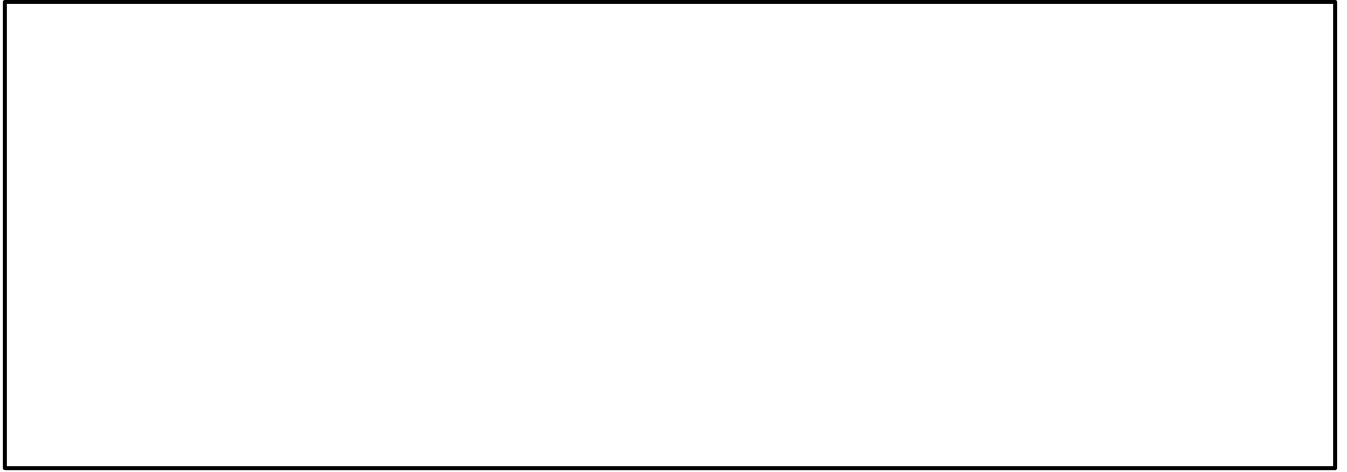
What does Seth say to Fishel that makes him upset?

8. What two questions does Fishel ask at the end of Chapter Three?

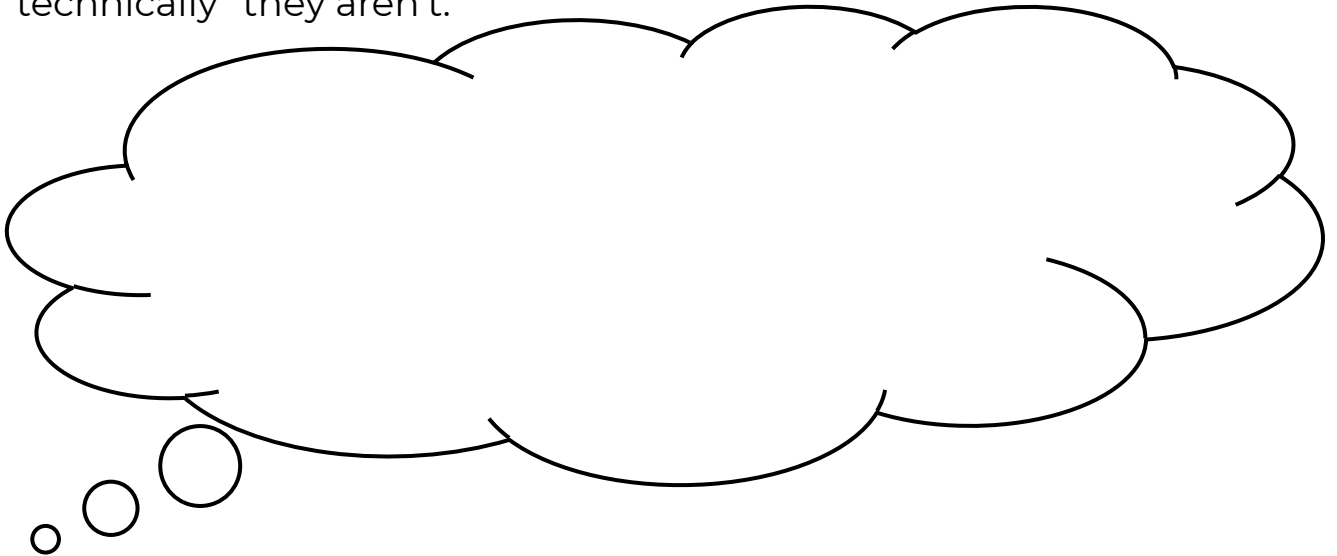
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Personal Connection & Extension Questions

1. Draw or write about a time when a friend of yours has made a decision that you didn't agree with. How did you feel? What did you say to express your opinion?



2. Even though the poster doesn't say that the knitting club is for girls only, Seth can't understand why his friend, Fishel, would want to go. Try to brainstorm any activities at your school that seem exclusive, even if "technically" they aren't.



3. In your opinion, should Fishel go to the knitting club?
 Yes, he should check it out. No, he should listen to Seth and bail.

Try to think of 3 reasons to support your point of view.

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Fish Out of Water

Chapter Four



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. Who is leading the Knitting Club? _____
What is unique about the way this person dresses?

2. What are the names of the four other members of the Knitting Club?

3. We know that Fishel wants to learn how to knit socks. What are the other members of the Knitting Club hoping to be able to make?

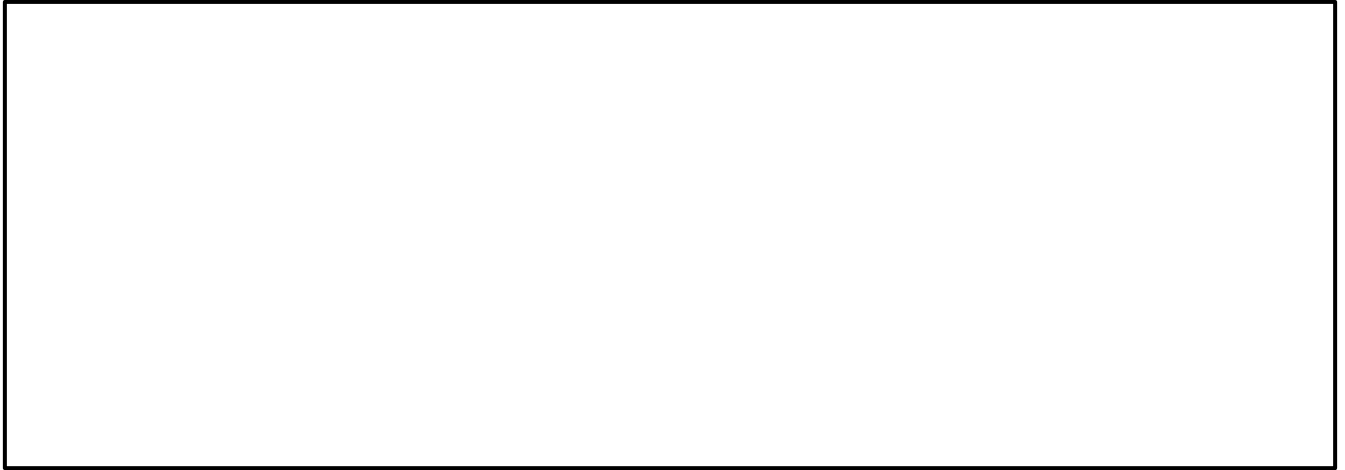
4. What are 3 different reasons that people should learn how to knit, according to the leader of the Knitting Club?
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5. What materials does a person need to knit?

6. What is the first knitting project that the club members will work on?

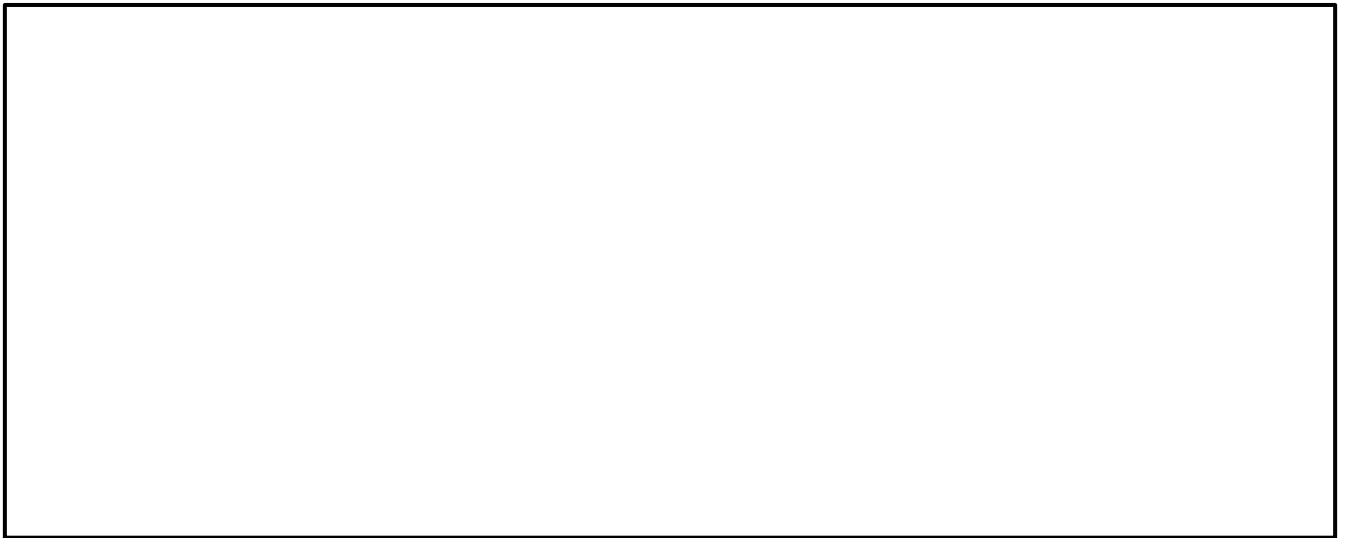
7. Fishel assumed that learning to knit would be fast and easy. What do his experiences at the first Knitting Club meeting prove?
 - Yes, it is quite easy to learn and projects don't take long to make.
 - No, knitting is actually quite complicated and challenging.

Personal Connection & Extension Questions

1. Draw or write about a time when you set a goal for yourself that was actually much more challenging than you thought it would be. Did you give up, or did you persist? How did you feel as a result?



2. Imagine you are Fishel. Draw or write about your experience at the Knitting Club meeting. Did you have a good time? Did you learn anything new? Will you go back again?



3. At the end of Chapter Four, Ms. Harper asks Fishel to stay back. She wants to talk to him about something. Draw or write about what you think she wants to say or ask Fishel.



Fish Out of Water

Chapter Five



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. Ms. Harper asks Fishel to stay behind after Knitting Club. What question does she ask him?

2. Fishel tells Ms. Harper that he is feeling conflicted because even though he really wants to learn how to knit, he is not being supported by his friends or family because knitting is thought of as a girly activity. Ms. Harper says she understands because she faced a similar conflict.

What activity was Ms. Harper passionate about? _____

What did people tell her? _____

What did she do? _____

3. What advice does Ms. Harper give to Fishel? (Hint: Look on pages 40-41.)

“Show them they’re _____. Be your _____ person and _____ that you know what’s _____ for _____.”

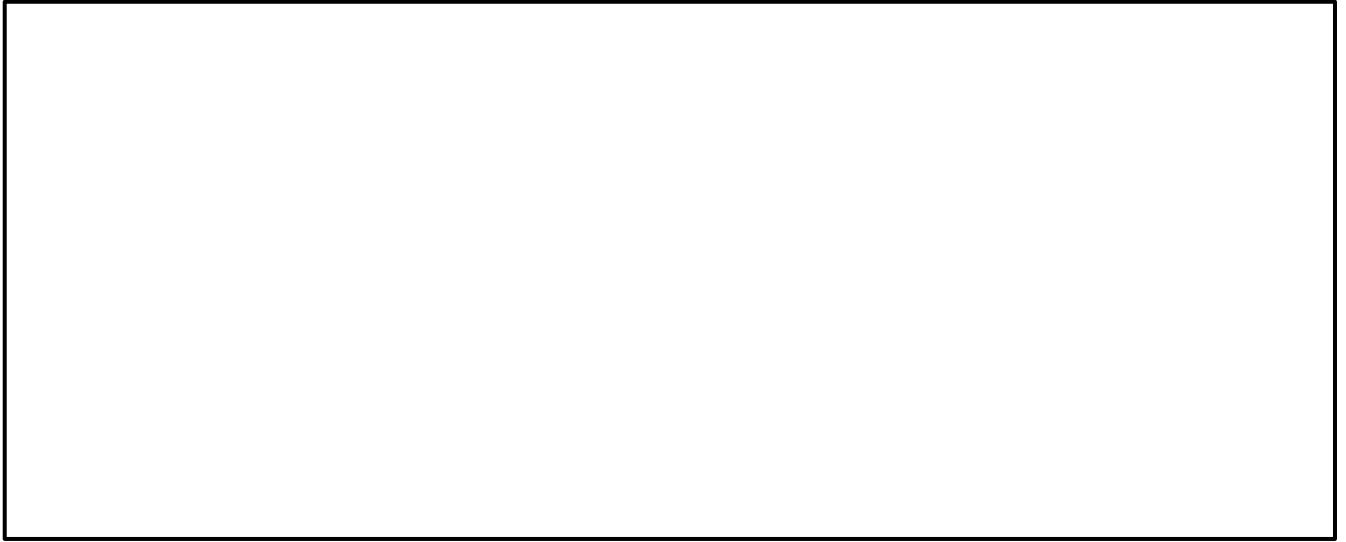
4. Ms. Harper notices that Fishel has the character trait of being “very determined”. What makes her notice this?

5. Describe the plan that Ms. Harper has for helping Fishel reach his goal.

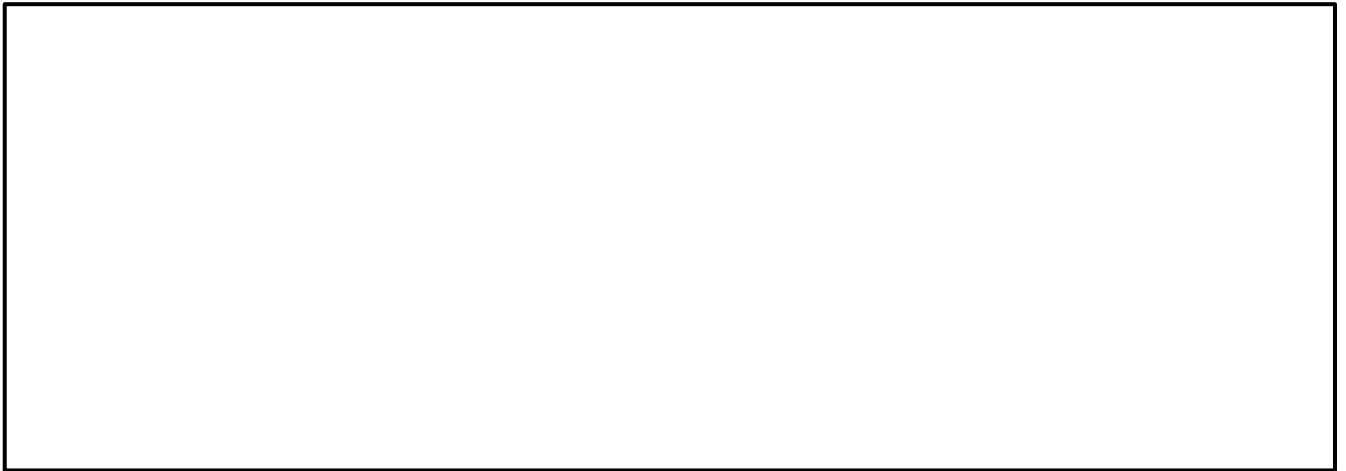
6. What clue does Fishel get that Seth is still upset with him?

Personal Connection & Extension Questions

1. Both Fishel and Ms. Harper talk about their passions in this chapter. Draw or write about some things that you are passionate about.



2. Fishel comments that it felt nice when Ms. Harper said to him, “I’m proud of you”. Draw or write about a time when someone has said this to you. Why did they say it? How did it make you feel?



3. When Karla, the bus driver, asks Fishel, “is everything okay?” He replies, “Yep. I just thought it would be nice to sit up front for a change.” This isn’t the truth. In your opinion, did Fishel make a good choice to lie?

Yes No

Try to think of 3 reasons to support your point of view.

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Fish Out of Water

Chapter Six



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. According to Fishel, what is “sure” code for?

2. What two reasons does Fishel’s mom provide that explain why he cannot stay home instead of going to water-polo at the JCC?

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3. Fishel has done some research about water polo. What does he discover? (How does he describe what water polo is?)

4. What does Fishel hear as he walks towards the men’s change rooms?

5. What does the instructor of the seniors’ Zumba class observe about Fishel?

What suggestion does he make?

6. Fishel is unsure about accepting the advice given to him by the Zumba instructor. What words does he remember that help guide his thinking?

7. What one thing does Fishel know “for sure” by the end of Chapter Six?

Personal Connection & Extension Questions

1. Do some of your own research about water polo by watching some [YouTube videos](#). Draw or write about some of the rules of the sport. Based on what you see, is this a sport you would like to try? Why or Why not?

2. Fishel thinks about some advice that Ms. Harper gave him, and this helps him make sense of a difficult situation. Draw or write about some powerful words or helpful advice that someone once told you.

3. Fishel is faced with the opportunity to change his activity at the JCC. What do you think he should do?

He should stick with water polo and at least give it a try.

He should register himself in the Zumba class.

(Other): _____

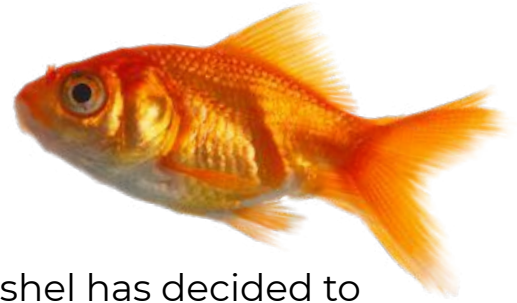
Try to think of 2 reasons to support your point of view.

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Fish Out of Water

Chapter Seven



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. In Chapter Seven the reader discovers that Fishel has decided to attend the seniors' Zumba class. When he first arrives there, how does he feel?

2. What is the Zumba instructor's name? _____

3. How does Maggie Cohen know Fishel?

4. The Zumba instructor calls the class participants, "alter kockers".

What does this translate to? _____

Where has Fishel heard this phrase before?

5. How long is the Zumba class? _____

6. Think of 3 ways to describe how Fishel feels at the end of the class.

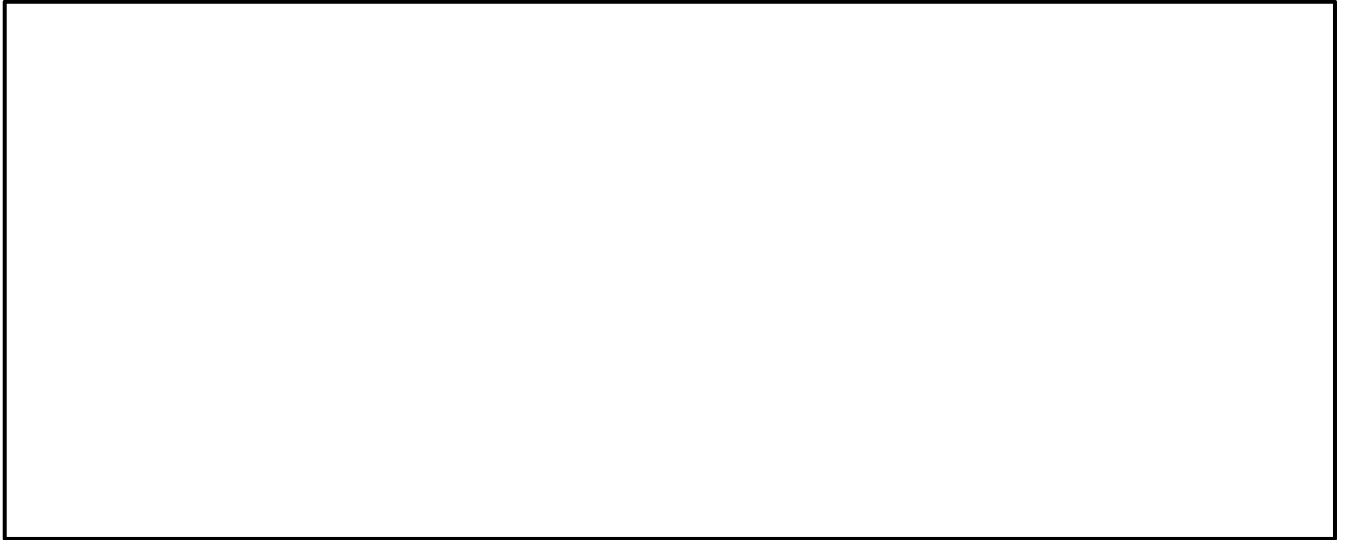
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7. After class, the Zumba instructor tells Fishel that the other participants liked having him there. What reason does he give?

8. What is Fishel's "biggest worry" at the end of Chapter Seven?

Personal Connection & Extension Questions

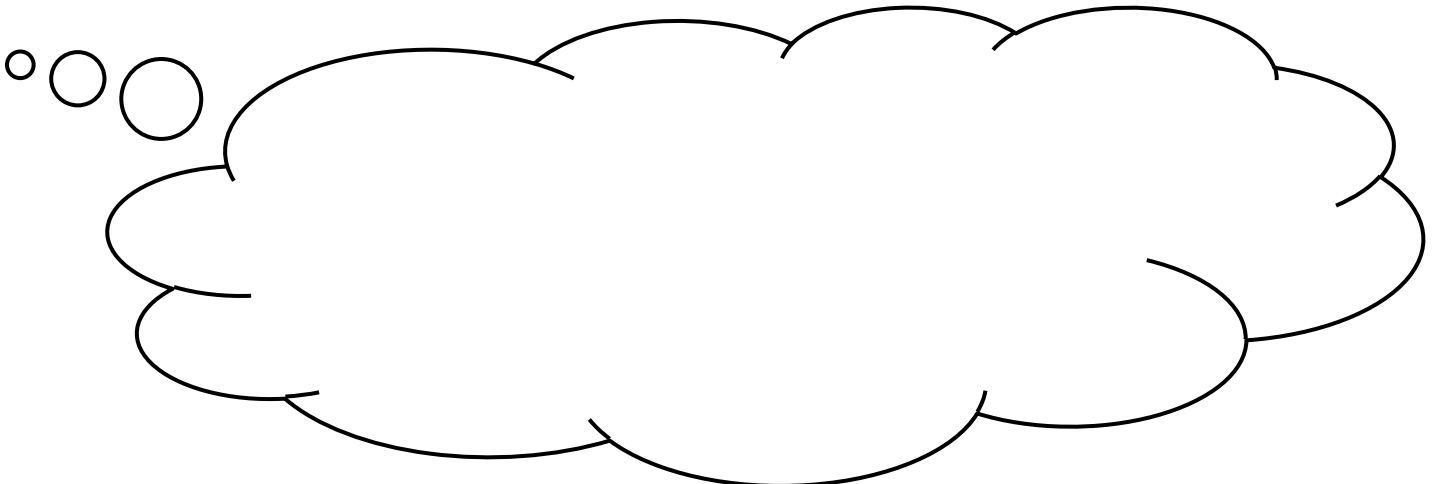
1. There is an expression that, “time flies when you are having fun.” Draw or write about an experience you have had when you felt so involved in an activity that you completely lost track of time.



2. Fishel “chickens out” of telling the whole truth about going to Zumba class and instead tells a “white lie”. Draw or write about time when you didn’t tell the whole truth about a situation.



3. Fishel explains why he chose to hide the truth from his mom. Brainstorm some reasons why other people might choose to lie.



Fish Out of Water

Chapters Eight & Nine



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. What is Darren's favourite meal?

2. Fishel says he is worried about 2 things. What are they?

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3. Why is Darren unable to play water polo?

4. Where does Fishel eat his lunch?

5. Fishel finds a book titled, *Knit to Wear*. When he finds the section about socks, what does he discover that makes his "heart sink"?

6. Fishel feels like there is a time pressure to make up with Seth. Explain why he feels this way.

7. Who is Mrs. Berg? _____

What does she seem to be curious about?

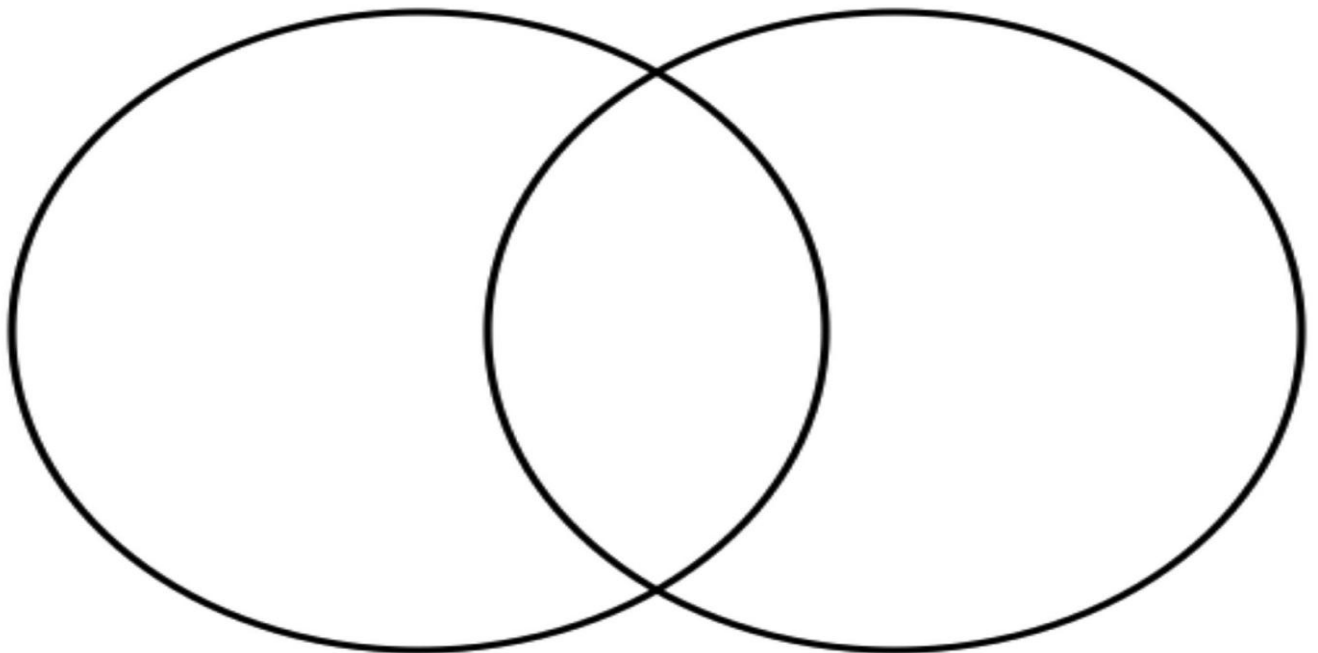
8. When Fishel tries to talk about joining Seth for his mitzvah project, what does Seth make clear?

9. Recall what an **understatement** means. Rewrite an easy definition below.

What does Fishel say is the “understatement of the century”?

Personal Connection & Extension Questions

1. Compare and contrast water polo and Zumba. What is similar about these activities? What is unique about them?



2. Seth seems to be very upset with Fishel, but Fishel is confused about why. Imagine you are Seth and write a note to Fishel explaining why you are mad.

Fish Out of Water

Chapter Ten



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. What complaint does Fishel's grandmother have against Rabbi Seigel?

2. Fishel asks for more time to determine his plan for his mitzvah project. What is Rabbi Seigel's response?

3. What is Shalom Village? _____

What is Tracey's job there? _____

4. What does "mitzvot" mean?

5. What is Rabbi Seigel's response when Fishel asks him, "You don't think it's stupid that I want to knit?"

"I don't think it's _____ at all. If it's something you _____
to do, something you have a _____ for, it's the most
_____ way for you to _____ of yourself."

6. According to Rabbi Seigel, what is a **stereotype**?

7. What does Fishel want to ask the rabbi about at the end of Chapter Ten?

What are the 2 reasons why Fishel doesn't ask the rabbi?

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Personal Connection & Extension Questions

1. Create a list of some common stereotypes associated with:

Boys/Men	Girls/Women
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•••	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•••

2. Can you think of other characteristics that people create stereotypes about?

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3. Rabbi Seigel says, "I don't think people should label activities that way. It's wrong to say some things are for boys or girls." Do you agree with him?

Yes No

Try to think of 2 reasons to support your point of view.

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4. Imagine that Fishel did ask Rabbi Seigel for advice on how to fix his friendship with Seth. Draw or write about what you think the rabbi would have suggested that Fishel should do.

Fish Out of Water

Chapter Eleven



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. Fishel is still eating his lunch alone in the library. What does he say is “the good part of not eating with Seth and the others”?

2. Fishel asks his mom to take him to Shalom Village. When does he want to go?

3. Who is Tom Sherman? _____

What did he tell Darren? _____

4. What strategy does Fishel use to avoid having to reply to Darren?

5. Darren seems quite upset about the information Tom shared with him. What two assumptions does Darren make on page 85?

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Are these assumptions correct? Yes No

6. Who inspires Fishel to stand up for what he wants and make his voice heard?

What brave statement does Fishel make to Darren and his mom?

“I’m not _____.”

I liked _____.” 21

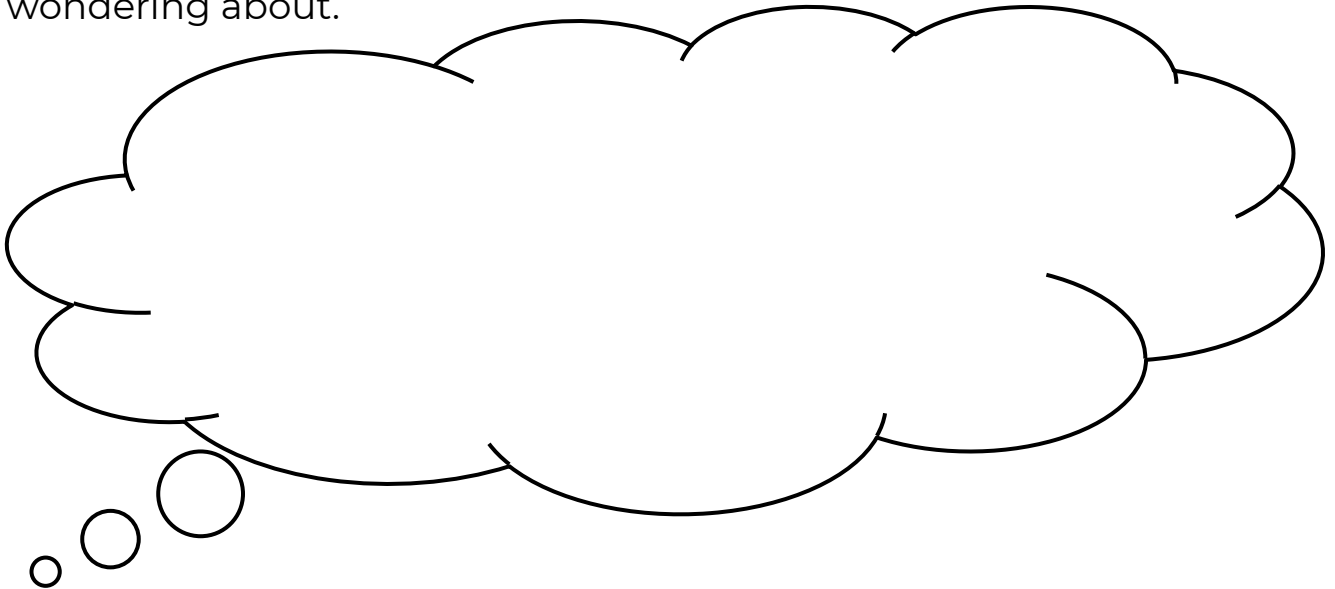
7. Fishel gets quite emotional and starts to cry. What stereotypical statement does Darren make?

8. Fishel refuses to accept Darren's statement. Record what powerful counter evidence Fishel provides.

"Yes they do. I saw _____"
_____."

Personal Connection & Extension Questions

1. On pages 80-81, Fishel is thinking deeply about why his grandmother isn't willing to teach him to knit. Paraphrase some of the questions he is wondering about.



2. Darren and Fishel seem to have very different interests and beliefs. Draw or write about something that you often disagree about with a parent or guardian. Are parents/guardians always right, or is it okay for children to have different opinions?

Fish Out of Water

Chapter Twelve



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. At the start of Chapter Twelve Fishel is crying so hard that...

2. Who knocks on Fishel's bedroom door to check on him?

3. Describe how Fishel's relationship with his mom was different "before Darren and Norah came along."

4. What surprises Fishel's mom on page 90?

5. Why does Fishel say, "Mom, I can't breathe!"

6. What does Fishel's mom say is "100 percent right"?

7. Fishel's mom admits that she is not pleased that he lied, but understands that he hid the truth because...

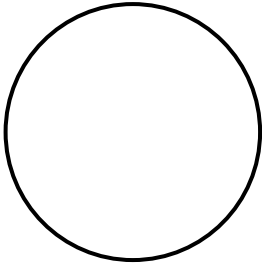
8. Fishel's mom says that it is important for Fishel to try new things. What does he remind her?

9. What does Fishel say his forgiveness "depends" on?

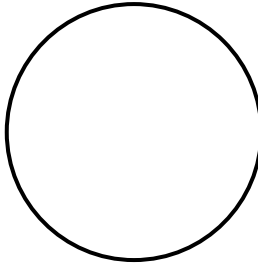
Personal Connection & Extension Questions

1. Complete the flowchart that shows how Fishel's mood changes throughout Chapter Twelve. Draw facial expressions to represent his moods, and complete the because statements to explain the reasons for his moods.

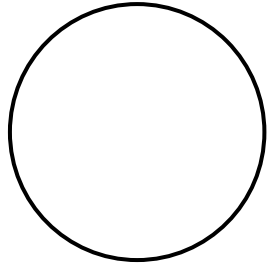
Beginning



Middle



End



Because _____

Because _____

Because _____

2. Fishel's mom thinks it is really important to try new things. Do you agree with her?

Yes No

Try to think of 3 reasons to support your point of view.

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Draw or write about something that you recently tried for the first time.

Fish Out of Water

Chapter Thirteen



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. Who goes to brunch with Fishel?

What does Fishel order?

2. Fishel expects to meet with Tracey at Shalom Village, but who else does he meet with?

3. Fishel and his mom are invited to stay for lunch, when an announcement will be made about Fishel's mitzvah project. Describe how the people at Shalom Village respond to the project proposal.

4. Describe what incident causes Fishel to comment, "Seriously, could this day get any better?" on page 101.

5. What floor do Fishel's grandparents live on? _____

6. What is Fishel's grandfather doing when he arrives?

7. Fishel's mom announces that she wants to talk to his grandparents. What does she want to talk to them about?

8. How does Fishel's grandmother already know about his mitzvah project?

9. When Fishel announces that he is going to knit, who surprises him with their support? What does this person offer to do?

10. Fishel’s grandmother reveals why she did not want to teach Fishel to knit. What was her concern?

Personal Connection & Extension Questions

1. The author has cleverly left out a lot of details about Fishel’s mitzvah project plan, and so it remains a bit of a mystery even this close to the end of the story. Fill in the chart below to identify what you know for sure about the project, and what you predict about it.

What I know for sure:	What I predict:
•	•
•	•
•	•
•	•
•	•

2. Fishel has to “make his voice strong” when he tells his grandmother that “boys can knit” (page 104). Draw or write about a time when you have had to find the courage to speak up about something important to you.

Fish Out of Water

Chapter Fourteen



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. Fishel has to “gather up all of his courage and fix things.”
What does Fishel hope to fix?

2. What question does Fishel ask Seth on page 109?

What is Seth’s response?

3. What insult does Seth use against Fishel on the bottom of page 109?

4. Fishel tries to explain to Seth why his words are hurtful. What does he say?

“Telling someone he _____ and meaning
it as an _____ is _____.”

5. Who joins Fishel in trying to help Seth understand that he is wrong?

6. Who does Fishel sit on the bus with on Monday afternoon?

7. Why does Fishel think his new friends like him?

8. What does Fishel think Seth says as he gets off the bus?

Personal Connection & Extension Questions

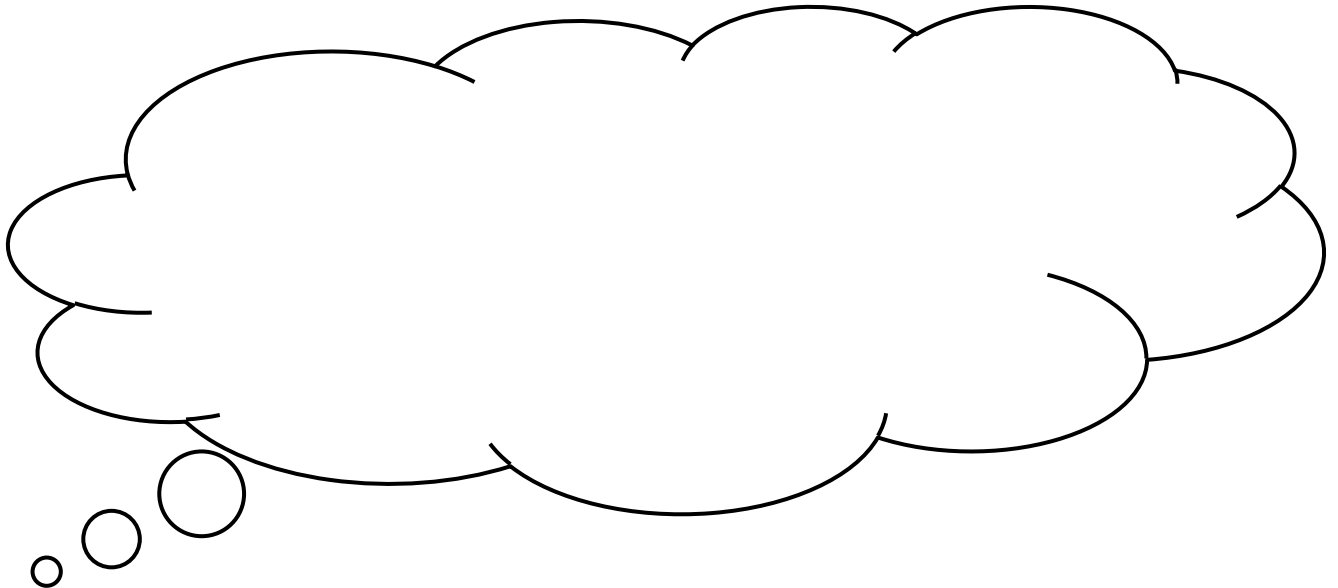
1. Fishel admits that even though he wanted to push Seth, he knew he had to “fight back with his words” instead. Is it ever appropriate to express yourself with physical actions?

Yes No

Try to think of 3 reasons to support your point of view.

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2. Seth seems to have thought about Fishel and Mandy’s words and changed his thinking. Imagine you are Seth, what are some of the thoughts you might have in reaction to what Fishel and Mandy said?



3. Fishel and his new friends talk excitedly about what they will learn next in Knitting Club. Draw or write about something you are currently excited to be learning about. It could be something you are learning in school, or in your life outside of school.

Fish Out of Water

Epilogue



Knowledge & Understanding Questions

1. How much time has past between the end of Chapter Fourteen and the Epilogue?

2. How does Fishel's grandfather give him encouragement during his bar mitzvah?

3. Fishel reports that he eventually repaired his relationship with Seth, Steven and Amir. What happens that convinces Fishel that his friends now understand that "activities are for whoever wants to do them"?

4. Fishel's mitzvah project is finally detailed in the epilogue. What is the name of the organization that Fishel started?

Who is it meant to help? _____

Who has contributed to the project to make it possible?

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5. Ms. Harper reveals a secret she has kept from Fishel. What is it?

6. Describe the special gift that Fishel's grandfather gives him:

7. What is Fishel's reaction to this gift?

Personal Connection & Extension Questions

1. Ms. Harper is wearing a dress with math equations all over it. Who is this dress in honor of?

Do some of your own research about who this person is by watching some [YouTube videos](#).

What famous characters did this person inspire?

Provide examples of two inventions this person is responsible for.

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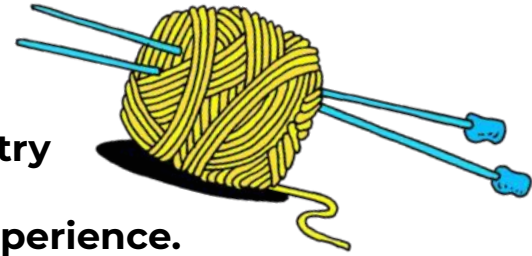
What advice did this person give their son?

“Give the _____ the _____ that you have and you’ll
be _____ into the _____. Give the world _____.”

What does this advice mean?

Draw or write about how Fishel’s experiences in this story provide an example of someone following this advice.

Extension Activity



**You have been given the exciting opportunity to try learning to knit - just like Fishel!
Answer the questions below to reflect on your experience.**

1. Were you excited to try knitting? Yes No

Why?

2. Fishel concludes that knitting is much more complicated than he originally thought. What part of knitting did you find most challenging?

3. Fishel was lucky to know someone that is a master at knitting, to have a knitting instructor, and to have some books about knitting available to him. These resources help him learn. What part of today's learning experience did you find most helpful?

4. What were some of the thoughts you experienced while you were learning today? Mark each thought with an **X** or a **✓** to show if this thought was negative or positive.

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5. Do you think that you would like to keep learning how to knit?

If yes, please write about what you would like to learn how to make.

If no, please write about a different craft or skill you would like to learn.
