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The Scroll

The Rabbi And The Sharks

During Shark Week, one rabbi is reminded of a too-close encounter

By [Dana Evan Kaplan](#) || August 6, 2013 | 4:18 PM



Tiger shark. (Greg Amptman)

It's [Shark Week](#) on the Discovery Channel, the one week each year when everyone suddenly becomes obsessed with sharks. For me, though, Shark Week is a bit more personal, an annual reflection on a terrifying, beautiful experience I had years ago in South Africa.

You may have heard of people cage diving with Great White Sharks near Cape Town. But I had the chance to dive without a cage in an ocean filled with different kinds of sharks—no Great Whites, thank goodness—in Natal, just north of Durban. It was the year after I left [my position as rabbi](#) of the Reform congregation in Cape Town. I returned to the country I had found so beautiful determined to experience all that I had not had time to do while I was leading the Progressive synagogue. One of the activities on my to-do list was scuba diving.

A travel agent in Johannesburg suggested a bed and breakfast in Umhlanga Rocks, an area which was originally part of the sugar estate of Sir Marshall Campbell. Umhlanga and Umhlanga Rocks are both named after the Ohlanga River, which reaches the Indian Ocean about three kilometers north of the town. The woman running the B&B had years of experience with diving and was able to recommend a dive shop. Unfortunately, they turned out to have little experience dealing with novice divers, a fact that nearly caused my untimely demise.

The dive shop gave me equipment and introduced me to the divemaster, who immediately turned away to do something else. Now that I'm more experienced as a diver, I realize I should have asked more questions ('Will I be okay out there?' would have been a helpful one). But at the time, I just did what I was told and got ready for the dive. I was interested in seeing what life under the water looked like—though sharks were not on my mind at all.

This was not a chummed dive, where the water is filled with chopped fish to attract the sharks and other fish. It wasn't even a baited dive, in which a small amount of bait is used to attract the sharks, not actually feed them. In these waters, the sharks are already there—there's no need to attract them.

We were placed in a rubber high-speed launch boat. The group was entirely male and, except for me, full of individuals who looked like they were in the South African Special Forces. In contrast I must have looked like the typical American tourist, with a slight potbelly and rental equipment. The boat started in an inlet behind the beach, built up speed and crashed through the waves and into the open ocean. I immediately became ill, but the rest of the divers remained tranquil, looking almost bored. We saw a pod of dolphins jumping through the water, my first time seeing Flipper in real life.

Once we got to the dive site, the dive master did a reverse entry and descended rapidly. Everyone followed him quickly. I found myself alone in the water. I went down slowly, since I was having trouble equalizing my ears. I looked around for my dive-mates for one or two minutes and then, following the standard [PADI](#) instructions, began to ascend to the surface.

Suddenly, there were about 20 sharks circling around me. It sounds much worse than it was—the circles were wide, and I had no sense that they were targeting or hunting me. The sharks actually didn't seem very interested in me; they had been going about their regular activities when I jumped into the middle of their turf. I was hoping to see a giant turtle, but maybe they had all been scared off. There were several different types of sharks, it seemed, although I could not be sure of their species.

I knew the waters had [Blacktip sharks](#), a fast, shoaling species that hunts in the mid-water region of inshore waters and is found along most of the East African seaboard. They eat bony fish, including the juveniles of other shark species, stingrays, cuttlefish, and crayfish. Of more concern to me were the Tiger sharks, a huge, striped shark with a broad, bluntly rounded snout and a large mouth with saw-edged, cockscomb shaped teeth. And the Zambezi shark, also known as the [bull shark](#), which has a high dorsal fin and broad triangular saw-edged upper teeth. The Zambezis are known to turn aggressive, sometimes for no obvious reason. There were no Hammerhead sharks around me—that, at least, was easy to tell since they have such distinctive heads.

When I came up to the surface, the ocean was choppy and our boat was far away. I realized I didn't have a flare gun or any other way to get attention, so I inflated my vest and waved my hands at the boat. Then I did something I do frequently as a Jew and as a rabbi, but had never done before in a situation like this—I said the Shema. I do not remember how much of the declaration I said, whether the first line only or perhaps more, but I said it. I remember thinking that I might not survive. I don't know how the skipper saw me but he did. It took him about 10 minutes to finally reach me.

Years later, I think about returning to dive there again. Seeing so many sharks, and being so vulnerable, was an unbelievable experience. It lasted only minutes, but I remember it vividly. When I'm in synagogue praying to God and trying to visually encapsulate the wonders of this world, I frequently remember the image of all those sharks in the wide-open ocean off the Natal coast.

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