

GETTING IN SHAPE FOR THE JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

I recently joined a fitness club. It happened after reading a passage in a book by Dr. Alan Morinis. In *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, he recounts a darker period in his life when his commitment to spirituality and social action had been supplanted by ambition, vanity and ego. In reflecting on how this came about, he made this observation:

“Spiritual practice is no different from any other kind of daily exercise -- skip one day, then find an excuse to skip another, and another, and finally your spiritual StairMaster is just gathering dust in a dark corner of your soul where the light never shines.” (p. 14)

The image of a StairMaster gathering dust made me realize that I had to do more than just want to be healthy. So I joined a fitness club and made a commitment to work out on a regular basis. That was about a month ago. Ask me how it's going.

Of course, the StairMaster analogy illustrates a more subtle point. Just as our physical health requires a commitment of time, effort and resources, so too does our spiritual health. Good intentions are important, but alone they cannot carry us very far. We must also find the structure and support that can help us succeed. This has led me to think about our congregation as a “fitness club for the soul” because our activities revolve around this one goal: to promote and support optimal spiritual health for progressive-minded Jews.

There are certainly other places that promote and support good spiritual health. Other synagogues and churches may have similar goals. Even secular organizations, from fitness centers to universities, now include classes in yoga and meditation. But for forward-thinking people who see that we are developing an exceptionally direct and comprehensive approach to optimal spiritual health, Temple Israel is likely to become a central address for this kind of engagement.

To successfully achieve optimal spiritual health, there are four things that are essential. First, as with physical fitness, there has to be ***the inner motivation*** to improve (or at least maintain) ones current state. Changing your routine and habits can only happen when you decide you are ready for a change. Rabbi Art Green, the first speaker in our spirituality series, spoke about the inner-stirrings of the heart which often lead people to become “spiritual seekers.” Our congregation is a place where those inner-stirrings are nurtured and where spiritual seekers are welcome.

The second essential element is ***the capacity to make intelligent choices***. One needs to ask questions like “what exactly is optimal spiritual health, and how does one most-effectively develop it?” Dr. Nathan Katz, the second speaker in our series, presented us with an overview of both religious and secular approaches to spirituality. He also presented contemporary research confirming the

neurological benefits of practices like prayer and meditation. Scientific and comparative perspectives can help us make informed choices, giving us the confidence we need to take the next important step.

The third essential element for cultivating optimal spiritual health is having ***the structure and support*** necessary to succeed. If one's approach is haphazard and lacking support, even the best intentions will not bear fruit. Because we typically have other demands pulling us in different directions, it helps to have a regular place, scheduled times and supportive relationships which fitness clubs and congregations can provide.

Dr. Alan Morinis, the third speaker in our spirituality series, presented us with an excellent example of a structured curriculum and system of support with the practice of *mussar*. At the end of this month (beginning March 28) Jeff Agron, co-president of The Mussar Institute, will follow up on that program with a three-week introductory class on the subject. I'm hoping we can incorporate a systematic approach such as this into what we already offer here at Temple Israel.

The fourth and final element necessary for spiritual fitness is the most elusive: ***grace***. Some call it "luck" or "good fortune" but in Hebrew we call it "*chesed*." When it comes to spiritual growth and development, we know that it is not the product of our effort alone. Coming to understand how grace operates, we stand a better chance of aligning ourselves with it. This is (was/will-be) the focus of our fourth and final segment in our spirituality series. Rabbi Rami Shapiro's presentation (March 1-3) on "Amazing *Chesed*" is (was/will-be) all about becoming more sensitive and responsive to the presence of grace in our lives; a perfect way to bring our spirituality series to a close.

As we begin our preparations for Passover (March 25-April 2) we'll want to make sure we have an adequate supply of *matzah* and other items for our seders. But we'll also want to take a personal inventory and make sure we have each of the four elements outlined above which are necessary for optimal spiritual health and fitness. With *Pesach* approaching, when we recount and re-live our people's exodus from Egypt, now is the time to get in shape -- not just physically but spiritually -- for the journey of a lifetime.