

## A Jewish Academy for Spiritual Fitness?

by Rabbi Moshe Thomas Heyn - Feb 2014

I have an idea that some might call *'audacious.'* That's OK. I think it's time.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs himself, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, used the word 'audacious' in his recent address at the URJ's Biennial when he urged Reform congregations to practice *'audacious hospitality.'* He said we can and should do much more to welcome newcomers into our community.

Benjamin Netanyahu used the same phrase in his address to participants at the Biennial. Via satellite, he described Israel as a place "where all Jews, including Reform Jews, experience nothing less than *'audacious hospitality.'*" Netanyahu knew that the phrase had just been used repeatedly by Rabbi Jacobs, so he knew it was an idea Reform Jews were ready to hear.

Dr. Ron Wolfson, author of the recent book entitled *Relational Judaism*, also spoke at the Biennial and made use of the term. He explained that being *'audacious'* with regard to hospitality is not just about welcoming people at the door or sending them friendly letters. It's about creating and multiplying personal bonds between old and new members. It means being willing to try something new.

So when it seemed that my idea was a bit audacious, I realized it would be a *good* thing. It's time for something new. It's time to create and multiply personal bonds between Temple members, and my idea is likely to do just that.

My idea is to engage everyone in the work we have come together to do. That's because we are here, as human beings on this planet, as members of a Jewish community and as members of Temple Israel, to cultivate what we might call "spiritual fitness."

Much has already been said about the concept. Doing a quick search on the internet, one can find about a dozen books written over the past twenty years with "spiritual fitness" in the title. But the concept has never been used in a Jewish congregation. Yet, if you think about it, the term aptly defines our purpose.

Today, everyone knows what "physical fitness" is. Whether we choose to pursue it or not, we each have some notion of what the concept means. Hence, it's not a stretch for us to consider the idea of "spiritual fitness."



*Rabbi Tom, his boys & friends cultivating spiritual fitness*

What is it? And how we might cultivate it, both individually and collectively?

In a Jewish context, the practice of prayer, *mussar*, *tzedakah*, *tikkun olam* and Jewish values – all are means for cultivating "spiritual fitness." Would you consider yourself to be spiritually fit? Would you consider our congregation to be spiritually fit? Would you consider our society to be spiritually fit?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no" or "not yet," then the appropriate response is not to belittle the concept but to see how it can be useful as a means for self-improvement. Our Temple can and should function as nothing less than a "Jewish Academy for Spiritual Fitness."

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi tells a story of when he began his career as a Chabad rabbi in New Haven, Connecticut. He started a little *cheder* (school for children) and had the *chutzpah* to call it a *yeshiva*. Of course, a *yeshiva* is like a graduate-level academy for Jewish studies; something much more advanced than a mere *cheder*. Consequently, some of the established rabbis in the area derided his efforts and complained to his superiors that he should not be allowed to call his school a *yeshiva*.

When a representative from Chabad eventually came to town, he responded to their complaints by saying: "Today gentlemen, I walked on George Street. And I saw on George Street there was a bus. And on the front of the bus, it said CHICAGO. I said '*Ganef! Shaygetz! Ligner!* (Thief! Vermin! Liar!) You're in New Haven! Why does your sign say Chicago?'"

*(continued on next page)*

The rabbi paused, then added with a twinkle in his eye: "Ahh, but the bus is **going** to Chicago! And from this *cheder*, there is **going** to be a *yeshiva*!"

It is true that calling Temple Israel a "Jewish Academy for Spiritual Fitness" is audacious, but that's basically what we are. It's an idea that is entirely consistent with who and what we aspire to be. And putting it in these terms makes sense, even to those who would otherwise have no reason to join a synagogue.

For the coming year, our Temple will host a series of lectures and programs around this theme. I believe it will expand and deepen our sense of purpose, both individually and collectively. I hope you will help me to develop this audacious idea and see if it has the power to enrich your life and our congregation.