

ON THE BRINK OF A NEW REVOLUTION

by Rabbi Moshe Thomas Heyn, December 2013

In 1969, Judi Sheppard Missett was a student at Northwestern University in Chicago. She liked to dance and began teaching classes in a jazz studio. Unfortunately, her classes had a 90 percent dropout rate. Then it dawned on her that some of her students attended the class to lose weight, have fun and get in shape. As an experiment, she turned them away from the mirrors and became less critical of their movements. Her students enjoyed the classes and attendance soon doubled and then tripled, until her studio was packed.

Her husband, Jack, would sometimes drop by and see 8-10 women with scarves around their necks sitting on chairs knitting, reading and watching their daughters. "One day," he recalled, "Judi turned and looked at the mothers and said she had to do something to get *them* up on their feet and experience the joy of movement." She soon had the parents moving with a little music and some easy, up-tempo choreography.

A few years later when Judi and her husband moved to California, she started teaching classes for the Carlsbad Parks and Recreation Department. Word spread and the program exploded with women from all over the area. To keep the number of participants to a manageable level, the department limited participation to individuals with a Carlsbad street address, but that didn't stop some women. They began signing up for P.O. boxes at the Carlsbad post office so they could attend her classes.

One day, a student suggested that she call her technique "Jazzercise" because it combined jazz dance and exercise. A couple of days later, Judi went to the copyright office and registered the name.

Today, "Jazzercise" is a household name. The organization now earns about \$100 million each year and, in the past 20 years, has raised more than \$25 million for charitable causes. Judi started a revolution and subsequently improved the lives of millions of people when she asked this question: **"If a combination of jazz dance and exercise could help you become happier and healthier, would you want to do it more?"** It's interesting how such a simple question changed the way millions of people now spend their time, energy and resources.

Back in 1969, gyms were in poor condition and exercise classes were sparsely attended. Someone taking a survey then might have asked people questions like: “Would you subject yourself to strenuous activity while one person is yelling and everyone else is sweating and panting? Would you interrupt your busy schedule to face traffic and other inconveniences, and then pay money to be subjected to this kind of treatment? Would you be foolish enough to invest in a “fitness center,” as a business owner or a customer, when everyone knows it’s free to exercise at home or outdoors?”

Of course, most people would have answered “no” to these questions. But then Judi came along and asked a different question, and people began saying “yes.” Now there are over 58 million Americans who pay dues and fees to fitness centers, generating over \$21.8 billion in revenue for the fitness industry in this past year alone.¹ We could certainly call that a revolution, and it’s possible that something like this is about to happen again.

In recent months, Jewish professionals have been worrying about a recent Pew Study which indicates that American Jews, especially young people, are less engaged in Jewish institutions than ever before.² I’m not worried because I can see that we’re in a situation almost identical to what we saw in back in 1969. The problem is that we haven’t been asking the right question.

Jewish institutions, like our Temple, are under-utilized today for the same reasons that gyms and dance studios were under-utilized back in 1969. The Pew Study attempted to shed light on those reasons by asking questions like “do you practice religious rituals?” and “do you pay dues to be a member of a synagogue?” But the \$100 million question is this: ***“If a combination of Jewish learning and spiritual practice could help you become happier and healthier, would you want to do it more?”***

Many Jews have never seriously considered this question. Most young people, in particular, never learned from their parents or experienced first-hand the satisfaction that comes from Jewish learning or spiritual practice. Instead, when they come into a synagogue, as rare as

1 IHRSA, 58.5 Million Americans Utilize Health Clubs, on the Internet at <http://www.ihrsa.org/media-center/2013/5/8/585-million-americans-utilize-health-clubs.html>.

2 <http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/jews-and-judaism/>

that may be, they often look silly to themselves wearing yarmulkes and holding prayer books. ***“And why,”*** they ask, ***“are we doing this?”***

If we are to learn anything from Judi Sheppard Missett and the fitness revolution she inspired, we might try turning ourselves away from the mirrors and being less concerned with appearances long enough to discover that, in addition to having a good time, we're actually engaging in the paramount task of self-examination and self-improvement.

If you're truly interested in becoming happier and healthier on all levels, you just need to ask yourself the right question, consider the implications of your response, and be willing to try something new. You may be surprised to find yourself on the brink of a new revolution.