

FROM THE EDITOR

Discussing the subject of Jewish women and body image with a group of college students last month, one young woman made an observation that has played in my mind many times since: "If my roommates and I stopped talking about what we've eaten or avoided eating, about how fat we look and how thin everybody

else looks, we'd have enough time to really make the revolution." From conversations like this one, and from all that I've been hearing from eavesdropping

on the self-loathing mutterings of pre-teens and teenagers, I reinforced my sense that the national preoccupation with body image was nuts, and somehow a plot to deflect girls and women from other, higher pursuits. Young women are starving themselves, rendering their bodies incapable of sustaining them for the important work they need to do, and the starving is taking up a lot of energy. Not an efficient way to raise the next generation.

So I've been prejudiced against the whole fitness "movement" as a depleter rather than a replenisher of women's strength. Plus, of course, as a head-trip kinda gal I was suspicious of what I saw to be the addictive behavior of my friends who were compulsive runners or exercise freaks.

I'd always seen my body as a container that carried my mind around, judging people who worked out at the local gym as narcissistic. (I came of age before the word aerobic was attached to anything but a species of bacteria.) And then I had an experience that changed the way I thought about the whole mind-body thing. I went to a spa.

Here were the surprises at the spa—first, the women weren't 98-pound weaklings, who needed to be skinny to shore up their fragile sense of who they were. I panted and stretched and had cranial massages alongside women of every age who had come to Canyon Ranch like me—tired, overworked, and (if they were first-timers) a little skeptical and sweating hard. According to the spa staffers I interviewed (I was still on enough of a head trip to consider every conversation an "interview"), New York-area spas are different from those out in the deserts of Arizona because "the clientele can drive here—and they're talking on their car phones to their offices even while they're pulling into the driveway. There's no decompression time!"

My mind did begin to appreciate my body for more than just vehicular support, and my judgmental responses to Women-Who-Work-Out (in my mind they had been the 90's equivalent to the Ladies-Who-Lunch) got tempered with a little understanding.

And eating in a conscious way felt good too (the servers announce the calories and fat

count of each dish)—and, surprisingly, very Jewish, since observing kashrut is a way of being aware of everything one eats. Although Jewish women seem to be well represented both at spas and among anorexics and bulimics (defiantly representing an amalgam of self-denial and self-assertion), historically, self-starvation was a Christian ascetic notion. Like life without sex, this "holy anorexia" doesn't have a place in the Jewish tradition. A mitzvah meal is supposed to be a part of every joyous occasion, and each holiday has its characteristic eats (see cover to free associate). One New York delicatessen even advertises its "condolence catering." We're instructed to save our best foods for shabbat meals, the better to savor them.

Food deprivation is not supposed to be part of our tradition. So what happens when lavish foods collide with a woman's desire for physical "perfection?" Read Susan Josephs' cover story of pleasure and pain to find out.

Mothers and Daughters

For an upcoming LILITH photo essay on Jewish mothers and daughters (and subsequent book), LILITH editor Rabbi Susan Schnur is seeking to interview Jewish mothers and daughters whose dyadic stories are interesting, different or moving. Have a lead? Contact: Susan Schnur at LILITH.

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