

State & Local

Jewish dance class reaches to unite body and soul

'Physical movement can be spiritual,' says teacher Lisa Sturm

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Some people like dancing with the stars. Lisa Sturm prefers dancing with soul.

The Maplewood resident, a social worker who is also trained in teaching aerobics and Pilates, has fused her passion for Judaism, dancing, and fitness into something she calls "neshama dancing," literally, "soul dancing."

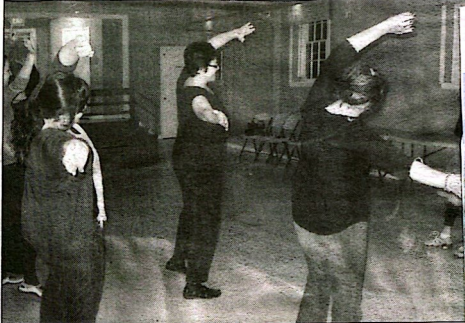
Set to the contemporary sound of such popular Jewish artists as Debbie Friedman, Neshama Carlebach, and Soulfarm, her classes combine aerobics, line dancing, circle dancing, and even a hint of square dancing. She does not intend it to be guided soul searching — there's no Jewish imagery or *kavana* accompanying the dancing — but Sturm does choose her music carefully, offering a brief summary of each selection, with the intention that it will set a spiritual tone.

"Any physical movement can be spiritual — when I'm dancing, I feel something; however, that feeling is intensified when the words and the beat are meaningful — it lifts the spirit beyond the ordinary grounded everyday life," Sturm said.

Neshama dancing is her attempt to help others connect to something higher with the tools she is most adept at using. She tried it out first last spring at a Rosh Hodesh women's group at Maplewood Jewish Center-Congregation Beth Ephraim, the Orthodox synagogue where she is a member. Participants clamored for more.

This fall, on a series of Wednesdays, she is leading women's neshama dancing sessions there.

Spiritual dancing is certainly not new in Judaism. Sturm herself points to the ecstatic, joyful dancing of the hasidim, especially in the Galilee town of Meiron, on Lag



Lisa Sturm leads "neshama dancing," a kind of spiritual dance form she has created at the Maplewood Jewish Center. Right, part of the dancing involves waving colorful scarves. Photos by Johanna Ginsberg



Ba'Omer. From her own background, she recalls dancing and singing at Shabbatons held by NCSY, the Orthodox youth group.

"There was something very spiritual and connected to God then, and it was not just the words," she said.

Five women gathered for the first of her sessions Oct. 20, in the spacious basement room of the synagogue's Charles Kimmel Building, darkened and candlelit for the occasion.

Slim and fit, Sturm looked part dancer (with a lavender loose-fitting skirt, black leggings, and black top), part traditional observant Jewish woman (long sleeves, a scarf on her head). She called the steps into a microphone headset.

As the group gained comfort, she added plenty of arm movement, some hips, and even jumping for those seeking a more high-impact effect.

The dance steps themselves differed only slightly from a regular fitness class. "There was definitely more reaching — uplifted arms — it's reaching for something, whatever that something is," Sturm said.

She also limited the Israeli circle dancing, she said, because it can be difficult aerobically, and if someone can't pick up the steps, they have to sit out the dance. But there was another reason, one coming straight from her fitness training.

But while the music and steps matter, part of neshama dancing also stems from the intention of the participant.

"People aren't just coming in for thinner thighs and look good in dresses they are planning to wear at the next affair. They are something healthy for their bodies and their spirits," she said.

"I hope people at least feel beyond everyday life and perhaps might feel a closer connection to God."

There were scarves available for two songs, "V'chol Karnei," and Roni," and tambourines for Debbie Friedman's "Miriam's Song." The dancing wore on, Sturm said, a kind of glow, an aura of joy connected to Hashem. "It's a neshama dance," she said the next day over coffee at Starbucks in Millburn.

Asked if there was any therapeutic in the dancing, Sturm said, "I don't think that plays much of a role except that I'm very in tune with how people are receiving whatever I'm putting out there. And, well, emotions and spirit are all kind of intertwined."

Sturm said she hopes the classes will provide some positive energy.

"I don't want to sound hokey, but there's a lot of negative energy around that can drain us and make us feel bad."

If you go

- What: Neshama dancing
- Who: Instructor Lisa Sturm
- Where: Maplewood Jewish Center-Congregation Beth Ephraim

