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Rise and Fall of a Journalist

Skydiving is everything it's cracked up to be, reports The Jerusalem Post's Amy Klein.

I'M STANDING on the edge of the plane, looking down; my arms are gripping the sides so tightly that it hurts. "Jump!" They yell from inside of the plane, "JUMP!"

Into the air? The solid air around me? I can't! I feel a shove and I'm outside the plane - falling, falling fast, the sky and the ground spinning around me as if it were one dimension and I put my hand on my back to feel the parachute. It's not there. IT'S NOT THERE!

And I'm falling, falling...

BOOM!

'Good Morning, this is Israel Radio, it's seven in the morning.' I open my eyes to the sound of my radio alarm. My body is plastered to the bed in sweat which doesn't stop when I remember what I'm going to do today.

"Who wants to go skydiving?" was the way the question was put to me. My thrill-seeking gene (not "death wish" gene) called out without thinking "I do!"

Who would jump out of a moving plane? I'm not one of those daredevils; even though I have gone paragliding (a parachute that lifts off a cliff) and own a moped, I have my limits: No bungee jumping (the snap of a cord reminds me of the clean, crack of a broken neck), and, in what is considered a relatively safe sport of skiing, I am petrified at the top of the mountain. But there's something about flying, that is so tantalizing, so enticing, that even a poor imitation - in this case, free fall - gets me signed on.

The day of the dive is the perfect time for panic to mount. Yet as we draw nearer to Sky Club, I am reassured by the statistics. Marc Illouz, the club's founder and manager, who invited me, regales me with statistics in the car. In the four-year history of the club, there have been no accidents with the tandem jump - where the person (in this case, me, unless I make a run for the beach) is attached to the instructor while they jump from the plane in a fifty-second free-fall.

THERE ARE two types of parachuting: Static line and free fall. In static line, you open the parachute right away; free fall is when you drop out of the plane (11- 12,000 feet at Sky Club) and don't open your parachute for about half the altitude: The free fall starts when all the tricks - looping, formations, spins - are done. Free fall is the thrill of the sport.

And sport it is, with approximately 700,000 practicing skydivers around the world. About 300,000 are from the US, the same amount from all of Europe, and the last 100,000 from other countries such as New Zealand and Australia. In Israel, Marc tells me, the number of active skydivers is 700, a figure he is augmenting daily with his school.

Sky Club, in addition to the thousand tandem jumpers it accommodates per year at \$250 per jump, also gives two skydiving courses. The first gives instruction and six jumps (five static line and one free fall) and costs \$450. The second is an AFF course (Accel-erated Free Fall) which consists of 10 jumps (all free fall) and upon successful completion of the \$1,500 course, one receives an international skydiving license. From that point, you're free to jump around the world, and skydivers work on increasing their number of jumps and improving their skills, to move up through the four levels of certification.

Sky Club sees them all - tandem jumpers, about 450 students per year, and the certified skydivers, who need their fix; because apparently, skydiving is a narcotic.

Last question before I panic: How many people die in this sport? Illouz tells me that jumping is safer than driving a car in Israel (what isn't these days?). In his school, only three students had accidents last year - a broken leg, a fractured arm, and a torn ligament. The worldwide average figure was 1 death per 70,000 jumps; but broken down by country, for example, in the US it was 1 death per 60,000 jumps and in Finland, 1 death per 350,000 jumps. (Ed. note: This number was tragically updated last week in Miami, Florida where a plane crashed, killing five skydivers and the pilot; one jumper survived).

"The main cause of death is stupidity," explains Illouz. "This sport is extremely safe. You have your parachute, you have your reserve (the reserves at his school open automatically at 900 feet). People like to make out that this is a dangerous sport. If you follow the iron-clad rules, then there is nothing to worry about." Illouz is a former paratrooper who culls his instructor staff of 15 from his reserve duty training.

Sky Club, located by Moshav Habonim near Zichron Ya'acov, has a number of trailers for management, registration and instruction (low buildings for clear landing purposes), a large hut-like club/cafe/terrace made out of logs, and a giant canvas tent where all the parachutes are stored, unpacked, rolled and demonstrated upon. The largest part of the club is a massive grassy knoll where the divers land.

Around the landing area is training equipment: harnesses to practice hanging in midair, static line and flat boards on wheels to practice balance (every movement of the body, every gesture, every twitch, will affect the way you turn in the wind); and an open version of a plane interior for simulated jumping. Except that this metal structure is on the ground instead of 11,000 feet in the air.

Oh, and one last thing: The plane. It's located off to the side between the club and the beach. Painted blue and yellow in the Sky Club's logo, the Pilatus Porter, with its cute

propeller, looks like it could not hold an acorn. But actually, the plane can hold nine people. And in about one hour, I'm going to be one of them.

BUT FIRST, my lesson. The crew looks like the male version of Baywatch. Young, buff and tan, I hope to be distracted by my Johnny Depp look-alike instructor, Arad Ben-David, as I am placing my life in his hands. I suit up, a full lycra suit, harness to attach myself to Arad. We go to the fake plane to practice basic position, the banana: Head leaning back into him, back arched, legs hooked backwards under the step.

Now I begin to get nervous (OK, I also didn't eat for two days beforehand).

What if they didn't pack the chute right? What if I'm not tied on tightly enough to Arad? What if I break my back on the landing? What if I die? (You think I didn't because you're reading this article. But what if I wrote it before I went, or my notes were published posthumously?)

But I am not going to think about what can go wrong. I am going to enjoy this takeoff. Regular plane ride, regular. See, there's the ocean, there's the beach, there's the school. Sure, the seating's a little tighter than comfort class, but it's a regular flight. Nothing scary about flying.

Whee!

It's a beautiful, sparkling, clear day. I can still see the red, pink, blue parachutes lying on the grass on the school below and the Mediterranean on the other side. I'm having a great time.

Then the door opens. Arad's altimeter reads 4,000 feet. What's going on? One of the students is doing his static line jump. The instructor is holding the parachute, which he throws out immediately behind the guy who just jumped.

THAT GUY JUST JUMPED OUT OF THE PLANE! "Did you see that? He just jumped out!" I yell. Arad points at his altimeter: 5,000 feet. Only 6,000 more to go until doomsday. My stomach clamps. Maybe this isn't such a good idea.

No time to panic - especially since I am on Arad's lap as he hooks me to him and jokes, "Well, you can't leave now, even if you wanted to." We also have to review the hand signals. One tap to open my arms, another to cross my chest before he opens the chute. He points to his altimeter. Ten thousand feet. Dear God.

Arad says in my ear: "Don't panic. This is supposed to be fun. You don't have to do anything except keep basic position. Leave everything up to me."

My brain goes numb.

I see from the corner of my eye the open door. Speckles of green plots, neatly arranged, pools of dark green reservoirs interspersed. The wind is rushing into the leaning plane, as if it wanted to dump us out. 'Let's go!' Arad says. Quick word to the Big Man - "Shema, Yisrael...!"

- and I put myself in Arad's hands. Legs, to be exact. He lifts me with his own, as we had practiced. We are on the floor of the plane. There's only a small square separating me from the great jaws of open space. Out tumble the other skydivers, one by one, over my head, it seems. They have been spit out the doors. Arad and I are moving towards the door.

'Ready?'

I guess I am because now I am hanging out the door and there's no time to think that the world is below me, waiting for me to go SPLAT. No time, because I have to get in position as I am attached to my dear, dear, instructor and lifeline by a few hooks and knots, and my butt is out the door and my legs are hooked under the step outside the plane. I have to get in banana position so I lean my head way back to see the flawless shining sky, closer than I have ever been before, and I arch my back onto him

and I am waiting for the command to "Jump! "

But there is no command because suddenly I have tumbled off the seat and we are spinning in a double loop and I see sky! Ground! Sky! Ground! and the wind is so loud I can't hear

myself scream and then I am above the ground with only 10,000 feet in between and that's when I realize: I did it.

I am flying. My arms are spread at 90 degrees and I am parallel to the ground which is coming closer at an incredible speed. The sun, the sky, the wind, the air, and me. We are all one. Whoop! I yelp at the photographer, wave, shout, we are all together at 5,500 feet above the ground until SNAP!

The man with the camera keeps falling at breakneck speed and we seem to be flying up! What's happened is that we've just stabilized ourselves (relatively speaking) by opening the parachute. And there we are at the quietest place on earth, gently lolling 5,000 feet above the ground after the longest 50 seconds of my life.

The juxtaposition of the 200-mph fall against the peace...unbelievable! I take off my sunglasses. I hold the parachute while Arad loosens my straps, which, now that I can think again, feel really tight. The light blue parachute is an oblong puff attached to us by a maze of strings that hold us in place. I pull down the left string and we turn 180 degrees to the left, to see Zichron Ya'acov and Habonim, pull on the right lever and

we see the beach, the ocean, then the school, that little patch of grass I am meant to land on. I feel like I am watching a movie - an aerial view of 3-D scenery happening all around me. I am one of those aliens from outer space coming to earth.

Arad takes the controls from me and we circle towards the school, which now becomes increasingly larger. "One last 360?" He asks. I nod. I would like to stay up here forever. But our planet looms closer and the grass gains detail, the people are moving, gesturing. We are like a held breath, fluttering above the ground. I lift my legs by the grips at my knee, and in sitting position, Arad runs us through the landing. My feet are on the ground, the parachute collapses behind us and I have a smile that won't

go away.

The real rush hits me hours later. The tumble into the sky, that flip into nothingness, the screaming rush of the wind, those 50 seconds when the world was at my feet, it all keeps replaying in my mind. It isn't the feat - tumbling out of a plane - but the experience.

It all makes my heart pump for hours (I can see why all the skydivers said that they were addicted to this like a drug); and yet I am oddly serene. I have seen the earth, this Godly creation, from a new perspective. I drank it in, swam in it, and let it envelop me fully.

My feet are on the ground but I left my heart up there, somewhere in the sky. I guess I'll have to go back someday and retrieve it.

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