

Olympic Ideology & Jewish Values: Conflict or Accommodation?

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Introduction

The history of the Olympic movement and Jewish history of the past one hundred years are closely interconnected. They both evolved from a crucial junction of history when the socio-political emancipation of Jews and the rise of political Zionism coincided with the emergence of modern sport and the formative years of the Olympic movement in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This presentation is a small part of a larger study about the hundred years of Jewish Olympic history. Its purpose is to provide a critical view of the complex relationship that exists between a secular trans-national movement with religious trappings, such as the Olympic movement, and Jewish religious and cultural ethic.

Like all international, or rather trans-national, organizations, the Olympic movement's claim for extraterritorial status has been granted, at least tacitly, by the world community. During its hundred year history, the movement has been able to create an aura of almost religious mysticism and mythology through groups of loyal followers, carefully choreographed rituals, and mystical images. It had also developed a corresponding ideology, not unlike an institutionalized religion, which prescribes and vigorously promotes a repertoire of behavior, well-orchestrated ceremonies, and core myths, that have the power to bind the believers together into a mass movement. I might also add, that the Olympic movement, at least in its inception, was based on unwaveringly pacifistic principles.¹

As a world religion, Judaism had frequently been characterized as highly rational in promoting religious and communal values that take into account both one's humanity and the idea of a "universal brother-sisterhood." Because of the historical dispersion of the Jewish people, it is based by necessity on the principles, just like the Olympic movement, of trans-

nationalism with a global outreach. This trans-nationalism also promotes a sense of "internationalism" and "cosmopolitanism," both terms have often been hurled against Jews by anti-Semitic ideologies. Jewish values, similar to the Olympic movement, had to grapple with the idea of an inherent conflict between transcendence in the face of nationalistic aspirations and national psychologies. Finally, Judaism promotes a pacifist ideology with a strong aversion toward physical violence.

A serious discussion about the nature and ideology of the Olympic movement in general, to borrow a phrase from John Hoberman, "remains underdeveloped." Beyond John MacAloon's works, indeed, Hoberman has been the only scholar who deemed it necessary to address this issue. How would religions relate to sport and the Olympic Games and how religious attitudes govern sports and Olympic participation also remains in the domain of speculative philosophy and metaphysical musings. This neglect is surprising in light of how much religion utilized sports for its own purposes in the past one hundred years.² Judaism, with its infinite ethical nuances and sheer complexity, compounded by a host-nation's cultural value-system, and its relationship to sport and the Olympic movement is even less explored or given critical scrutiny. Even a cursory glance at scholarly literature finds that the few philosophical papers on the theme of sports in Jewish history and culture look for rabbinical justification for attitudes toward sport as a human need and a social institution. This approach is somewhat misleading because it assumes specific religious objections or rulings against Jewish sports or Olympic participation either in the Bible or the Talmudic literature. However, there is no such ethical injunction. This is a case when a belief takes on a life of its own. Jewish historians and social observers often fell into the trap of promoting a view of Jewish attitudes toward sport with a pronounced bias toward ethical values at the expense of a penetrating view of an interaction with these values with social, political, and economic factors.³

The majority of sources agree, however, that the complex relationship between sports, the Olympic Games and Jewish religious and communal values, both in ancient and modern times, has been problematic at best and almost always wrought with contradictions. Yet, Jewish tradition, at least what we are taught to

believe, has viewed the body and athleticism with a degree of discomfort or ambivalence. John Hoberman's perceptive remark, "conflicted feelings about sport and the body," well capsulizes the genuine as it has existed in Jewish culture.⁴ It is hard to contradict the point that the myth that Jews are "nimble in their mind but not their body," has ingrained itself as much within the Jewish as the world's consciousness. One might also safely conclude that this view deliberately promoted the image of the "People-of-the-Book" over the image of the athlete. Even a casual question about famous Olympic Jewish athletes might elicit only the name Mark Spitz - and even that only after some contemplation. The name Agnes Keleti and Maria Gorochovskaia, who were among the most successful Olympic athletes of the modern era, would find blank stares.

How much is this a deliberately perpetuated myth, and how much is reality, is another thorny question. A myth does not take root without expressing many truths. They are misleading truths, usually, but important ones; truth, for one thing, to the needs of those who elaborate and accept the myth; truth to the demand for some control over complex realities; truth to the recognition of shared values (however shakily grounded those values may actually be). Even the myths that simplify reality are not, in themselves, simple.

All this does not negate the idea that Jewish religious ethic idealistically promotes a hierarchy of values in which the body, sport, and the Olympic Games occupy a certain role and place. However, how much this coincides of overlaps with Jewish communal ethic, formulated more on the practical level, has never been well defined. While learning has always been central to Jewish thinking, Judaism as a religious system has never advocated or subscribed to extreme asceticism. The two main axioms rooted in Jewish philosophy are: (1) the primacy of the spiritual over the physical, without neglecting the latter, and (2) the sanctity of life, eliciting a strong aversion to physical violence.

Even without resorting to apologetic rationalization, that Jews as a group might have been one of the most successful ethnic groups in the hundred years history of the modern Olympics, has somehow been relegated to the periphery of Jewish consciousness, Undeniably,

the number of Jewish participants and their achievements in the Olympic movement is so conspicuous, so overwhelming, that in practical terms it negates the assumption that Jews lack the necessary physical attributes, interest, or drive for top level athletics. This provides us with at least a glimpse that, all assertions to the contrary, the Jewish community needed and embraced the Olympic movement for its own specific reasons.

The critical question that needs to be addressed, then, is what is the motivation behind the subconscious relegation of sport and the Olympics in the Jewish value system. Equally important, is to find an answer to the puzzle of why Jews participated in the Olympic Games so successfully. These issues reflect a recurring philosophical quandary that persists almost uninterrupted since the emergence of modern sport. It centers on an inherent contradiction or conflict between what we believe about the spirit of Judaism, or as one observer termed, the Jewish "Neshamah," and the idea of sport and the Olympic Games. This theme is an intriguing one and worthy of examination. Jewish Olympic participation, just like Jewish existence, is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon. It is governed by the intricate web of Jewish religious and communal ethic that is overlaid by external (societal) economic, political, social, and psychological factors. While Jewish religious practices are relatively similar around the world, it would be foolish to claim that a homogenous Jewish culture and society exists. Thus, the five governing principles for Jewish Olympic participation came from trends which also shaped Jewish history in modern time. In the following sections (I-V), I explore each briefly.

I.

Jewish religious traditions have been anchored in the centrality of the Holy Scriptures, there is only one value-system; the religious world-view of the Torah. The Torah forms the moral and ethical reasoning in Jewish culture and inevitably influenced its stance toward sports and the Olympic movement. For it is the belief of traditional Judaism that other areas of human life may not be in harmony with the teachings of the Torah. Where an essential conflict must exist is when these areas (and this would apply to fields such as art, patriotism, or science, as much as the "Olympic Spirit") claim to make up autonomous ideologies.

One of the central prayers in Jewish liturgy thanks God for “He hath not made us like the pagans of the world, nor placed us like the heathen tribes of the earth”⁵ The emphasis on spirituality that, according to Jewish belief, sets us apart from the outside world, and the warning that emulating “rude and coarse” behavior of our gentile neighbors leads to assimilation has been a defence mechanism that served as a safeguard of Jewish identity. It is not surprising, then, that a dynamic interaction between mainstream values and those of a sub-culture, such as the Jewish community, is a must for harmonious coexistence. This, however, must be reconciled and brought into line with that of the dominant society which on some level always signifies a loss or at least a compromise to the sub-culture.

Jewish culture and mores in general abhor physical violence. The marked aversion of violence reflects a moral stance in Jewish philosophy toward the sanctity of life. While Jewish boxers had their share of Olympic victories, the most popular “Jewish” Olympic sport remains fencing, which, of course, provides a well-controlled means toward violence. Again, Philip Roth’s observation about his motivation in choosing baseball because “unlike boxing or football, [it] had nothing to do with the menace of brute force unleashed against flesh and bones.”

II.

Anti-Semitism can be regarded as one of the cardinal factors in shaping Jewish history. Anthony Julius once noted that the emergence of racial-political anti-Semitism is “the price to pay for admission into the club of Modernism.” Anti-Semitism challenges a basic measure of one’s humanity, the Jewish physical self-worth. The central hypothesis here is that in order to reject the Jew, one must degrade him, dehumanize him, and demonize him, first in “physical” terms. It promoted a stereotypical Jewish image of “defective masculinity.” Gilman associated Jewish preoccupation with the body in the late nineteenth century with the rise of an athletic German youth movement and English sports. In his book about Franz Kafka, Gilman lists a bewildering range of traits attributed to Jews, including neurasthenia, skin diseases, hypochondria, effeminacy, a deformed foot, “Jewish gaze,” just to mention a few. Jewish fears about Western societies’ obsession with Jewish physical

differences, led toward embracing sport and Olympism as a forum to dispel Jewish athletic inferiority.⁶

III.

Many Jews viewed joining the main gymnastic movements and, more importantly, sport clubs and country clubs and the Olympic movement as part of their “emancipation” from the old legal and social exclusions as well as a certain “Jewish pathology.”⁷ Modern sport was as much a product of the nineteenth century as the emancipation of Jews. In many societies, Jews considered the two as part and parcel - if Jews could join this fraternity of athletes that would prove they were being accepted. They could also use the opportunities presented by their participation in a social organization with Christians to prove the two could prosper by their association. Initially, the Olympic movement emerged as unifying national force promoting a brotherhood and sisterhood of all people that would welcome and accept Jews as members.

IV.

Jewish involvement in athletics, beginning with the second half of the last century, also corresponded with their rise in the ranks of the middle-class in Europe and America. While financially becoming equal, socially and psychologically, they remained outsiders. Participating in sports was just another means by which the Jewish middle-class pursued its social and psychological integration and assimilation. We find that in societies where gymnastics and sports, and especially Olympic glory, were viewed as a national priority, Jews also became intensely involved in these activities. Involvement in sports in a society where sport as a social institution is held in high esteem, in many ways, is a form of belonging to the “great tribe.” Philip Roth in his memoirs, *The Facts: A Novel of Autobiography*, rationalizes his infatuation with baseball not by his dreams of becoming a major leaguer, but “with the bestowal of membership in a great secular nationalistic church from which nobody had ever seemed to suggest that Jews should be excluded.”

V.

Zionist preoccupation with the body, exercise, and later, the Olympic idea, was a direct consequence of anti-Semitic pressures. The Jewish historian, Howard Sachar, once remarked: “without anti-Semitism,

political Zionism would not have emerged in the nineteenth century.”⁸ There was here a major difference between the rapidly expanding assimilationist-minded bourgeoisie establishment and Zionist circles. The first one hoped to accelerate, through sports, the process of assimilation. Zionists, on the other hand, felt that sport is a natural outgrowth of a “normal” nationhood. As a political and nationalistic movement, Zionism advocated the “normalization” of the Jews by transforming them into “a nation like any other.” The ideological basis for this daunting task was the doctrine that in order to erase the anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews, one must create a “New Jewish Man - cleansed by physical toil and baptized by robust physical activity.” Zionist aspirations needed a physical component to their political platform as much for ideological purposes as humanitarian ones. Their aim was as much to counter anti-Semitic claims of Jewish physical inferiority - after all, by that time, Jews’ participation in the Deutsche Turnerschaft surpassed their proportion in the general population - as addressing a genuine concern for the medical and hygienic aspects of ghetto living in Eastern Europe. Thus, the call of Max Nordau for the cultivation of a “Musklejudentum” in the 2nd Zionist Congress in Basel, 1898, by itself would not explain early Zionist concerns with athleticism, or lack thereof among Jews. Dr. Max Mandelstamm’s comment (a physician by training) decrying the squalor of living and health conditions in the little Shtetles of the “Ostjuden,” puts Nordau’s call in proper context.⁹

Finally, Zionist ambitions were well served by the Olympic idea which was also a rallying point for the Jewish middle classes. Members of the Jüdische Turnerschaft were definitely not casual observers in the fight between gymnastics and modern sports, and consequently the Olympic Games, which were raging parallel between the adherents of the Deutsche Turnerschaft and promoters of English-style sports in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Gymnastics, in the minds of the Turners, was equated with the unity, discipline, and nationalistic fervor in Germany, while the decadent sports, which hastened the moral decline of bourgeoisie-capitalist England, was the symbol of individualism. The pursuit of “English” sports, according to the proponent of gymnastics, was a social-malaise of the rich assimilationists and not the national-minded masses.

The newly emerging Olympic movement exacerbated this socio-ideological conflict. Sport signified the rapidly emerging Jewish bourgeoisie which was pursuing its social and psychological integration through sport.¹⁰

In fact, the modern Olympic movement can be credited with providing a guiding example for the Maccabiah idea, exerting powerful influences upon the inception and format of the Jewish Games. Originally proposed in 1912 as the Jewish Olympiad, the Maccabiah Games were not held for the first time until 1932, in Tel Aviv. Although they bear upon themselves all the outwardly ceremonial trappings of an Olympic festival, the idea of the Maccabiah Games transcends pure athletic competition. The dominating philosophical principle of the Maccabiah Games is to attract Jewish athletes as a unifying force, from all over the world to Israel in as many sports events as possible. Thus, as a quadrennial celebration, held a year after the Olympics, they emphasize the idea of participation over records.¹¹

Conclusion

Historic context helps to explain Jewish participation in the Olympic movement. At the turn of the century, Jews were well on their way to achieve an economic success unrivalled in history. Within several decades, they became the virtual middle-class in some countries. With the emergence of political Zionism, a socio-political evolution rapidly transformed Jewish society and its value system from a purely religious to both religious and ethnic community. This transformation also aided the Jewish acceptance of the Olympic movement and what it represents.

Jewish acceptance of and participation in the Olympic movement, although not unconditional, is a predictable process. As an unforced marriage of ideologies, they came together at a fortuitous moment in history. An insecure middle-class, with an economic power in ascendance, was looking for psychological and social acceptance. Jews found the Olympic ideology not only acceptable, but useful in assisting in this quest. Every group, or subculture adopts and translates social institutions to serve and correspond to its own cultural concepts and value system. On the final account, we must also acquiesce to the fact that Jews as a cultural groups accepted dominant societal values with a

particular Jewish twist, under their own terms. While there was an inherent conflict between traditional (i.e. Orthodox) Judaism and the Olympic movement, a social evolution from purely religious to more ethically oriented Judaism willingly embraced the Olympics as an important vehicle for its own needs. That is to say, sport and the Olympic Games must be viewed not as an end to themselves but as a means to accomplish things which is commanded by the "spirit." Sports need to be placed in the context of Judaism and rooted in Jewish tradition. Nordau's argument is that Jewish intellectual prowess should be the motivating factor for Jewish athletic parity with other people. It is when people begin to attach an inherent value, or "spirit," to athletic achievement that Jewish tradition finds itself at odds with the Secular environment, forced to stand at some distance from the Olympic arena.

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Endnotes

1. The most comprehensive analysis of Olympic ideology belongs to John Hoberman, "Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism," *Journal of Sport History*, 22 (Spring 1995): 1-37; John J. MacAloon, *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
2. One may remember the question of Muscular Christianity and the emergence of the YMCA. Brian Gerard Milton, *Sport as a Functional Equivalent of Religion*, (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1972); Charles S. Prebish, *Religion and Sport: the Meeting of Sacred and Profane*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993); *Sport and Religion*, (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Books, 1992); *Sport and Religion*, (Mainz: Matthias-Grunewald-Verlag, 1986); Benoit Joseph Bickel, *Religion et sport, essai historique et philosophique*, (St. Maurice, St. Augustin, 1944); Willi Schwank, *Kirche und Sport in Deutschland: von 1848 bis 1920*, (Hochheim am Main: Schors-Verlag, 1979); Atef Mohamed E. Alogleh, *The philosophy of sport in Islamic religion*, (Mathesis,

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3. Jeshaiahu Schwed, ed. *Hapeilut Hagufanit Bemaheshavah Haychudit*, (Giva'at Washington: n.d.); Meir Bakshi, "Physical Culture in the Writings of Mainonides," and Jeshaiahu Schwed, "The Role of Physical Strength in the Teaching of Rabbi Abraham Issac Kook," and Victor Solomon, "Judaism and Sport," in Proceedings of *International Seminar of Physical Education and Sport in the Jewish History and Culture*, (Wingate Institute, 1973); Morris Kurtz, "the Contribution of Traditional Jewish Sources in Disclosing the Influence of reek Gymnastics on the Ancient Jewish Culture," in Proceedings of the *Society on the History of Physical Education and Sport in Asia and Pacific Area*, (Wingate Institute, 1974), pp. 59-68; Jehoshua Leibowits, "Harebam al Hit'amlut," in Proceedings of *Tarbut Haguf V'harefu 'a* (Wingate Institute, 1976) pp. 97-9; Rosenberg, Danny, "Maiminides on Physical Exercise," in Proceedings of the *5th Canadian Symposium on the History of Sport and Physical Education*, (University of Toronto, Toronto, 1982), pp. 267-274; Saul Ross, "An Investigation into the Jewish Concept of Ethics Regarding its Application to Sport: A Hierarchy of Ethics," in Proceedings of the *Second International Seminar on Physical Education and Sport in Jewish History and Culture*, Israel, 1977, pp. 29-40 and "Jewish Ethics and Sport: Toward Jewish Philosophy of Physical Education and sport," in Proceedings of *International Seminar on Physical Education and Sport in the Jewish History and Culture*, (Wingate Institute, 1981), pp. 31-8; Siedentop, Daryl, "Differences between Greek and Hebrew Views of Man," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport*, 2,2(1971): 30-49; Simon, Ernst, "The Judaic View of Sport," in *Sport in the Modern World: Chances and Problems*, (Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 1973), pp. 595-9; Soreq, Yehiam, "Rabbinic Aspects of Physical Culture and Sport Among Medieval and Renaissance Jewry," in Proceedings of *International Seminar on Physical Education and Sport in the Jewish History and Culture*, (Wingate Institute, 1981), pp. 39-48.
4. John M. Hoberman, "Sport and the Myth of the 'Jewish' Body." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the North American society for Sports history, Clemson University, Clemson, S.C., May 27, 1989; and "Why Jews Play Sports: Do Sport and Jewish Values Conflict?" *Moment*, (April 1991) pp. 34-39, 42.
5. It is repeated several times during a service. See

Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book, (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly of America, 1985), p. 37.

6. The best discussion of this topic belongs to Patricia Vertinsky, "The 'Racial' Body and the Anatomy of Difference: Anti-Semitism, Physical culture, and the Jew's Foot," *Sport Science Review*, 4, 1(1995): 38-59. Sander L. Gilman, *Franz Kafka: the Jewish Patient*, (New York: Routledge, 1996) and *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

7. Rürup, Reinhard, *Emanzipation und Antisemitismus: Studien zur Judenfrage der burgerlichen Gesellschaft*, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1987).

8. Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel: from the Rise of Zionism to our Time*. 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1996); Hajo Bennett, "Opfer des 'Arierparagraphen: der Fall der Berliner Turnerschaft." *Stadion*. 15 (1989): 29-44; Becker, Harmut, *Antisemitismus in der Deutschen Turnerschaft*. (Sankt Augustin: Verlag Hans Richarz), 1980.

9. II. Zionisten-Kongresses zu Basel 1898 Stenographische Protokoll (Vienna: Verlag des Vereines "Erez Isreal": 1898), pp. 24, 89-90. Max Nordau, "Muskeljudentum," *JTZ* 1 (1900): 10-11, 51-53, 62-67, 75-79; Max Nordau, "Muskeljudentum," *Die Welt*. 1(1902), pp. 2, 4; George Eisen, "Nationalism, Zionism and the Emergence of the Juedische Turnerschaft," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 1983.

10. George Eisen, *Maccabiah Games: A History of the Jewish Olympics*, (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1979).

11. See Eisen, *Maccabiah Games: A History of the Jewish Olympics*. See also, Segal, Eliezer, L., "Why the Olympic Spirit Lacks a Jewish Neshama," *Jewish Star*, September 1, 1987.