

# The Influence of Greek Gymnastics on the Jewish Culture

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Significant new research has emerged in the past six years regarding physical education and sport in the Jewish biblical and hellenistic eras. Ballou, Harris, and Laemmer have done good work, using primary documents of a nontraditional Judaic nature. Little attention has been paid to the topic of physical education in the Talmud — with the exception of papers by Alouf and Freehof.

The influence of Hellenism, which started when Israel came under Greek domination in the last third of the fourth century B.C., was undoubtedly greater than the traditionalist line of Judaism would be willing to admit. Yet, one must not exaggerate its importance. Thus while it is certainly true that the introduction of Hellenistic culture — including Greek gymnastics — into Israel and particularly into Jerusalem precipitated the Maccabean revolt of 168 B.C., it is also true that this culture had a significant influence even on traditional Judaism, which likes to create the image of the Jews as “the people of the book.”

The Talmud speaks positively about swimming, ball playing, vigorous stretching exercises, yet forbids orthodox Jews from attending Greek gymnastics and Roman festivals.

Harris has devoted special attention to the influence of Greek gymnastics on the Jews of the Dispersion, basing his writings primarily on Philo Judaeus, who was born in 25 B.C. in Alexandria. Undoubtedly this influence was even larger than the influence on the Jews of Palestine.

It is, however, of special interest to note that Philo’s writings supplied Harris with evidence about certain practices in Greek gymnastics that were not obtainable in any other source, such as the behavior of athletes at the turning point of the dialulos race. Hereby Philo supplies us with even more important evidence about this topic than Saul of Tarsus, who became Saint Paul in his later life.

Harris claims that “we may therefore reasonably conclude that the Jews of Palestine often watched Greek sport. Whether or not they actively participated is not known, but it is difficult to believe that vigorous young Jews never attempted to imitate what they saw in the stadium.” I would dare to go one step further and claim that Harris’ statement is an understatement and that when we add the evidence of the Talmud to the data on which Harris’ statement is based, we can definitely point towards a significant influence of Greek gymnastics on the Jewish culture.