

BODY CULTURE, RELIGION AND JEWISH IDENTITY

Haim Kaufman & Yair Galily

Zinman College, Wingate Institute, Israel 42902

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the connection between the physical culture of the Jewish people and the Jewish religion throughout history. A systematic investigation has been conducted in an attempt to examine the connection between diverse Jewish identities and their relation to body culture, especially the attitude of the Jewish religion towards body culture when religion ceased to be the sole defining element of Jewish identity. The argument made is that the attitude of Jews and Judaism to body culture has been a consequence of the changing historic circumstances and the character of Jewish identity in each era and of how great a threat body culture posed to religious Judaism in each period. This threat has always been an internal one, usually occurring when one Jewish stream that was not aligned to the "traditional" one adopted body culture as a world view, which was perceived as contradictory to the isolationist tenets of religious Judaism.

BODY CULTURE, RELIGION AND JEWISH IDENTITY

Throughout history, the definition of what constitutes the essence of “Jewish identity” has undergone significant alteration. The birth of Jewish identity can be traced back to the twelve original tribes, which shared a common territorial consciousness and faith in one God. When they eventually lost their territory, the Jewish people took on a clearly religious identity. Their longing for renewed territorial nationalism was relegated to some utopian day in the unseen future. In the early modern period when Enlightenment concepts began to permeate Jewish society, multiple complex definitions of the term "Jew" emerged, religion being only one of them.

The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the connection between the physical culture of the Jewish people and the Jewish religion throughout history. A systematic investigation has been conducted in an attempt to examine the connection between diverse Jewish identities and their relation to body culture, especially the attitude of the Jewish religion towards body culture when religion ceased to be the sole defining element of Jewish identity.

Ancient Eras: The First and Second Temples

The Biblical Era

According to tradition, the "people of Israel" originated during the exodus from Egypt in the period of Ra'amses (circa 1300 B.C.). How the nation came into being, the stages of their consolidation, and the origins of its monotheism are complex and intricate issues, beyond the scope of this paper's discussion. The question raised here is the relation of the people of Israel during this period to body culture.

Biblical sources indicate that in terms of body culture no differences can be found between the perceptions of the people of Israel and those of other ancient cultures of the period. In ancient society physical skill was an existential necessity. In order to survive, fight and perform religious rituals, an individual was required to have a great number of physical skills. In the Biblical world physical strength was not worshiped and fostering the body was not part of any organized worldview or aesthetic aim. A strong body was simply a means for survival and a strong individual

with physical skills gained admiration. Jacob was given the name Israel after proving his strength in battle and in a struggle with God (*Genesis*, 32: 25-29). He also exhibited impressive physical abilities carrying heavy stones (*Genesis*, 29:10; 31:45). Samson the Judge was admired for his strength (*Judges*, 13-16), and David claimed that he could fight bears and lions (*Samuel I*, 17:34-35). Several Biblical heroes show impressive running skills, such as the Benjaminite from Afek (*Samuel I*, 4:12-18), the messengers bringing news of Absalom's death to David (*Samuel II* 18:19-32) and Elijah who outran Ahab's chariot (*Kings I*: 18:46). Rituals at the time involved dance and ceremonies, which required many varied physical movements, such as the High Priests' assembly and passage over Mount Carmel (*Kings I*: 18:26-28).

In addition, great deal of evidence indicates that as far back as ancient times body culture was commonly connected to leisure. The various games played at the time were for entertainment ("Call Samson and he will play for us", *Judges*, 16:25) or for military purposes ("The young men will play before us", *Samuel II*, 2:14). They were characteristic of the higher classes and did not reflect a philosophical-moral system.¹

The Encounter with Hellenism

Despite disagreement over the essence of Israel's religion during the period of the First Temple, there is uniform agreement that from the Persian Era and onward, after the return to the Land of Israel in 538 B.C.E., the Hebrew faith renounced the syncretism of plural gods. The Torah, in its complete written form as it is known today was already in existence, and at the same time the Torah's oral tradition developed. The first confrontation between Judaism and body culture was an outcome of the cultural encounter between Jews and the Hellenistic culture (and later the Hellenistic-Roman culture) starting late in the 4th century B.C.E.

As a result of Alexander the Great's conquests (323-336 B.C.E.) Hellenistic culture pervaded all areas of his conquests. This culture differed from its predecessor, Classical Greek culture, in various ways. It was a syncretistic culture combining cultural and religious elements of the East with Classical Greek foundations. The classic "polis" was replaced by the great state under the control of the king. Although "polis" cities maintained their internal institutions, they lost their autonomy and became the main support for the Hellenistic kings.

Body culture, which was a central component of Greek culture, became central to Hellenistic culture as well. The gymnasium continued its traditional role of educating youth. It was also a precondition for gaining citizenship in the new Eastern "polis" cities. Sports facilities, such as the stadium and hippodrome became an integral part of urban architecture.

Universal Hellenistic culture also affected Jewish aristocracy which, like its counterparts, aspired to integrate within the *ecumene*, the society established under the control of Hellenistic kingdoms. This influence was reflected in many areas, such as the adoption of Greek names (Alexander, Menelaus, Yasun) and norms of behavior (such as the *Beit Tuvia* story, *Antiquities of the Jews* 12:1-241, or the "comic" haircut, *Talmud Tractate Sota*, 49:b). The most extreme expression of Hellenistic influence and prevalence was undoubtedly the attempt at reform made during the period of Antiochus IV (175-164 B.C.E.). Details and development of the reform are beyond the scope of this discussion, but suffice it to say that a "polis" (apparently by the name of Antiochia) was established in Jerusalem, and as was customary, a gymnasium was built there in which the accepted athletic customs were adopted: "Yasun happily built a gymnasium at the foot of the fortress and urged the best of the young men to wear the *Ptasus* hat... and neglecting the holy sacrifices, the priests quickly ran to take part in the *Palistera* games, instead of following the Torah, after the discus throw" (*Maccabees II*: 4:7-17). Imitation of Hellenistic customs was also seen in the adoption of the practice of engaging in physical activity in the nude, while hiding their circumcision by "pulling the foreskin" (*Maccabees I*: 15).

This reform in Jerusalem was perceived by the majority of the Jewish people as an affront to their Jewish lifestyle. No evidence is seen that assimilation to Greek culture prior to the Antiochus edicts (which were an extreme reaction to the struggle against assimilation to Greek culture) significantly impacted on religious precepts (see, for example, their position in regard to the Tyre games, *Maccabees II*, 4:18-20). It seems that despite the hostile position taken in the *Books of the Maccabees* towards the assimilators, the goal of assimilation was to integrate into the world around them by the external adoption of common norms, while continuing to practice Jewish tradition.²

The traditional Jewish view that developed during the Persian Era disapproved of the adoption of Hellenistic habits, which was perceived as being a step towards religious assimilation. The fear was that Hellenization would not stop at the adoption

of external customs, but would slide down the slippery slope to the worship of idols so closely tied to urban "polis" life, and to the sport competitions that were always dedicated in honor of one of the Olympic gods. Jewish theocentrism and ethnocentrism were in complete contrast to Hellenistic polytheistic universality. Thus, the behavior of the Hellenists posed a serious internal threat to the Jewish world, and Greek body culture was perceived as the symbol and standard of that threat.

The encounter ended with a victory for traditional Judaism, and for the first time the traumatic polarity between "body culture" and "Judaism" was created. This polarity would persist and leave its imprint throughout Jewish history.

The relationship of the *Hasmonean* reign, which was created afterwards, to Hellenistic culture was ambivalent. The *Hasmoneans* also bore Greek names (e.g. Horkanus, Aristobolus) and the lifestyles they adopted were as Hellenistic as under any other ruler's. At the same time, however, they took steps to Judify Eretz-Israel by converting its inhabitants and fighting against Hellenistic cities. There is no evidence that the *Hasmonean* rulers' Hellenistic customs included characteristic of the Hellenistic body culture, which is perhaps indicative of the bad feelings remaining from the encounter with this aspect of Hellenism.³

The Roman Era

Hellenistic body culture returned to Israel with the Roman conquest (63 B.C.E.) The Romans rebuilt Hellenistic cities which were used as support for their rule and as a counterweight against the Jewish population in Eretz-Israel. Reconstruction of these cities brought back the various characteristics of Hellenistic body culture - the gymnasia, sport facilities, and diverse organized competitions.

A significant contribution in this area came from Herod and his heirs who strengthened their ties with the Hellenistic-Roman world in Eretz-Israel and abroad. Herod, who displayed superb physical fitness (*Wars I: 21:13*), was responsible for the construction of many sports facilities for the purpose of staging competitions customary in Greece agonistics and for mounting Roman-style competitions,—blood sports and horse and chariot races. Examples of Herod's diverse activity in this area are abundant: He constructed sport facilities in Jerusalem and organized various types of games, among them the 5th year games in honor of the Emperor Augustus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 15:267-279). Similar games were organized by Herod in

Caesarea, and indeed he set a precedent in the Hellenistic-Roman world by awarding prizes for second and third places for the first time (*Wars* 1: 21:8). His most salient contribution to sport outside of Eretz-Israel was the grants he awarded to the Olympic Games in Greece, which led to his appointment as "Games Leader" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 15:149). Herod's heirs also adopted a similar policy, and the stadium in Tiberius was constructed by Herod Antipas (*Wars III*: 10:10).⁴

It is difficult to evaluate the extent of Jewish involvement in the sport enterprises of Herod and his heirs; some cities, such as Caesarea were in fact involved. It can be assumed that in cities with a Jewish majority, such as Tiberias and Tzipori, Jews did not remain indifferent to the happenings and took an active part in competitions, at least as spectators, and made a good living from the various facilities. This probably describes the situation in the Jewish Diaspora in the Hellenistic-Roman world. Jews were not educated in the gymnasia (which is the source of the controversial problem of Jewish citizenship and the legal status of the *politeuma*, which will not be discussed in this framework), though they were surely knowledgeable in the art of gymnastics. The most salient example is Philo of Alexandria, whose writings indicate in-depth knowledge of Hellenistic sports. Philo illustrates his suppositions with extensive use of terms from the world of athletics and wrestling, allegories he must have chosen because they were familiar to his readers (for example, *Allegoric Interpretation III*, 14: On Cherubs, 81).⁵

Despite the national-territorial conflict between residents of the Hellenistic "polis" and the Jews in Eretz-Israel during this period, a central factor in the rebellion against Rome in 66 C.E., we do not hear of militant resistance to Hellenistic and Roman sport as in the days of Antiochus. It seems that in this domain a form of co-existence was created. Greek sport represented the external enemy, but did not pose an internal threat that would subvert the essence of Judaism. None of the Jewish sects internalized the Hellenistic lifestyle ideologically, so there was no longer a need to fight against body culture as representative of this lifestyle. No signs of assimilation can be found in the Jews' enjoyment of the games in the cities, and no dramatic Jewish change can be discerned in relation to body culture. It appears that Judaism could adopt external customs of the Hellenistic-Roman culture without negatively affecting the essence of Judaism.

Rabbinical Judaism's Attitude towards Body Culture after the Destruction of the Second Temple until the Early Modern Period

Following the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.), as the various sects (the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Dead Sea sects, and the newly disengaged Christians) gradually disappeared, a spiritual center began to take shape in Yavneh, in the style of the Pharisee Jews, who had been dominant prior to the destruction. The destruction of the Temple in fact led to the formation of Rabbinical Judaism, which has persisted until present times. Jews lost the majority they had maintained until the Bar-Kochba rebellion (132-135), and in the following centuries the central point of importance for Judaism shifted from Eretz-Israel to the Diaspora. From a territorial people the Jews gradually became a religious entity detached from a national territory, maintaining the vision of returning to it with the coming of the Messiah. Jews could now be defined as a religious ethnic group isolated from its surrounding environment and living its community life according to *Halachaic* laws, and lacking any concrete national aspirations.

The Mishnaic and Talmudic Period (70-500 A.D.)

During the Mishnaic and Talmudic period the Rabbis' attitude towards body culture was surprisingly liberal and knowledgeable. Saul's father forbade running on the Sabbath "for the purpose of exercising," proof that there was no ban on doing so other days of the week (*Tosefta, Sabbath, 15:22*), and Resh Lakish used an example from athletics to demonstrate God's power (*Exodos Rabbah: 21:10*); and *Tractate Sabbath* brings a source indicating an in-depth understanding of the *Pankration* gymnasium system (*Sabbath: 26: 6*); teaching his children to swim was one of the father's duties (*Kiddushin, 21:a*); ballgames were very popular (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah, 12: 11; Sanhedrin, 7:b*); the details of horse race events were well known (*Beit Hamedrash, 5:37*), and Rabbi Shimon Ben-Gamliel's outstanding physical skills were considered among his salient virtues (*Sukkah, 53:a*).⁶

The sources available on Judaism during this period and thereafter are for the most part *Halachaic* sources which reflect the internal world of their writers and do not allow a qualitative and quantitative examination of the role of sports in Jews' everyday lives.⁷ What can be said is that the sources give at least some indication of

the sages' world. In terms of Judaism's former relation to sport, the earlier tone of hostility is no longer found - not that physical activity was encouraged and certainly there was no moral stance regarding body culture. Yet, neither was there explicit opposition to it, and athletic activity was banned only on the Sabbath or where it was part of a foreign ritual (*Idol Worship*, 18:b). The sages' world of imagery was often borrowed from gymnastics and they saw nothing wrong in comparing the transfer of the Oral Torah to a ball being passed from hand to hand (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, 12:11).⁸

The normative (Rabbinical) Judaism that crystallized during this period felt strong and unthreatened, and its attitude to body culture was therefore indifferent and appeased, so that the discord of the past seems to have dissipated. Although the Jewish ideal was the study of the Torah (*Avot*: 83:7), physical activity was not precluded and there was no fear that it would lead to Jews imitating other Gentile practices.

The Middle Ages

This attitude towards body culture persisted through the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Age. In contrast to the Hellenistic-Roman culture, the cultures in which Jewish life was conducted – Islam and especially Christianity - were hostile to body culture. Body culture as a value was a symbol of the pagan world inherited by Christianity and was competitive in nature to Christianity from the start. Although Judaism had become accustomed to dwelling alongside this culture, and in a certain sense had even become conciliated with it, Christianity could never live in harmony with the pagan world. It fought against paganism and its system of symbols and beliefs in order to take it over. Clearly, in the Christian world physical culture could not be of value. Moreover, for Christianity the ideal was the monk, a spiritual believer eschewed all physical pleasures and dedicates his whole being to serving God. The human body was perceived as a machine in the hands of Satan who encouraged sin, and it therefore had to be punished, and satisfaction had to be denied. This was the only way to reach redemption.

The attitude towards body culture in Christianity has undergone considerable changes and vicissitudes over the centuries, but this is not the place to discuss them. As in Judaism, Christianity also underwent moderation (mainly with the development

of the city), however body culture never returned to the central position it claimed in the Hellenistic Period, not even during the Renaissance when there was an attempt to revive the classical cultures. The knights' "tournaments", the village dances and amusements, and the games that began developing in the cities would never take the place of Greek agonistics.

It appears that Jews lived in an environment lacking body culture and agonistic values (though it did not abstain completely from physical activity). In fact the indifferent attitude of the Mishnaic and Talmudic sages towards physical activity is also visible during this period. The rich Jewish responsa literature has left us a great deal of evidence about daily sport activities among the Jews: wrestling, running, ballgames, etc. Here too, the evidence does not provide information about the number of people who engaged in physical activity at the time, but none of the responses negate engaging in these activities.⁹

The change in attitude towards physical activity was related to health and philosophy. Many Jews engaged in medicine (including Asaf Harofe, the Physician and Shabbethai Ben Avraham Donnolo), and they approached body culture in terms of health. The most prominent of all was Maimonides (1138-1204), who in addition to his vast experience as a physician, considered the philosophical and *Halachaic* aspects of physical activity as well.

In his medical books (such as *Medical Aphorisms of Moses* and *Regimen of Health*), Maimonides discusses physical activity as a means for maintaining health. He discusses the importance of proper nutrition (*Regimen of Health*, p. 13), and gymnastics (*Regimen of Health*, p. 31ff., *Medical Aphorisms of Moses*, p. 18) at great length. These ideas are given *Halachaic* expression as well (*Laws of (Tractate) De'ah* 4:2; 4:3) Maimonides' perceived body culture in a philosophical context, and for the first time its role in Judaism was defined in a systematic, structured manner. According to Maimonides, there exists a scale of four wholes: the wholeness of ownership, the wholeness of body, the wholeness of values, and the most genuine wholeness, which is knowledge of God (*Guide for the Perplexed*, Part III, 54, 414). Body wholeness ("the temper of a person should be aimed at balance, and his organs appropriately proportional and strong") is not the objective, as "even if a person reaches his absolute strength, at its peak it will not reach the strength of a strong mule", but rather it is a means to attain a wholeness of attributes leading to genuine wholeness. Physical activity is thus only a tool, but an important tool. Its utility is not

pleasure or a way to fill leisure time (Torah study is intended for those purposes). Since man is composed of body and soul, inappropriate care of the body detracts from its wholeness and prevents it from fulfilling the purpose of its existence. Maimonides thus grants physical activity a certain legitimacy, but this did not make it an integral part of established Jewish education, which was dedicated almost entirely to Torah studies.¹⁰

New Jewish Identities and their Attitude to Body Culture

A dramatic change in Jewish attitudes to body culture occurred during the start of the Enlightenment at the end of the 17th Century. The European Enlightenment partially revived the classical Greek system of values. The Judeo-Christian theocentric conception was replaced by an anthropocentric moral system which placed the human being and his needs at the center. The human was a rational being who must examine all phenomena using his brain rather than be chained to a system of beliefs and opinions dictated by political and religious institutions. Placing the human being at the center, where his life is not merely a passage to the next world but whose purpose lies in this world, again reemphasized the moral consideration of the individual's physical needs and leisure activities. During the industrial revolution the decrease in hard physical labor led to a concomitant increase in leisure time. This marked the beginning of the modern development of physical education in schools and of diverse types of sports. The Jewish Enlightenment movement, which developed alongside its European counterpart, attempted to normalize the Diaspora Jew's life once again. It tried to eliminate the barriers and Christian society's negative attitude towards Jews by emphasizing their common ground. Removing the barriers was expressed in three main areas: providing general education in addition to traditional Jewish education, teaching the official language of the host state and striving for "productivization" – educating for labor and productivity in order to make the Jew "productive" and worthy of being a citizen with equal rights.

The social, economic and national changes that occurred in Europe as a result of the Enlightenment produced cracks in the traditional framework of the Jewish community. The world surrounding the Jews was no longer a Christian world, within which the Jewish community resided, but rather a world of nation-states whose Jewish inhabitants gradually became citizens with equal rights and in whose

frameworks Jews could work and succeed. The traditional community lost its role as enforcer of laws and ceased to be the Jew's only existential framework. The community was no longer the Jew's dominant educational factor and he was now free to search for other self-determined definitions of his Jewish identity. As a result, at the start of the 18th century, diverse Jewish identities began to take shape which often times conflicted with one another, each claiming to have the best chances of creating the most promising future for the Jewish people.¹¹ These diverse Jewish identities led to different attitudes toward body culture in general, especially to sport. The various expressions of these Jewish identities and the different attitudes towards body culture as expressed by the various Jewish streams will be discussed next.

Integrating in the Majority Population

The concepts promoted by the Enlightenment and liberalism, the growth of modern states, and above all the emancipation granted to Jews in Central and Western Europe, led to the integration of Jews in all spheres of life in Europe. Jews fitting into the field of economics (the Rothschild and Hirsch Families, for example), the free professions, culture (Mendelssohn, Mahler, Kafka, Stefan Zweig) and science (Einstein and Freud, for example).

This integration led Jews to question their Jewish identity within the new reality. Jews who until this time easily defined themselves in light of their economic, social, and religious differences, now had to search for ways to define their identity that would apply both to their unique Jewish status as well as their inclusion in the ruling majority.

The new definitions that emerged were not uniform, and several integration patterns can be identified:

1. **Complete assimilation.** Many Jews completely assimilated into their surrounding environment, severed all ties with their Jewish environment, and denied their Judaism. Some of them even chose to convert to christianity. It should be noted that this process was not always consciously initiated. The fact that Jews were an inseparable part of their environment led to marital ties with non-Jews, instigating a dynamic process of attempting to disengage from Judaism. However, this was not

always successful. In 1935 when the Nuremberg Laws were published, almost half of those defined as “Jews” were actually Germans with Jewish roots.

2. **National assimilation while preserving ties to the Jewish religion.** These Jews tried to distinguish between their religious and national identities. They considered themselves part of the nation into which they had integrated and claimed that their Judaism was merely a religious framework. Just as there were Catholic Germans, Protestant Germans, etc., they were Jewish Germans. For this purpose they had to blur obvious national ties between the Jewish religion and Eretz-Israel and the return to Zion. This was the setting in which the Reform movement was born, with its emphasis on the universal elements in the Jewish religion.

3. **Preservation of national identity within a “civil” national framework.** These Jews tried to preserve their Jewish national identity, which was not necessarily related to the Jewish religion or territorial self-definition. The supposition was that a distinction should be made between ethnic-cultural identity and civil national identity. This concept was difficult to implement in states with tribal-national associations, such as Germany, but in states whose national and civilian identity were one and the same, such as France and especially the United States, this could be achieved.

In terms of sport, there was actually no difference among these various Jewish identities. Jews considered themselves part of general society, and therefore their integration in body culture was part of the mobility processes Jews experienced in general society, especially as part of the urban middle class to which many Jews belonged in Central and Western Europe. Many Jews joined the “German Gymnast Movement”, and many excelled in competitive sports in countries where these began to develop. The Platov brothers, the Jewish gymnasts who represented Germany in the First Olympic Games in Athens, Alfred Gutman from Hungary who won two gold medals in those games, and dozens of other outstanding Jewish athletes represented their countries with pride. However, this participation undoubtedly incited anti-Semitic groups that were displeased by the inclusion of Jews who, they argued, were a physically inferior race.¹²

Socialism and Communism

During the 19th and 20th centuries, socialist philosophy developed throughout Europe, especially as a result of the Industrial Revolution and widening social gaps. The concepts of a new egalitarian society, free of oppressors and oppressed, resonated loudly in Tsarist Russia, where lack of democracy, large social gaps and economic backwardness were especially salient in relation to Central and Western Europe. These concepts captivated many Jews, especially in Russia. A revolution which would overthrow the Tsarist regime and create a social revolution in Russia could also resolve the civil discrimination and social and economic distress suffered by Russian Jews.

Jews chose to join socialist movements in two main ways. The first was to completely merge within the general movements and struggle side by side with them for social change. Considering the fact that socialism by its nature is cosmopolitan rather than national, joining general movements corresponded with these concepts. Emphasis was not placed on the unique Jewish problem, but rather on the general struggle of the working class. The relatively large number of Jews found in the Bolshevik Revolutionary leadership (Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, etc.) testifies to this approach.

A second form of joining socialist movements was action within a special Jewish framework, in light of the increasing number of working class Jews in Eastern Europe. The most prominent labor organization in Eastern Europe was the *Bund* (established in 1897). Its basic philosophy advocated fighting for the class interests, rather than the national needs, of Jewish workers. It quickly became clear that the *Bund* could not disengage itself from the Jewish national issue and offering Jews a class struggle without taking into account the unique Jewish situation was problematic. The *Bund* defined Judaism as a culture. That is, its main objective was to achieve cultural autonomy in the utopian socialist state that would arise, and preserve the Jewish culture that had developed in the Yiddish language, which was created in the Diaspora in opposition to territorial nationalism and the Hebrew language.

At first, these socialist concepts found no expression in sports. Autocratic rule by the Tsars did not permit free organization and banned the founding of gymnast unions that were justifiably perceived as a means for national awakening. In any

case, Jews tended not to engage in much physical activity at that time. Practical expression of this appeared only after the Bolshevik Revolution and World War I. The Bolsheviks also did not permit the establishment of unions with a national basis, although sport was cultivated by the regime with the purpose of creating a new Soviet citizen. Jewish integration as individuals into the new Soviet Union system led to the inclusion of Jews in this phenomenon as well, for as individuals they were now proper citizens of the Soviet Union.

Jewish socialist sport unions, whose aim was to introduce Jewish youth to these ideas, were established between the two World Wars mainly in Poland. Poland was at the time the country with the largest number of Jews, and therefore became the main arena for the various Jewish streams. The *Bund* movement founded a large sports union for workers called the *Morgenstern* (morning star) in Poland, which competed in the Jewish community against the Zionist *Maccabi* and at a certain period against the socialist Zionist *Hapoel*. In addition, the *Po'alei-Tsiyon* – Left founded the *Gwiazda-Stern* Union.¹³

Jewish Nationalism

The influence of the awakening of national movements in Europe, the growth of modern anti-Semitism in Central and Western Europe, and the persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe led many Jews to adopt national concepts of Jewish self-definition. The basic philosophy of these Jews maintained that anti-Semitism would not allow the full integration of Jews in their countries, and since Jews constituted a nation, they had to struggle for self-definition like any other nation.

The nature of self-definition was not unanimously accepted. Some claimed that Jewish-national autonomy should be sought in each country. Others claimed that suitable territories had to be found for the establishment of a Jewish state. The national solution accepted by the majority was the Zionist solution, which meant the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Eretz-Israel, the historic homeland of the Jewish people.

The Zionist solution at first seemed unrealistic, due to the problem of acquiring territory under Ottoman control and which had an Arab majority, yet political circumstances at the end of the 19th Century - and especially the changes that occurred following World War I – made it feasible when the British received the

Mandate for Eretz-Israel and expressed a commitment to establish a national homeland in it.

More than any other identity, national identity influenced the creation of Jewish sports. Instead of integrating Jews in sports within their countries, the intention was to establish national sport unions like those in Central Europe, such as the “German Gymnast Union” and the Czech *Sokol*. The Jewish national movement, and mainly the Zionist movement, emphasized the formation of a new Jew who differed from the image of the traditional Diaspora Jew. Rejecting the Diaspora meant negating anything related to it and forming a new muscular Jew, different from the perception of the frail Eastern European Jew.¹⁴

It is interesting to note that when Jewish sport unions were first established, they were aimed at all Jews with national, not just Zionist, awareness, including Jews who maintained their Jewish nationality within their civilian nationality. Members of the Berlin *BarKochva* Union (1898), and later the Jewish Gymnast Union founded in 1903 during the Sixth Zionist Congress, were mostly Zionist, yet they did not define themselves as such in their aims and allowed any Jew with a national identity to join.

Only after World War I did national mapping become clearer. The *Maccabi Union*, which was established shortly after WWI (1921), defined itself as Zionist and served as a means for attracting Jewish youth to the Zionist movement. At the same time, national Jewish unions which did not define themselves in Zionist terms were also formed, such as the *Shield*, which represented the discharged Jewish soldiers in Germany. In Eretz-Israel additional unions (*Hapoel*, *Beitar*, *Elitzur*) were established, however, these did not reflect different Jewish identities but instead represented political camps that held different ideas about realizing the Zionist dream.¹⁵

Religious Judaism's Attitude towards Body Culture in the Modern Period

Jewish Orthodoxy

The development of sport among Jews in general, and Jewish national sport from the Enlightenment onward, created a new reality for traditional Judaism. The Enlightenment negated the foundations of orthodox society – it opposed the absolute rule of *Halacha* (Jewish Law), fought against the isolation of Jewish society and

rejected the coercive framework of the religious community. Rather than submission to *Halacha* and its prohibitions, emphasis was placed on universal values shared by all people. Rather than isolation, social integration was stressed. According to the Jewish Enlightenment, the community should be a voluntary framework subscribed to by its members rather than a strict organization forcing *Halachaic* way of life on its members and preventing them from living outside it (unless they converted).

For the first time since the days of the Second Temple, Orthodox Judaism felt threatened from within and was forced to placate the fierce internal struggle that had been taking place since the start of the 18th century between Hassidic Jews and their opponents. This zealous struggle had threatened to split the religious world and has persisted in a more moderate way to this day.¹⁶ The ideas of this common enemy, threatened to undermine the very existence of religious Judaism, had been the only option for Jewish identity until that time. The reaction of religious Judaism was to consolidate Jewish orthodoxy, the “true faith”, which would serve as a counterweight of attempts to alter tradition to suit modern trends.

Orthodox Judaism was shaped to a great extent by the Chatam Sofer (1762-1839), born in Germany and the served as the Chief Rabbi of the Pressburg community in Hungary (today’s Bratislava in Slovakia). He coined the expression, “Novelty is prohibited by the Torah”, according to which any change in lifestyle should be resisted, even if it does not necessarily contradict *Halacha*. An outcome of this stringent *Halachaic* edict was "to raise the ghetto walls" and to emphasize the differences and uniqueness of Jews by external means of dress and language as well.

Orthodoxy preached disengagement from the surrounding environment and minimal contact for the purpose of livelihood only. Any attempt to introduce changes in traditional Jewish customs and lifestyle in order to integrate into modern life was harshly attacked. It opposed the Jewish struggle for emancipation out of fear that emancipation would lead to Jewish assimilation.¹⁷

Orthodoxy was also opposed to the revival of Jewish nationalism, especially the Zionist movement. Zionism was perceived as a modern secular movement and as redemption through nature as opposed to redemption through the Messiah at the End of Days (that is, bringing the Messiah without God), and as a breach of the oath to God to come en masse to Eretz-Israel.¹⁸

The return to body culture was only one component of the Enlightenment, and not necessarily its central one. Nevertheless, Orthodoxy viewed any expression of the Enlightenment as a threat to be resisted. The Enlightenment was identified (perhaps rightly so) as modern Hellenism, and the old trauma of the war against Hellenism and its central form of expression, body culture, was reawakened. After many years of a tolerant attitude and acceptance of the various expressions of body culture among Jews, all conciliatory acts were forgotten and the old hostility returned.

Orthodox Rabbis began calling attention to those elements of the body culture that could harm the Jewish religion. Engaging in body culture was perceived first and foremost as a form of modern Hellenization which was a foreign culture. The very term "body culture" intrinsically bore a social and educational entity generating an alternative culture to a life of Torah and religious precepts. Engagement in body culture was considered "a waste of Torah time" and as "activity for fools." That is, it was a substitute activity for Torah studies, the true mission of the Jewish people, and was conducted in an atmosphere of easy behavior lacking in content and value.

Physical activity was also conducted in a time and place that were in conflict with obedience to religious commandments. Sports and games took place on the Sabbath, which led to its desecration. Sport facilities, such as stadiums and pools, led to indecent encounters between men and women and a lack of modesty. Sport spectatorship, besides being a foolish endeavor, also led to undesirable behaviors such as sports idol worship, violence, and aggression, and all of this in place of religion and serving God.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that alongside this stringent approach, there was a more moderate approach that did not completely reject physical activity, but rather discriminated between physical activity for health and physical activity for enjoyment of the game.¹⁹

New Orthodoxy

Alongside strict orthodoxy, a neo-orthodox approach developed in Germany. Rabbi Shimon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), the Chief Rabbi of the Frankfurt Community, tried to integrate Jewish life according to *Halacha* with modern life. According to his teachings, no contradiction separates modern values and Jewish values and the two can be integrated in the modern world without changing a single

religious commandment. The motto he adopted was “Torah should go with proper behavior” (*Tractate Avot*, 1:b), meaning one can simultaneously assimilate into modern life, aspire for emancipation, acquire general education, and lead an orthodox lifestyle.

Such an approach did not denounce body culture, and Hirsch himself established a high school with science studies in Frankfurt in 1853, which included gymnastics in its curriculum. In 1882 a large hall for gymnastics and sport was inaugurated in the school. This approach to body culture was reflected in the teaching of some of his followers, for example Rabbi Joseph Zvi Carlbach, who established a similar school in Hamburg, and Hirsch's grandson, Rabbi Isaac Breuer, who wrote explicitly about body culture in his book *Nahliel*, in which he maintained that Judaism must adopt an approach to body culture which finds the balance between Christianity's call for "killing the body" and the Greek's call for "worshipping the body".²⁰

Religious Zionism

A different attitude to body culture was maintained by Jewish Zionism. In contrast to Orthodox Judaism, it regarded Zionism as the beginning of redemption, that is, as a way to realize the vision of redemption and as an expression of the coming of the messianic era. The fact that Zionism's leaders and ideas were secular posed no problem. According to this concept they were unaware of the religious significance of their actions, as they were only playing a part in God's plan, which aimed at the redemption of Israel, the foundations of which are well grounded in the Bible.²¹

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacoen Kook (1865-1935), the first Ashkenazi rabbi in Eretz-Israel, was prominent among the proponents of Religious Zionism. Among his wide-ranging ideological expressions are references to body culture. Since Rabbi Kook's attitude to Zionism differed from that of Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, his view of body culture was dissimilar as well. He regarded the body as important on both the personal and national levels. On the personal level, body strength is important as it contributes to spiritual activity, for "when the body is healthy it lifts the spiritual light and strengthens it" (*Orot Hakodesh*, 3, chap. 54). On a national level, Rabbi Kook adopted the Zionist ethos of "Muscular Judaism" and endowed it with religious

significance. Physical strength was a condition for national revival and the light of the Jewish spirit would strengthen in a strong body. As Rabbi Kook put it,

"Our physical demands are great. We require a healthy body. We have dealt at length with spiritualism and we have forgotten the sanctity of the body. We have abandoned physical health and fortitude. We have forgotten that we have sacred flesh no less than we have sacred spirit...Our repentance will be gained only if, in all its spirituality, a corporeal answer will be found, which will generate healthy blood, healthy flesh, strong and firm bodies, an intense spirit shining upon strong muscles, and the fortitude of sacred flesh will give light to the soul that has been weakened (*The Vision of Redemption, Lights*, chap. 36)²².

Rabbi Kook's perception not only goes against Orthodoxy's antagonism to body culture, but also attributes sanctity to this culture from a general view of spiritual wholeness that depends on physical strength. However, his views did not correspond to those of the Zionist movement, which maintained that physical strength was necessary only for changing and improving the Jew's self-image. This, in their view, was the initial tool for fostering and strengthening the Jewish soul.

Summary and Conclusions

To sum up, it can be said that the attitude of Jews and Judaism to body culture has been a consequence of the changing historic circumstances and the character of Jewish identity in each era and of how great a threat body culture posed to religious Judaism in each period. This threat has always been an internal one, usually occurring when one Jewish stream that was not aligned to the "traditional" one adopted body culture as a world view, which was perceived as contradictory to the isolationist tenets of religious Judaism.

Traditional Judaism was threatened for the first time during the Hellenistic period by Jews who adopted this culture as part of a reform they wished to make in the Jewish culture. During the Roman Era, when Hellenistic sport returned to Eretz-Israel, it was not adopted as part of imminent Jewish culture and therefore no longer posed an internal threat that might undermine the essence of Judaism. None of the Jewish sects made the Hellenistic lifestyle a part of their ideology, and thus there was no need to fight against body culture as a symbol of such a lifestyle. It appears that Judaism was able to adopt external customs of Hellenistic-Roman culture without harming its vital essence.

Following the destruction of the Second Temple, normative Judaism consolidated. The term "Judaism" became a religious entity disengaged from national territory, whose vision of the return was postponed to the End of Days with the coming of the Messiah. The normative (Rabbinical) Judaism of that time felt strong and unthreatened. Its attitude to body culture was therefore mollified. There was no reason not to engage in physical activity, and again there was no fear that it would lead to the adoption of Gentile behavior.

During the Middle Ages, Jews lived in an environment that did not value body culture and agonistics. In fact, the indifferent attitude towards body culture on the part of the Mishnaic and Talmudic sages is reflected in this period. The rich *Halachaic* literature from that era has left numerous testimonies to Jews' daily engagement in the various sports and expressions of acceptance of physical activity, at least in terms of this activity's healthful aspects.

The Enlightenment in the Early Modern Period led to dramatic changes within the Jewish people. Instead of one religious entity, diverse Jewish identities formed, each claiming to faithfully reflect the one Jewish entity that would ensure the Jews of an optimal future. Some integrated into the ruling majority in various ways. Some preferred integration in socialist movements and found an answer to the Jewish question in a world revolution. Others claimed national self-definition, most notably the Zionist movement.

The divergent Jewish identities led to diverse approaches to body culture. Each one utilized aspects of body culture for its needs by integrating within the gymnastics and sport movements established in each state and by means of gymnastics and sport unions that expressed their unique identity.

The Enlightenment and the changes that took place in Jewish identities created non-religious Jewish options for the first time. As in the Hellenistic reform, Orthodox Judaism again felt internally threatened. Religious Judaism's reaction was to consolidate into an isolationist and stringent Orthodoxy to serve as a counterweight to attempts at adapting to modern ways of life. Orthodoxy regarded every expression of the Enlightenment, including body culture, as objects to be attacked. The ancient trauma of war against Hellenism and its central form of expression, body culture, was reawakened. After many years of adopting a forgiving attitude and accepting various expressions of body culture, the conciliatory foundations were abandoned and the old hostility returned.

Religious Zionism, which developed together with the Zionist movement, introduced a religious messianic dimension that differed from Orthodoxy. It viewed physical revival as part of the spiritual revival of Jewish nationality by ascribing to body culture a dimension of sanctity.

It appears that in recent years orthodox resistance in Israel and in the Diaspora, especially in the United States, has been somewhat blunted. Leisure culture has begun to play a role in this society and physical activity is perceived by the orthodox as less threatening than other types of modern cultural activities, so long as it is for purposes of leisure activity and not competitive sport or institutionalized physical education in education institutions.

- ¹ For more information on body culture of ancient and Biblical Eastern culture, see: Soreq, Y. *The History of Physical Education, Body Culture and Sport (in Peoples and in Israel)*, Seminar Hakibutzim, 1988, pp. 13-26; D. B. van Dalen, E. D. Mitchell, B. L. Bennett, *A World History of Physical Education*, Prentice-Hall, 1964, pp 5-40.
- ² On Greek sport, see: I. D. Douskou (Ed.), *The Olympic Games in Ancient Greece*, Athens, 1982; On Hellenistic Reform, see: Soreq, Y. *The History of Physical Education*, pp. 68-80; Soreq, Y. The Jerusalem Gymnasium during the Hellenistic Era, *Physical Education*, 5 (1982), pp4-8; Soreq, Y. Registering the People of Jerusalem to the People of Antiochia, *Physical Education* 4-5 (1984), pp 13-14; A. Cherikover, The Hellenistic Movement in Jerusalem and Antiochus' Edicts, in A. Shalit (ed.), *The History of the People of Israel, the Hellenistic Era*, Jerusalem, 1983 , pp. 82-102 (Heb.)
- ³ The only clear piece of evidence of body culture during the Hasmonean period is the swimming pool in Jericho, see: E. Netzer, "Two sport facilities in the Jericho Valley in the First Century B.C.E.", in U. Zimri (Ed.), *Body Culture in Judaism, The Second International Seminar Report*, Wingate Institute, July 1977, pp. 7-14. (Heb.)
- ⁴ On sport in Eretz-Israel during the era of Herod and his sons, see: Y. Soreq, *History of Physical Education*, pp.99-112; M. Laemmer, Herod's Contribution to the Olympic Games, in A. Gil (ed.), pp. 37-44; H. Harris, *Greek Athletics and the Jews*, Tel-Aviv, 1972, pp. 46-60.
- ⁵ See: Y. Soreq, *History of Physical Education*, pp. 112-120; H. Harris, *Greek Athletics and the Jews*, pp. 61-126.
- ⁶ See: Y. Soreq, *Body Culture in Eretz-Israel during the Mishna and Talmud Period*, Wingate Institute, 1977. (Heb.)
- ⁷ The argument between Gedalyahu Alon and Saul Liberman on the extent to which Greek influence penetrated the Jewish world (in general, and in sport in particular) is well known. See: S Liberman *Greek and Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, Jerusalem, 1984 [Hebrew] , G. Alon, *Studies in Jewish History B* Tel-Aviv, 1970, pp 248-277 (Heb.)
- ⁸ See: Y. Schwartz, "The Ball Game in Jewish Society during the Mishnaic and Talmudic Period", *Zion* 60. (c) (1995), pp. 260-269 (Heb.)
- ⁹ See: Y. Soreq, *Body Culture and Sport in Judaism during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Wingate Institute, 1980. (Heb.)
- ¹⁰ Y. Schvade, "Physical activity in Maimonides' Mishna", *Movement 3* (1) (1995), pp. 7-22 (Heb.)
- ¹¹ N. Herman, *Jewish Identity- a Social Psychological Perspective*, New Brunswick and oxford, 1989. P.T. Goldberg / M. Kausz (Eds) , *Jewish Identity*, Temple University Press, 1993
- ¹² G. Eisen, "Jewish History and the Ideology of Modern Sport: Approaches and Interpretations " *Journal of Sport History* 25 (1998), pp 382-531
- ¹³ R. Gechtman, "Socialist Mess Politics through Sport: The Bund's Morgnshtern in Poland, 1926-1939" *Journal of Sport History* 26 (1999), pp 382-531; D Blecking , " Marxism versus Muscular Judaism- Jewish Sports In Poland", in: G. Eisen / H. Kaufman / M. Lammer (Eds), *Sport and Physical Education in Jewish History*. Wingate Institute, 2003, pp 48-55.
- ¹⁴ H. Kaufman, "The National Ideas of the term muscle Judaism", " *Movement 3* (3) (1996) , pp 226-248 [Hebrew]. M. Zimmermann, "Muscle Jews versus Nervous Jews" in M Brenner/ G. Reuveni (Eds), *Emancipation through Muscles, Jews and Sport in Europe*, University of Nebraska Press, pp 13-26.
- ¹⁵ H. Kaufman "Israeli Sport – from National Pride to Political Hostility" in M. Laemmer/ E. Mertin/ T.Terret (Eds.) *New Aspects of Sport History*, Proceedings of the 9th ISHPES Congress; Cologne, Germany, 2005, pp 58-61
- ¹⁶ E. J Schochet. *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna* New Jersey 1994
- ¹⁷ M. Semet, *Novelty is prohibited by the Torah – Chapters from the History of Orthodoxy*, Tel-Aviv, 2005. (Heb.)
- ¹⁸ A. Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Radicalism* ; Tel Aviv, 1993 (Heb.)
- ¹⁹ A. Arendt, "Body Culture in Rabbinical Literature in the Last Generations" in H. Kaufman, C. Harif, *Body Culture and Sport in Israel in the 20th Century*, Netanya-Jerusalem, 2002, pp. 25-50. (Heb.); N. Ofir, "Torah and Sport as an Educational Ideal", *Hagigei Giva*, 11, (2004), pp. 81-99 (Heb.)
- ²⁰ N. Ofir, "Torah and Sport", pp. 86-87.
- ²¹ A. Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Radicalism*, pp. 111-200.

²² On Rabbi Kook and his attitude towards body culture, see: A. Shapir, "Rabbi Kook and his attitude towards body culture", *Hagigei Giva*, 7 (1996), pp. 147-157 (Heb.); Y. Garb, Rabbi Kook: "Working Out as Divine Work" in: G. Eisen/H.Kaufman/ M. Laemmer (Eds), *Sport and Physical Education in Jewish History*. Wingate Institute, 2003, pp 7-14..