

The biographies of Jewish Zionist Leaders and their effect on the attitude of Zionist Leadership towards sport prior to the establishment of the State of Israel

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The Zionist movement was established at the end of the 19th Century. The fact that this movement actually represented the national consciousness of a religious group without a land to which it belonged generated a great deal of disagreements within the group regarding its aims and methods of implementation. In fact, to this day there is no agreed upon definition of “Zionism” by all those who call themselves “Zionists”, but rather general accords: all Zionist streams strive to establish a homeland for the Jewish people in *Eretz Israel*. There are conflicts about the size of the homeland, its substance, and the character of its sovereignty. All streams talk about forming a national culture for the purpose of creating a shared identity with the Hebrew language at its core and all streams are concerned with the need to change the body image of the Jew in order to create a figure of the “New Jew”.

At the Second Zionist Congress (1898), Max Nordau coined the phrase “Muscle Judaism”. This term expressed the desire to become free of the image of the “exiled” Jew, the desire for a change in Jewish character and a transformation from the neurotic anxiety that allegedly characterizes it. With that, this term accrues many additional ideational components of the new Jewish ethos: it expresses the power of the Jewish people to fight anti-Semitism in exile as well the development of military skills as a means of creating a Hebrew force, and thereby an attempt to confront racial assumptions regarding the native physical inferiority of the Jew. The term also expresses a romantic model of thought regarding a return to the heroic ancient past of national heroes (for this reason, Jewish sport unions carried names of former heroes such as *Bar-Kochba*, *Samson*, *Bar-Giora* and *Yehuda the Maccabi*)

The image of the new muscular Jew is that of a corporeal, primal, productive man who works his land and is in tuned with the nature surrounding him. Exercise and sport activities are regarded as forms of nurturing team spirit, unity in movement,

discipline and a means of serving the nation for the purpose of helping forge unity and consolidation. The idea of the New Jew became a central element in Zionist terminology and discourse, and Modern Hebrew literature gave extensive expression to it.

The concept of the “New Jew” was closely related to the cultivation of body culture. The establishment of the Zionist movement catalyzed the foundation of national Jewish sport unions, especially in Central Europe. It should be noted that the Enlightenment and Jewish integration within European society also contributed to the participation of Jews in exercise and sport in these regions.¹

While in Western and Central Europe the link between the New Jew and sport was apparent, in *Eretz Israel* it conjured up different connotations. Although the concept of the “New Jew” was vital to the Zionist ethos, it should be pointed out that exercise and sport in *Eretz Israel* suffered from a standoffish and indifferent attitude from the Zionist establishment: from the Zionist Union, the National Council and the General Union. National institutions provided little assistance to sport unions, physical education was ranked low on school priority, and frequent complaints about an indifferent and distant stance from the establishment are found in sources from sport unions. If this was indeed the case, the question that arises is why did such a gap exist between an agreed-upon ethos of the “New Jew” and the attitude in *Eretz Israel* towards exercise and sport, the means by which the ethos was to be realized in practice? We ascertain that the answer lies in personal factors mainly related to the ethnic origins of Zionist leadership in *Eretz Israel*.

The foundation of Jewish sport and exercise unions had reverse relations with the Zionist movement’s main source of power. The process of establishing Jewish sport unions mainly occurred in Western and Central Europe, while in Eastern Europe it was more gradual: Russia was less exposed to the Enlightenment and to industrial and modernization processes. Therefore, Russian Jews were less exposed to the ideational and external signs of the Enlightenment and the resultant changes regarding the value

¹ H. Kaufman, "The National Ideas of the term muscle Judaism" , " *Movement 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.

of body culture. The traditional communal framework was more dominant in Eastern Europe, and therefore greater resistance was met to sport activity, an expression of modernization which the community opposed. The image of the “Exiled Jew”, a key element in the idea of the “New Jew”, leans upon this image of the Eastern European Jew.

An additional aspect was the autocratic rule of the Tsars which did not permit open gathering and organizing and rejected the establishment of exercise unions which were regarded, with some justice, as a national awakening. Most immigrants to *Eretz Israel*, as the majority of the settlement leadership there, came from Eastern Europe and had no former sports background. Jewish sport developed in Eastern Europe later than in Central Europe and was not amply rooted to allow internalization of its values by the Jewish masses in the East, as was the case of the Jewish leadership that came from there. Hence, a reverse relationship emerged between the practical expression of Zionist awakening (Eastern Europe) and the establishment of Zionist sport unions (Central and Western Europe).

The first ideological waves of immigration which arrived from Eastern Europe at the start of the 20th Century supported the concept of taking over labor and security from Arab hands as a means of creating a Hebrew working class and defense force. The “New Jew” in the reality of *Eretz Israel* remained a central shaping idea. Yet, the actual implementation of the body building plan was to be realized through Hebrew labor, pioneer achievement and the formation of a military force. Exercise and sport, on their own, were considered bourgeois leisure activities, and at most another form of entertainment. To clarify this point, the biographies of a number of prominent personalities in the Zionist leadership in exile and in *Eretz Israel* are worthy of examination.²

Two key figures from the initial years of the Zionist movement serve as examples of the way the Central European Jewish leadership treated sport: Theodore Herzl

² H. Kaufman " Der neue Jude Und die Korperkultur in Israel in: Y. Hotam, M. Zimmermann (hrsg) *Zweimal Heimat; Die jechs zwishen Mitteleuropa und Nahost* . Beerenverlag , Frankfurt 2005, pp 280-286.

(1860-1904), the founder of the Zionist movement and Max Nordau (1849-1923), his senior advisor. Herzl was a sickly person throughout his life and died at the age of 44 from heart disease. Other than fencing during his years as a student, he did not engage in physical activities. With that, having been born in Hungary and having lived all his life in Austria, where he made a living as a journalist for "Neue Freie Presse" and as a playwright, he was well aware of the physical activity that began to characterize Jews of his generation and wrote about it extensively in his correspondence. In 1896, Herzl wrote in praise of bike riding and in 1900 while giving a speech before the Zionist Congress he asked for support in establishing exercise movements. In the Viennese journal "Our Hope", he called for training the muscles, rather than the wind, so that the nickname "Little Jews" (Judenjungen) will turn into "Young Jews" (Junge Juden). Herzl gave extensive expression to Jewish engagement in sport in his utopian book *Altneuland* where he describes a future Jewish state. He describes the youth there as physically wholesome as a result of sport activities. It is interesting that the Central European Herzl praised British sport and its youth for playing tennis, cricket and football. Team spirit and forming a social bridge captivated his vision of forming an exemplary future Jewish society.

Max Nordau, Herzl's advisor, was a doctor and philosopher. He, himself, was small built with a figure far from the muscular ideal he preached. Like Herzl he was born in Hungary and worked mainly in Central Europe, thereby naturally influenced by the trends of the period. He was deeply troubled by the problems of the Jewish race (which were generally called attention to by anti-Semites). In Nordau's opinion traditional Jewish education suppressed the youth's body and spirit and Jews atrophied due to lack of physical activity and not because of inferior racial traits. In the Second Zionist Congress (1898), it was Nordau who initiated a discussion on the physical situation of the Jewish people and it is he who coined the term "Muscle Judaism". In an article which Nordau dedicated to exercise he considered it a counterweight which would balance the one-sided image of the brainy Jew, and at the same time it contradicted to the race theories which were developing at the time. This

position of Nordau's was one of the primary reasons for establishing national exercise and sport unions in Central and Western Europe.³

Herzel and Nordau who formed the initial Zionist movement never themselves immigrated to *Eretz Israel* and both of them died before the major momentum of national Jewish settlement took place there. The majority of the immigrations to *Eretz Israel* came from Eastern Europe and the first mass immigration from Central Europe came only during the 30's with the start of Nazi policies towards Jews in Germany. Despite the significant contributions by Central European immigrants to Jewish settlement in *Eretz Israel* in many fields (financial, social, cultural, etc.), very few of them turned to politics, so that in practice, Zionist leadership in *Eretz Israel* was composed for the most part by leadership that immigrated from Eastern Europe, which had little connection to sport. One such example is the figure of Aharon David Gordon, an important ideological leader at the start of the settlement in *Eretz Israel*. Gordon (1856-1922) immigrated to *Eretz Israel* in 1904 at the age of 48. He advocated the need to establish a Hebrew working class and a "Labor Religion" to which he gave the personal example of an older worker conducting hard physical labor alongside youth. This turned him into a shaping figure at the time, and one of the two labor parties which were founded at the time, "The Young Worker", was based on his ideas. A letter he sent in 1920 to the Macabbi Center in *Eretz Israel* serves as an example of his attitude to sport. In it, he objects that "Macabbi" send teachers to learn exercise abroad. He claimed that Jewish muscles would develop only through labor. Exercise and sport were at the most "complementary to labor", though hardly within the bounds of a national movement, for they alone "will not turn us into workers". According to him, sport is merely a form of "bourgeois entertainment".⁴

The most salient figure in the period shaping *Eretz Israel* settlement and the State of Israel was David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973). David Ben-Gurion served among others

³ Y. Sorek, "Physical Culture in the Theories of the Zionist Movement's Founding Fathers," in H. Kaufman and H.i Harif (eds), *Physical Culture in Israel in the Twentieth Century*, Idan 22, (Yad Ben-Zvi and Wingate Institute, 2002 .pp 9-24 [Hebrew]

⁴A .D. Gordon's article first appeared in the daily *Davar*, 8 February 1926

as head of the Jewish Agency prior to the establishment of the State and served as Prime Minister of Israel during the initial years of its establishment. He immigrated to *Eretz Isarel* from Poland in 1906 and in his personal biography (as in that of many others who came during these years from Eastern Europe), there is no link to sport (curiously, in his later years he began to engage in sport and became famous for his ability to perform a “head stand” and for his countless marches).

At the start of his political career, Ben-Gurion was head of the General Histadrut Labor Federation and within this framework he made sure that the Labor Sport Union “Ha’Poel” which rose at the start of the 20’s would be part of the Histadrut. Far from an interest in sport, this was actually an aggressive political approach adopted by Ben-Gurion from a desire to concentrate and control all labor unions in *Eretz Israel* and to place them under the Histadrut’s authority. Ben-Gurion’s interest in the Histadrut Sport Union was functional: little concerned with body culture, he saw the “Ha’Poel” Sport Union as a means to achieve security and political aims. He regarded the Sport Union as a manifest way to train workers for their role in the Hagana organization – the leading underground organization of the Jewish settlement in *Eretz Israel* prior to the establishment of the State.

At the political level, Ben-Gurion considered the Sport Union a militia which would serve the Histadrut’s political aims. Similarly to what occurred in Europe during the same years, a harsh political struggle took place in *Eretz Israel* between the right and left wings. Because Ben-Gurion considered his Revisionist rivals on the right fascists, he founded within Ha’Poel the as a paramilitary force similar to the “Shutzbund” in Austria with the purpose of protecting the working class in *Eretz Israel*. As the struggle became fiercer, he initiated the founding of Ha’Poel in Poland because the majority of his opponents’ supporters were concentrated there during the elections for the Zionist Histadrut which took place there at the time.

In 1935 Ben-Gurion was elected head of the Jewish Agency and thus turned from a labor leader to a national leader. He tried to reach a compromise with his rivals and therefore lost interest in the Sport Union. From here on Ben-Gurion (while serving as

Prime-Minister of the State of Israel as well) had no involvement or interest in any matter related to sports in Israel.⁵

A similar functional position was held by Ben-Gurion's greatest rival, Ze'ev Jabotinski (1880-1940). Jabotinski was the founder of the Revisionist Party which supported a militant stance, especially in regard to Arab issues. He was also born in Odessa, and like other leaders from Eastern Europe he too was not exposed in his youth to anything related to physical activity.

The initial interest he finds in the Sport Union is in 1920. In April of that same year the Conference of the Principal Allied Powers at San Remo was about to assemble for the purpose of deciding the fate of the Middle East following WW1. Arab unrest in *Eretz Israel* began to apply pressure so that the Committee recognize *Eretz Israel* as part of Syria and oppose the Balfur Declaration. Jabotinski initiated founding a Jewish Defense Committee in Jerusalem and for that purpose he turned to the center of "Macabbi". At the first meeting he clearly stated he had no interest in anything related to sport itself, and that he valued the Sport Union only if it engaged in activity with military character. "Macabbi" personalities made up the majority of the Defense Committee, some of whose members, along with Jabotinski, were incarcerated by the British during the bloody clashes that erupted in Jerusalem in April, 1920. In 1924, Jabotinski founded the Beitar movement which was a youth movement of the Revisionist faction. Beitar emphasized military training and engaged in sport activity, among others. Over the years, many sport departments dealing mainly with football and boxing were established in Beitar. It is currently identified in Israeli public opinion as a sport union rather than a youth movement, and paradoxically Jabotinski, who had no personal link to sport, is the figure who founded the sport union.⁶

Leaders whose main Zionist activity was in *Eretz Israel* (and not in the Zionist Histadrut) include Itzhak Ben-Zvi (1884-1963). Ben-Zvi was one of the most significant labor leaders at the start of Zionist settlement. From 1931 he was head of

⁵ Y. Goldstein, "Sport Association and Politics: The Case of Igud Hasadran"., in: G. Eisen/H.Kaufman/ M. Lammer (Eds), *sport and Physical Education in Jewish History*. Wingate Institute, 2003, pp 94-102.

⁶ S. Reznik."Betar: Sport and Politics in segmented society". *Israel Affairs* 13(2007) pp 617-641.

the National Committee (the institution for internal Jewish leadership in *Eretz Israel* during the Mandate). Between the years 1952-1963 he served as President of the State of Israel.

Ben-Zvi was involved in founding the sport union “Samson”, which was one of the first sport unions founded in *Eretz Israel*. It was founded in 1909 and was active for a little over a year. Behind its foundation was a clear security aim: the “Young Turks” Revolution in the Ottoman Empire brought about an Arab national awakening and a need to reinforce Jewish defense. The “Poalei Zion” Party, with Ben-Zvi as one of its key leaders, decided to establish the “Samson” sport union as a security measure. Ben-Zvi was involved in 1911 in founding the “Macabbi” Union in Jerusalem (the first union by the name Macabbi in *Eretz Israel*), and took an active part in its first meetings. An article published by Ben-Zvi on the establishment of the union teaches us that for him, its significance lies in its national and social activity.

Following WW1, there is no evidence to Ben-Zvi’s further involvement in sport. Despite his senior role in the National Committee he failed to leave a mark in athletic developments that occurred in *Eretz Israel* during the Mandate. It is interesting to note that it is during his later years while serving as President of the State of Israel that he shaped a sport tradition that is carried on to this day in which the Football State Championship Cup is granted by the President.⁷

This sample of leaders from Eastern Europe clearly illustrates the common ground they held in sports: their aims for launching sport unions were mainly functional; that is, they were created for political, national or security reasons. Sport in itself was not the primary incentive. This explains the gap that existed between the ethos of Muscle Judaism and the low priority sport itself was attributed in *Eretz Israel* prior to the establishment of the State of Israel.

⁷ H. Kaufman, “The disappeared Sport Association,” *Etmol*, 156, 2002 pp 18-19 [Hebrew].