

**SPORTS, ZIONIST IDEOLOGY AND THE STATE OF
ISRAEL**

Haim Kaufman & Yair Galily

Abstract

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The Enlightenment and Jewish Sports

The Enlightenment which began at the start of the 17th century brought about dramatic changes for the Jewish people and was one of the leading causes for the growth of Jewish nationalism expressed by Zionism. The Enlightenment replaced the theocentric Judeo-Christian concept in the anthropocentric moral system and placed human beings and their needs at the center. The human became a rational creature who must examine phenomena by means of the brain free of the chains of a system whose beliefs and opinions are dictated by political and religious institutions. The Jewish Enlightenment, which followed the footsteps of its European counterpart, intended to give the exiled Jew a normative lifestyle once again. It attempted to tear down barriers between Jews and the surrounding world, and to change Christian society's negative attitude towards Jews by emphasizing the common ground they share. Barriers were removed through changes in three main areas: general education in addition to traditional Jewish education, the study of the nation's language, and the strive for "productivization" – instilling values of manual work and production in order to turn the Jew into a "productive" citizen worthy of equal rights.

The Enlightenment, together with social, economic and national benefits in Europe, which were for the most part a result of the movement, ruptured the traditional framework of the Jewish community. The world surrounding the Jews was no longer a Christian world, alongside which lived the Jewish community, but rather a world of nation-states where Jews gradually became citizens with equal rights and in whose frameworks they could work and succeed. Consequently, the traditional community lost its power to enforce Jewish law, and no longer served as the Jews' sole existential structure. The community was no longer the dominant educating authority of the Jews who were now free to search additional self-definitions to their Jewish identity. As a result, at the start of the 18th century, various Jewish identities began to take form, which at times conflicted with one another, and each claimed to be the one that would lead the Jewish people to an optimal future.¹ The diverse

Jewish identities that took shape at the time led to diverse attitudes towards body culture in general and to sports in particular.

The concepts developed 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 Europe in all spheres of life. Jews integrated in such disciplines as economics (for example, the Rothschild and Hirsch families), the independent professions, culture (Mendelssohn, Mahler, Kafka, Stefan Zweig) and science (Einstein and Freud). This integration led Jews to question their Jewish identity in a new reality. The new definitions that emerged were not uniform and several integration patterns can be identified: complete assimilation, national assimilation with preservation of Jewish religious association, or preservation of a national identity within a “civilian” national framework.

However Jews chose to define themselves, they saw themselves as part of general society and therefore their integration in gymnastics and sports was part of the process of Jewish mobility in society at large, especially as part of their integration within the urban middle class, to which a large part belonged in Central and Western Europe. Many Jews became members of the “German Gymnast Movement” and many excelled in countries where competitive sports 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 outstanding Jewish athletes who represented their states (time does not permit listing them all) did so as patriots of their countries – though, undoubtedly their achievements stood in opposition to anti-Semitic bodies who were against Jewish integration claiming Jews’ physical racial inferiority.

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 democratization, social gaps and economic delay 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 solve civilian discrimination and the social and economic distress of Russian Jews.

Jews chose to join socialist movements in two main forms. The first was a complete merge in general movements and a joint effort to change society. The second was activity within a unique Jewish framework in light of the increasingly growing working class status of Jews in Eastern Europe. The most prominent labor union in Eastern Europe was the “Bund” organization (established in 1897) which adopted the definition of Judaism as a culture. It set a goal that within a future socialist state, cultural autonomy would be established which would oppose territorial nationalism and the Hebrew language, but preserve Jewish culture of the Yiddish language created in exile².

At first, these socialist concepts had no expression in sports. Autocratic rule by the Tsars did not permit free organization and rejected the founding of gymnast unions that were perceived, justifiably, as a means for national awakening. In any case, Jews did not engage in physical activity. Practical expression of this was found only after the Bolshevik Revolution and World War I. Neither did the Bolsheviks permit the establishment of unions with a national basis, though sports were cultivated by the regime with the purpose of creating the new Soviet. Jewish integration of individuals in the new Soviet Union system led Jews to take part in this phenomenon as well, for as individuals they were now full-fledged citizens of the Soviet Union.

Jewish socialist sports unions, whose aim was to introduce Jewish youth to these ideas, were established mainly in Poland between the two World Wars. Poland at the time was the state with the largest number of Jews and therefore became the main arena for the various Jewish streams. The “Bund” movement established the biggest sports union for workers called *Hamergenstern* 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 leftist Zion Activists (Poalei Zion) established the “Goyzda-Stern” Union.³

Jewish Nationalism, Zionism and the New Jew

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 ideals for the self-definition of the Jewish people. They recognized that anti-Semitism would prevent them from complete assimilation and since Judaism was a nationality in and of itself, it had to fight for self-determination, like any other nationality. However, the character such self-determination should possess was under heated debate. Some claimed that each state should strive for national Jewish autonomy. Others claimed that appropriate territories should be found where a Jewish state could be established. The national solution accepted by the majority was the Zionist solution which meant establishing a Jewish homeland in *Eretz Israel*, the historic homeland of the Jewish people. The Enlightenment freed Jews from religious beliefs insisting on future Messianic Jewish redemption in *Eretz Israel* and made the concretization of the Jewish return to *Eretz Israel* possible. The Messianic prophecy was given a contemporary earthly dimension to the establishment of a Jewish state. At first the Zionist solution appeared unrealistic considering the difficulty in gaining territory under the Ottoman rule with an Arab majority. Nevertheless, political circumstances which took shape at the end of the 19th century and the exchanges that ensued after World War I turned the solution into a viable one once *Eretz Israel* was in the British Mandate's possession.

In comparison to other national unions that arose in Europe in the 19th century, the Zionist Movement was unique from three aspects. First, the majority of the national group that was supposed to be represented by Zionism did not identify with the movement's goals. Furthermore, other movements popular among the Jewish people at that time were intensely opposed to Zionism. Secondly, Zionism was the only national movement the majority of whose followers lived outside of what they perceived as their national homeland. Some were even willing to compromise for other territories. These included the founders of the Pinsker Movement and Theodor Herzl, who in their initial platform books "Autoimancipation" and "The Land of the Jews" actually did not focus on *Eretz Israel*. Third, Zionism was a national movement that rejected a clear definition. Religious affiliation aside, almost none of its supporters could claim to share a common culture at the time of its establishment. This final point was cause for disagreement among supporters regarding its aims and the means to achieve them (Was the aim a state? If a state, then was it to be defined as a Jewish state, or a bi-national state? Was it to be established in *Eretz Israel*? Was the means to establish it by physical settlement or political activity, or was the

establishment of a cultural spiritual center enough? Would a socialist society to be established there, or a capitalistic one? Or should it be a Jewish state that would function according to the *Halacha*? Should all Jews immigrate there or should selective immigration be chosen? etc.)

As a result, a clear definition of “Zionism” was (and still is) a highly controversial issue. Nevertheless, three general “meta-aims” were agreed upon by all factions of the movement, especially after the death of Herzl (1904). First, exile should come to an end and the Jewish people should establish a homeland in *Eretz Israel*. Debate continued regarding its size, features and the type of government that should develop in it. Second, there was a need to create a national culture and a common identity for the settlers who came from such culturally diverse backgrounds. The new culture must be centered on the Hebrew language, that is, the Hebrew issue was non-negotiable. Thus, the revival of the Hebrew language became one of the Zionist Movement’s greatest achievements. Third, the physical image of the Jew had to be transformed into a “New Jew.” The expression, “New Jew,” referred to a “positive” physical type that was the antithesis of the Diaspora Jew’s negative stereotype.

Herzl and Nordau wrote about the cumbersome, slim, gaunt Jew who grunts and coughs, and Sokolov claimed that the more bitter and wrinkled the Jew the more he resembles the Diaspora stereotype. The new physical image that would refute the stereotype of the Diaspora Jew (which demonstrates that anti-Semitic claims to the Jews’ physical inferiority were ingrained in the Jewish psyche as well) was for a large part a legacy of the Enlightenment. As a result, a new “original” or “real” Jew was formed in complete opposition to the anti-Semitic image. With that, it can not be ignored that these images were not completely unjustified, and they expressed to a great extent the Eastern European Jew’s physical inactivity which influenced how the Diaspora Jew was perceived both by anti-Semites and Central and Western European Jews.

Max Nordau coined the phrase “Muscle Judaism” in the Second Zionist Congress (1898). The new term expressed the will to free oneself from the “exiled” Jew, the will to change Jewish character and to change the neurotic anxiety that allegedly characterizes it. Moreover, it comprises of many other ideas regarding the new Jewish ethos. The term expresses Jewish power to fight against anti-Semitism in

the Diaspora and to develop military skills as a means of building a Hebrew force, and thus an attempt to contend with racial assumptions regarding the Jew's congenital physical inferiority. The term also expresses a model of romantic philosophy by calling for a return to the ancient heroic past of the Jewish people. Since the Jewish heroes of the past became objects of emulation, it was natural for Jewish sports unions to adopt names of legendary heroes such as Bar-Kochva, Samson, and Judea the Maccabi.⁴

The image of the new muscular Jew exemplified a primeval, strong, productive type of person who worked the land and was totally familiar with his natural surroundings. In this light, athletics and sports were seen as means for developing group spirit, controlled movement, and discipline, and for serving the goal of nationalism by cultivating unity and cohesion. The notion of the new Jew turned into a central component in Zionist terminology and dialogue, and Modern Hebrew literature gave it wide expression. The Zionist physical body which meant a flawless male Jewish body was expressed in the writings of Tchernichovski, Bialik, Brener, Moshe Shamir, and others⁵. The image of the *tzabar*, native born in *Eretz Israel*, which took shape at the start of the settlement in *Eretz Israel* further represented this new image⁶.

The New Jew and Sports Activity: The Diaspora vs. *Eretz Israel*

The concept of the "New Jew" was closely tied with the cultivation of body culture. That is how Max Nordau, who wrote extensively on the issue, understood the concept and how it was understood in Germany and Central Europe as well. The Zionist Movement and the discussion over the Jew's physical image catalyzed the establishment of Jewish gymnasts unions. The first was "Bar Kochba" Berlin in 1898 followed by additional unions in dominant areas of German culture. In the Sixth Zionist Congress in Basel in 1903, the "Jewish Gymnasts Movement" was established which served as an umbrella organization for all unions in Central Europe. The intention was to establish national gymnasts unions similar to other national unions in Central Europe, namely the "German Gymnasts Union" and the Czechoslovakian "Sokol". Interestingly, when Jewish sports unions were first established, they were targeted to all Jews with national consciousness, not only Zionists, including those

Jews who maintained their Jewish nationality within their civilian national framework. “Bar-Kochba” Berlin members (1898), and later “Jewish Gymnasts Movement” members were for the most part Zionists, but they did not define themselves as such, and thus any Jew with a national identity was granted the opportunity to join. Only after WWI did national mapping become clearer. The changes that occurred within the Zionist Movement and in *Eretz Israel* enabled Zionist national sports unions to be more clearly defined. The Zionist Movement gained momentum following the Balfur Declaration and the beginning of the British Mandate in *Eretz Israel*. As a result, the “Maccabi” Labor Federation which was founded shortly after WWI (1921) defined itself as Zionist and became a means to attract Jewish youth to the Zionist Movement. At the same time, Jewish national unions which did not define themselves in Zionist terms, such as the “Shield” (which represented released Jewish soldiers) and the “Vintus” were established as well.⁷

While in Western and Central Europe the link between the New Jew and sports 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 sports 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 sports unions, physical education was ranked low on school priority, and frequent complaints about an indifferent and distant stance from the establishment are found in sports union sources.⁸ 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 towards exercise and sport in *Eretz Israel* where the ethos was to be realized in practice? Two main reasons offer an answer. First, the foundation of Jewish sports and gymnasts unions had reverse relations with the Zionist Movement’s main source of power. The process of establishing Jewish sports unions mainly occurred in Western and Central Europe, while in Eastern Europe it occurred more gradually: 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 of body culture. The traditional communal framework was more dominant in Eastern Europe, and therefore greater resistance was met to sports 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.

In addition, the autocratic rule of the Tsars did not permit open gathering and organizing and forbade the establishment of gymnasts 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 sports developed in Eastern Europe later than in Central Europe and were not amply rooted to allow internalization of their values by the Jewish masses in the East, as was the case of the Jewish leadership that came from there.⁹ Hence, a reverse relationship emerged between the practical expression of Zionist awakening (Eastern Europe) and the establishment of Zionist sports unions (Central and Western Europe).

The second reason is an outcome of the first and can be found in the perception of the “New Jew” in *Eretz Israel* by the first ideological waves of immigration which arrived from Eastern Europe at the start of the 20th Century. They supported the concept of taking over labor and security from Arab hands as a means of creating a Hebrew working class and defense force. In 1920, A.D. Gordon, one of the leaders who conceived of the idea of “Labor Religion” and one of the most prominent spiritual leaders of *Eretz Israel* activists during the second immigration wave, wrote a letter to the “Maccabi” Center in *Eretz Israel*. In it, he objects that “Maccabi” send teachers to learn gymnastics abroad. He claimed that Jewish muscles would develop only through labor. Gymnastics and sports were at most “complementary to labor”, though hardly within the bounds of a national movement, for they alone “will not turn us into workers”. In “*Hashomer (The Guardian) Book*”, there is a story written by union activist Zvi Nadav about a “Maccabi” member who joined the Guardian Union, though despite his well developed muscles he could not carry the burden of guarding. This story bears witness to the demeaning attitude towards gymnastics and body development, and the emphasis that was placed on the worker’s and the guard’s courage and determination over the athlete’s.¹⁰

That is, the idea of the “New Jew” in the reality of *Eretz Israel* remained a central shaping concept, yet its practical implementation received a wider dimension. It was not perceived (as it was perceived by Nordau) as body development by means of gymnastics and sports, but as an ideal to be realized through Hebrew labor, pioneer

work and the building of a military force. Gymnastics and sports, on their own, were considered bourgeois entertainment, or at most a form of leisure.

Thus, the concept of the “New Jew” never ceased being a shaping and agreed-upon ethos in Zionist consciousness, although approaches to implement it were wide and varied. In Western Europe, body culture was developed and gymnasts and sports unions were established for that purpose. In *Eretz Israel*, where the proportion of immigrants from Western and Central Europe was smaller, the practical expression fostered by the ruling establishment was the production of strong, muscular Hebrew work by means of developing manual labor and a military force, while sports and gymnastics were considered bourgeois entertainment for recreational purposes. The German immigration which arrived in *Eretz Israel* in the 30s was the first mass immigration from Central Europe and the situation should have changed as a result: it contributed many gymnast teachers, outstanding athletes and coaches, yet it did not fundamentally change the perceptions described above, as they were already deeply rooted in the Settlement. Moreover, this immigration wave had a minimal role in the Jewish leadership, which was the shaping agent of the national ethos in *Eretz Israel*. The image of the “New Jew” did provide a new physical image of the Jew in *Eretz Israel*, though not in the “athletic” sense of the term.

Politics, Zionism and Sports in *Eretz Israel* and the Diaspora

As abovementioned, one of the unique characteristics of the Zionist Movement was the lack of consensus among its supporters regarding its aims and objectives. Those who carried them out in practice disagreed on the significant issues which would form the society taking shape in *Eretz Israel*, which led to a divide of the Settlement into conflicting political camps.

The first camp was the labor camp which was formed prior to WWI, and significantly grew after the war. This camp was the most organized and consolidated of the groups, and its various parties were unionized under the *Histadrut* (General Federation). The *Histadrut*, apart from being a professional union, assumed positional responsibilities and national tasks. According to it, the Hebrew worker was a pioneer at the head of the camp, who would achieve the aims of the society in making in *Eretz Israel*. The functions of the *Histadrut* included immigrant

absorption, settlement, defense, and caring for the range of personal, cultural and spiritual needs of the worker.

Another camp was the “civilian” camp which was formed by the urban “bourgeois” class. This camp was more divided and less consolidated in terms of ideology and each party in the camp actually represented private professional sectors (farmers, merchants, craftsmen, etc.). It was mainly characterized by its opposition to socialist ideology and the *Histadrut*’s hegemony in the Jewish Settlement, and its support of private enterprise and capitalistic economy. The Revisionist party which developed within this camp by its founder Zeev Jabotinski, offered financial as well as national solutions to meet the range of problems at hand. In the 30’s this party was under the threat of the labor camp hegemony. Additional camps included the religious camp of religious Zionists and ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionists and the ethnic camp which was comprised of parties whose aim was to promote the interests of their ethnic groups (Georgians, Yemenites, etc.).

The political camps not only fought against one another ideologically, but also established their own institutions which would serve as instruments in the ideological struggle. Health organizations, educational factions, labor unions, youth movements and clandestine military organizations were associated with a clearly defined political identity. Sports unions which were established in *Eretz Israel* at the time shared the same orientation.¹¹

The first gymnastics and sports union established in *Eretz Israel* was “Maccabi”, whose national federation was founded in 1912. “Maccabi” was founded as a national gymnastics and sports federation. It was intended to represent national Zionist values accepted by all and to stay neutral regarding controversial issues. However, since the Zionist Movement was unable to clearly define what those values were, conflict surrounding how to implement them and what image and direction should the state to be established adopt began at the start of Settlement in *Eretz Israel*. One controversial national issue during the foundation of “Maccabi” was Hebrew labor. Farmers regarded Arab labor as an economic means which enabled colonies to subsist as well as a way of forming good relations with the Arab population. Workers, on the other hand, viewed the taking of labor into Hebrew hands as a central national objective for the purpose of creating a healthy and natural society based on Hebrew workers. Brutal (some even violent) disputes regarding this issue within

“Maccabi” indicated that already at an early stage, common values that could be agreed upon by all would not be easily found.¹²

Divided political camps were clearly defined in the 20's at the start of the British Mandate and the establishment of a “homeland”. The political divide reflected upon sports as well. The “Hapoel” Union was established as a sports union strictly for workers and corresponded with the aims of the General Federation, which met its goals by means of establishing various bodies within it (a health organization, the “Davar” newspaper, the worker factories, etc.). “Maccabi” which was established earlier and considered itself from the start as an apolitical sports organization which was not targeted at any particular sector, was cornered into the “civilian” camp (seeing as anyone who belonged to the labor camp joined “Hapoel”).¹³

Over the years two additional sports organizations with political sectarian identity were established: Beitar, which was in essence a youth movement of the Revisionist Party (founded in 1923 in Riga), began to foster sports activity and began to be identified as a sport union as it was identified as a youth movement, and “Elizur” (founded in 1939) was founded as a religious Zionist sports union.¹⁴

The politicization of Hebrew sports was not only an outcome of the circumstances that developed in *Eretz Israel*, but also of political developments in international sport. In the early 20's the international labor union (Sozialistische Arbeiter Sport Internationale, SASI) was established as an answer to the Olympic sports which were regarded as bourgeois, and the foundation of “Hapoel” in *Eretz Israel* was in fact part of the process of establishing similar sports unions. Shortly after its foundation, in 1927, “Hapoel” joined SASI. Paradoxically, the “Hapoel” union, which gradually became the largest sports union in the country, represented both the leading national camp in the national Settlement enterprise in *Eretz Israel*, and international sports for workers. One of the aims of “Maccabi” became to incorporate sports in *Eretz Israel* within international sports unions and to enhance ties with Jewish sports in the Diaspora. It established the “Amateurs Sports Union in *Eretz Israel*” and the “Olympic Committee in *Eretz Israel*”. “Hapoel”, out of loyalty to SASI, avoided contact with those organizations. For this reason, despite its classification as a “pioneer” camp, it was accused by other sports unions as preferring foreign class interests over loyalty to national interests.¹⁵

Sports in *Eretz Israel* moved from this point on two different planes: On an external plane national Zionist interests of the Settlement were promoted. Sports

served to forge ties with the Diaspora and for Zionist publicity in the Jewish world for the purpose of the Settlement. Journeys by different teams from *Eretz Israel* abroad strengthened ties with the Diaspora and culminated in the organization of two Maccabia Games in *Eretz Israel* (in 1932 and 1935), and led the *Eretz Israel* national team to participate in the World Pre-Cup Football Games. On the other, internal plane, political segmentation and hostility reflected the sectarianism of the Jewish Settlement in general. Such hostility, sometimes expressed by violence, hindered the institutionalization of sports in the country.¹⁶

Political sectarianism in Jewish sports was pronounced only in *Eretz Israel*, and not in the Diaspora. “Maccabi” in the Diaspora appealed to a great deal of Jewish youth who came to engage in sports activities. Within the “Maccabi” framework they were indoctrinated in the ideational-cultural framework of the Zionist Movement as well. “Maccabi” in the Diaspora did not mull over the Jewish Settlement’s sectarian problems, and its struggle was focused externally rather than internally – as opposed to Jewish unions which represented Jewish factions. The identification of “Maccabi” in *Eretz Israel* with a particular camp could have only harmed the World Maccabi Federation’s apolitical stance and bring about division in the Diaspora. Therefore, the majority of labor unions in the Diaspora joined “Maccabi” and even made it difficult in the early 30’s for *Eretz Israel* “Hapoel” to establish “Hapoel” in the Diaspora, which would have turned Jewish Zionist sports in the Diaspora political-sectarian as well.¹⁷

Zionism and Sports following the Establishment of the State

The establishment of the State of Israel was a turning point from all aspects of the Zionist idea. The Zionist Movement which was up to this point a national movement competing after the hearts of Jews in terms of a suitable Jewish identity and the appropriate solution to the Jewish problem, in fact won the right to realize its vision – a Jewish state in *Eretz Israel*. Zionism had won the ideological struggle for the solution to the Jewish problem. The Holocaust allegedly proved that Jewish existence in the Diaspora was hopeless and placed the Jewish people in existential danger. The murder of millions in the Holocaust put an end to the vivacious and

multi-diverse Judaism that existed in Eastern Europe, burying other Jewish factions which competed with Zionism as well.

The Zionist idea from now on added a new dimension. Zionism, which until now focused on the struggle against other Jewish factions and political struggles within it for the purpose of establishing a state, became the official ideology of the new state. It now had to contend with new challenges, both internally, in terms of the process of building a nation, as well as externally, in terms of legitimizing the status of the nation in the world and among Jews abroad. One of the means employed by the new state was sports. Despite the fact that the founding ideology of the state was established on the basis of Jews who fought for realizing the Zionist ideal – it was in fact a state of immigrants who came as a result of distress in their countries. The Settlement, which on the eve of the War of Independence accounted for 600,000 Jews (most of whom also came due to distress but internalized in the meantime the founding ideology), absorbed some million two hundred thousand Jews in its first 15 years of existence. Some of the Jews were Holocaust refugees who concentrated in displaced camps after WWII, or Jews who abandoned their countries due to political strife which arose there (Poland, Hungary). *Eretz Israel* was a last resort for most of them who couldn't return to their countries or emigrate to others. Most immigrants came from Islamic countries, where Zionist activity was minor and very few Jews emigrated from those areas prior to the establishment of the state. The Jewish-Arab conflict brought hundreds of thousands of refugee immigrants from Islamic countries, most of whom (apart from religious tradition) had a weak connection to modern Zionist ideology.¹⁸

The aim of the state's institutions was therefore to shape a common collective ideational identity for the population's wide range of diverse segments (native and immigrant, Ashkenazi and Sefardi, religious and secular) in order to bond them together within a melting pot which would produce a new Jewish-Israeli identity. For this reason, the initial years of the state were spent creating a common culture (literature, all forms of art, school curricula) which would all serve this public ideological objective.

Sports, which prior to the establishment of the state was not a primary priority, did not change its status in terms of immigrant absorption, foreign affairs, defense, etc. However, similar to other forms of culture, it became a tool for national design by becoming the focus of national identity. Israeli athletes carrying the flag of the

country, singing its national anthem, and competing alongside the nations of the world inspired national pride and formed an integrative collective identity crossing all social classes and political sectors. One peak moment illustrating this phenomenon was the football game played by Israel vs. the USSR in 1956 which aroused sweeping national enthusiasm, especially following direct contact with representatives of the Soviet superpower. Although Israel was defeated in both encounters, the goal made by Stalmach into the Russian net produced a wave of pride and joy which was felt across the country and is remembered to this day as the moment which best expressed the new national spirit.¹⁹

Another aspect of sports in the early years of the state was its functional use for the new state's foreign needs: forging friendly ties, cooperation with other nations, spreading propaganda, and gaining respect and prestige, as well as expressing protest.

In terms of propaganda, the new state set two main objectives. The first was propaganda to justify its very existence. Arab propaganda generated de-legitimization of the new Jewish state. *Eretz Israel* propaganda, in counter-response, was determined to distribute propaganda around the world that would justify the Zionist idea as a basis for its existence. The second was propaganda to the Jewish world for support of Zionism and immigration to Israel.

This agenda was carried out already on Israel's national football team's first journey to the United States in 1948, shortly after the establishment of the state. Although the team lost in all three matches, it reached its publicity objectives: a large Jewish audience came to watch it including many American celebrities from politics and entertainment, and the visit received a great deal of public exposure.

Representative athletes from Israel in those days became publicity ambassadors. They carried with them mementos, pamphlets and brochures about Israel and regularly stayed with the local Jewish communities. In those days Israel repeatedly failed in the Olympic Games, though its participation and opportunity to carry the national flag as an equal to all other nations was perceived as more important. With that, there was a growing demand to close the gap between Israel and the rest of the athletic world in terms of level and abilities. The prestigious value of achievements and its impact on national pride was better understood, and sensitivity to the impact of failure on the sports field on the image portrayed externally to the world and internally to the nation grew.

The defeat of the national football team against Poland in Warslav (2-7) in June, 1959, became a humiliating national trauma, while the relatively few achievements in the European Championship (fifth place in 1953) and a number of victories in football and athletics (for example: the victory of the football team against Yugoslavia in Belgrade in April 1960 and Israel's achievements in various Asian Championships) received at the time a great deal of press and served as a source of pride way beyond their actual athletic value.

Another dimension of Zionist ideology in the early years of the nation was associated with the political nature of sports. The establishment of the state did not significantly change the sectarian character of Israeli sports. In its early years, there were clearly defined ideological political camps, and sports continued to serve, as in the former days of the Settlement, as a form of rivalry between the different political camps and unions. The agreement known as "Fifty-Fifty" which was signed in 1951 brought political stability to sports institutions and in effect to athletes' representation in the national teams. This was clearly a political agreement with a pragmatic approach which enabled a "sound" existence of sports institutions and the existence of leagues in the various branches.²⁰

The political nature of Israeli sports in the early years of the state affected all the organizations involved in it. Sports centers had deep rooted ties to political centers of power: "Hapoel" continued its ties with the General Federation, which at that time of the Labor Union and Mapai rule was at its strongest. "Maccabi" institutionalized its ties with the "General Zionists", "Beitar" joined the Freedom Movement, and like the Parliament of those days it regarded "Maccabi" as its ally, and "Elizur" continued being identified with religious Zionism ("Hamizrachi" and "Hapoel Hamizrachi").

The public in those days tended to identify with the new nationalism by means of political parties whose common ground (apart from the Communists, Arabs and Ultra-Orthodox who were at the margins of the political spectrum) was their commitment to the Zionist ideal, while differences remained mainly in regard to the defense, social and economic means to achieving the Zionist aims of the nation.

Political sports served as a tool for the benefit of the national ideal and the division of fans into camps reflected their political tendencies. Sports clubs were established as an instrument for recruiting supporters for political purposes, especially for recruiting immigrants from the periphery, the extent of whose cultural identity

with the founding Zionist ideology was small and their joining a sports club was perceived as the first link in the connecting chain from the local club center to the central sports center and from there to state-national identity.²¹

The political divide in sports among the centers next to the function of sports to unify society led to tension between its role as an integrative tool for shaping identity and collective consciousness and as an instrument in the political struggle for the benefit of particularistic Zionist ideas.

Sports and Zionism: from Erosion to Identification

Social political developments, especially since the Yom Kippur War, brought about many changes on an ideological level. Although Zionism is still considered the ideological foundation of the State of Israel (though, Post-Zionist concepts are developing which claim that Zionism has completed its role), the ideological identity of traditional political blocs has undergone a great deal of changes.

During the years of the settlement and the early years of the state, political camps were clearly defined and delineated. The ideological conception of each party was clearly associated with social, economic and defense issues and each party could be clearly identified politically and socially. After the Six Day War, ideological identity began to be blurred, and the distinctive features that delineated each political body began to fade. The central debate regarding the future of captured territories overshadowed and practically obliterated the debate regarding the character of the society taking shape in Israel. The debate regarding the economic future was won by capitalism, and ever since it has been quite difficult to clearly define the significant differences between the different parties and bodies. The main difference between what is considered today extreme “left” and extreme “right” lies in their radically different attitudes regarding the purpose of the “territories”, rather than essential differences in their social-economic perceptions. Israeli society is still sectarian, though in effect political-ideological sectarianism has been converted to sectarianism of social character: ethnic, religious, ethnic minorities, and economic status.

The ideological blur that occurred began to reflect upon the relations between political sports centers as well. Centers continued to preserve their organizational power, though they gradually ceased being a focus of partisan power and an

instrument of political influence. The “Fifty-Fifty” phenomenon dissolved, and nowadays athletes no longer choose teams according to their political association, but rather according to economic and personal considerations. Mobility from one center to another is no longer problematic. Fans do not politically identify with teams any longer, and at most they identify with “community” teams according to geographic area or with a teams’ success. Today, there are almost no sports teams which can be regarded as clearly “political”. Though several symbols of the past (such as the red color and the symbol of “Hapoel”) have been preserved, no one really attributes any significance to them other than being the “symbol” and “color” of one’s favorite club. The process of globalization has also contributed to the blurring of tribalism and nationalism, and has led to the creation of multi-national teams and spectatorship beyond borders, cultures and status. In the new reality of professional and global sports, sectarian political sports have lost their position.

This change, in effect, meant that together with the loss of the unions’ political recruiting force, so was their ideological Zionist significance. From the 90’s control over teams and athletes was transferred to private owners and business agents, for whom the political labels of the unions they purchased were irrelevant. Sports became “merchandise”. Players were no longer committed to their unions nor were they identified with them any longer allowing them mobility among the various clubs according to their professional needs and in accordance to their abilities. Team symbols with Zionist orientations were replaced or appear next to commercial company logos. In the various ball game branches, foreign players are in fact more dominant in the Israeli market, and Israeli coaches and players are active abroad turning them into local heroes, without a sense of betrayal to national values or of anti-Zionism.²²

Even more prominent is the fact that different teams which perform as representatives of Israel, no longer gain sweeping public support as the “nation’s representatives”, but rather only that of their fans (and often provoke the hostility of the rival teams). The “Maccabi” Tel Aviv basketball team, for example, which had always served as the national “tribal bonfire” and as an apolitical source of national identity, today arouses only the interest of its fans.

Nevertheless, alongside the erosion of Zionist values due to the processes described above, sports are today one of the few instruments to glue together emotional consciousness and bond collective identity. The abovementioned sectarian

“tribalism” which characterizes today’s segmented society makes a cohesive identity with consensus among all strata of society impossible. A closer examination of what emotionally binds all segments of society to one another reveals that it is always dramatic events, some of which are tragic, which generate a sense of common fate. This is true, in particular, when it comes to terrorist attacks or calamities. On the other hand, the number of “positive” events engraved in the collective consciousness which form a sense of identity among the different “tribes” of the nation is small – and most are related to the field of sports: “Maccabi” Tel Aviv’s many achievements in basketball (when it was still the “Nation’s Team”) and the medals awarded to Israeli athletes in the Olympic Games, are noteworthy as events which awaken national pride and inspire Israeli identification across the nation.²³ Such events have no substitute, other than the wave of national pride that sweeps the country when the National Team reaches the final levels in the *Mondial* or when it wins an actual significant international achievement. Still, in Israel, as in the rest of the world, teams have lost their status as national representatives. Nevertheless, the national teams are still a center of identification and a source of pride, or on the contrary, of frustration, reinforcing a sense of collective identification.

Zionism or Israeliness?

The sense of collective identification generated by national teams raises the question regarding the essence of such identification and whether today this identification can still be characterized as Zionist, or whether it now evokes a sense of civilian-Israeli identity.

This question relates to the complex and problematic discussion regarding how to define the State of Israel’s identity today. The State of Israel defines itself as a Jewish state which expresses the Zionist vision of a return to Zion, and at the same time, as a democratic state which does not discriminate against its resident populations according to ethnic backgrounds. Many argue that self-definition as a Jewish state and as a democracy is an internal contradiction, while others have tried in various ways to diminish the alleged contradiction that lies between the definitions.²⁴

The Jewish character of the state is expressed in its language and its symbols, including its national anthem and official holidays. However, a quarter of the State of

Israel's residents are not Jewish. The state, being a democracy, regards its non-Jewish residents as citizens with equal rights and requires that they identify with the state and its institutions, even when the country's official symbols do not express their ethnic identity and often, even contradict them.

As abovementioned, during the early years of the state, Israeli sports, both on a representative level and on a team level, were identified with the Zionist ideology of the country. National teams (which were for the most part strictly Jewish teams) regarded themselves as representatives of the new Zionist state and as an instrument of Zionist publicity which was intended, among other things, to justify the existence of the new Jewish state and its values.

It seems that in recent years, this foundation has almost disappeared. Representative national team games have become routine and their initial sense of mission has completely disappeared. The enthusiasm of those days of innocence, when the Zionist flag was carried as an equal among the flags of the rest of the world's nations, has long faded. The objective of the national teams is no longer to preserve ties with Jewish communities abroad and to spread national propaganda. In addition, Israeli national teams are no longer represented only by Jews – they include Arabs and naturalized non-Jewish Israeli players. The national team is Israeli, but is no longer an all-Jewish team and its Jewish character is preserved only in a ceremonious sense: the national blue and white colors, the game in the background of the Zionist flag which has become the nation's flag, and the anthem which represents the aspirations of the Jewish people.

The fact that Arab and naturalized non-Jewish Israeli players are representatives in the national teams turns the teams into a source of identification for the nation's non-Jewish citizens as well who identify with them as citizens of the state, but are completely disengaged from the Zionist ideology which has led to its establishment.²⁵ As a result, today the national sports teams serve as the only source of collective identification with the State of Israel which is unrelated to the state's national Zionist values. In terms of representative teams, it can be justifiably argued that the sports field is practically the only place where the State of Israel can be defined as a state of all its citizens.

In conclusion, sports have been a central element of the Zionist ideal to create a new Jew, even though the meaning of the term did not necessarily include physical activity and was perceived differently in the Diaspora and in *Eretz Israel*. The

establishment of the State turned sports into an instrument for recruiting diverse streams of Zionist ideology, both on a political and on a national level and as a means of internal and external Zionist propaganda, as well as collective identification in the society taking shape in *Eretz Israel*.

The social, economic and political changes the country has undergone in the past 30 years have led sports to lose their function as a political tool and as a tool for spreading propaganda. Instead, sports have become one of the only forms of producing collective identification that can unify the Israeli public. Still, this identification is not necessarily related to Zionist ideology, but rather to civilian identification with the State of Israel.

End Notes

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- ¹ For an exhaustive summary of the various Jewish factions, see: Shifra Colet (ed.) **Jewish Existence in the Diaspora in the 20th Century**, Ministry of Education and Culture: Ma' a lot, 1984
- ² Zvi Barzilai, *The Bund Movement in Poland between the Two World Wars*, Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 11-31
- ³ Rony Gechman, *Socialist Mass Politics through Sport: The Bund's Morgenshtern in Poland 1926-1939* **Journal of Sport History** 1999 (26,2) pp 326-352. ; Diethelm Belking, *Marxism in the Face of Muscle Judaism: Jewish Sports in Poland*. **Betnua** (6) 2-3 (2002), pp 149-159
- ⁴ Nordau, "The Lodgz and the Esperantists", *Zionist Writings*, Jerusalem, 1936 , pp. 126-127; Haim Kaufman, *The National Elements and Components of the Term Muscle Judaism*, **Betnua** (3) 3 (1996), pp. 261-281; Yehiam Shorek, *Body Culture in the Teachings of the Zionist Movement's Fathers*, in: Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (ed.), **Body Culture and Sports in Israel in the 20th Century**, **Idan** 22, Yad Ben Zvi and Wingate Institute (2002) pp. 9-24; Moshe Zimmerman, *Muscle Judaism – A Remedy for Jewish Nerves*. *Zmanim*, 83 (2003), pp. 56-65.
- ⁵ A comprehensive study of the new Jew in literature, in Michael Glosman, **The Zionist Body, Nationalism, Gender and Sexuality in Modern Hebrew Literature**, Tel Aviv, 2007.
- ⁶ See: Oz Almog, *The Tzabar – A Portrait*, Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 1997.
- ⁷ Yogo Mayer Paul, *Equality-Egality, Jews and Sport in Germany*, **Leo Beack Institutes Yearbook** 25 (1980) pp 221-241. George Eisen, *Zionism nationalism and the Emergence of the Judische Turnerschaft*, , **Leo Beack Institutes** 28 (1983) pp 247- 262
- ⁸ *Jewish Gymnasts Union regulations*, in Uriel Zimri and Emanuel Gil (ed.) *An Anthology of the History of Physical Education*, 1, Wingate Institute, 1979, pp. 89-91, World "Maccabi" regulations, pp. 92-95.
- ⁹ On the gap between the ethos and reality in terms of its place in physical education in the Settlement, see Ithak Ram, *The Ideational Foundations of Physical Education in Eretz Israel at the start of the 20th Century*, in Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (ed.), **Body Culture and Sports in Israel in the 20th Century**, **Idan** 22, Yad Ben Zvi and Wingate Institute (2002), pp. 51-80. Also see, Maya Dar, *And When Is There Time to Exercise?*, on the indifference of the government towards the first steps of the body culture in Eretz Israel, **Once Upon a Time, a Young Stage for History** 3, (2003) pp. 73-92. The first Jewish sports union in the East was established in Lodgz in 1921 followed by the establishment of unions in Odessa (1913) and Warsaw (1914) Yehoshua Aluf and Moshe Galblum (ed.) **A Memorial Book for "Maccabi" Warsaw**, Tel-Aviv, 1973; Uri Miller, "Maccabi" Organization in Russia in relation to general history. **Betnua** 7, 1-2 (2004) pp. 79-109.
- ¹⁰ Gordon's letter was first published in the "Davar" on February 8, 1926. The story on the "Maccabi" activist: Zvi Nadav, *Half a Body Gone*, *The Guard Book*, Words of Friends, Ministry of Defense, 1957, pp. 150-152
- ¹¹ Mordechai Naor and Dan Giladi, *Eretz Israel in the 20th Century*, Tel-Aviv, 1990 pp. 218-229, Binymain Eliav (ed.) *The Settlement in the Days of the National Homeland*, Jerusalem, 1976, pp. 242-180.
- ¹² Haim Kaufman, *The Conflict during the Mandate between the "Hapoel" unions and "Maccabi" foundation on the issue of participation in the Maccabiah Games*, **Betnua** 2, 3 (1994), pp. 52-55.
- ¹³ Haim Kaufman, *Maccabi vs. Hapoel – The Creation of the Political Divide in Sports in Eretz Israel*, in Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (ed.), **Body Culture and Sports in Israel in the 20th Century**, **Idan** 22, Yad Ben Zvi and Wingate Institute (2002) pp 89-112.
- ¹⁴ On sports in "Beitar", see Shlomo Resnik, *The Beitar Sports Union: Sports and Politics in a Divided Society*, in Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (ed.), **Body Culture and Sports in Israel in the 20th Century**, **Idan** 22, Yad Ben Zvi and Wingate Institute (2002) pp 159-183., on Elizur, see the same, pp. 184-185
- ¹⁵ Haim Kaufman, *The Ideational Link between Workers' sports and "Hapoel" Union during the Mandate*, **Betnua** 3, 1 (1995), pp. 56-76. Amichai Alparovich, *Israel and the Olympic Movement – Not Just Sports*, in Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (ed.), **Body Culture and Sports in Israel in the 20th Century**, **Idan** 22, Yad Ben Zvi and Wingate Institute (2002) pp 302-304.
- ¹⁶ On sports in the service of national interests of the Settlement, see dissertation by Hagai Harif, *International Sports and Politics, the Political Function of Representative Sports in the Settlement of Eretz Israel and the State of Israel 1898-1960*, Bar Ilan University, 2002, pp. 129-251. On violent expression, see Haim Kaufman, *The Beginning of Hebrew Football in Eretz Israel 1930-1933*, **Betnua** 8, 1-2 (2006), pp. 37-42, on the Maccabiah and their significance, see: Zvi Zameret, *The*

Maccabias: The Olympic Games of the Jewish People, in Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (ed.), **Body Culture and Sports in Israel in the 20th Century**, *Idan 22*, Yad Ben Zvi and Wingate Institute (2002) pp 113-128.

¹⁷ See Kaufman, (footnote 3), pp. 101-104

¹⁸ On the mass immigration and various aspects of the period, see: Mordechai Naor (ed.), *Olim and Ma'abarot 1948-1952*, *Idan 8*, Yad Itzhak Ben Zvi, 1987; Zvi Zameret and Hana Yablonka (ed.) **The First Decade 1948-1958**, *Idan 20*, Yad Itzhak Ben Zvi, 1997.

¹⁹ See dissertation by Hagai Harif (footnote 16), and Hagai Harif "It's important that we strike the Gentiles": The National Significance of Football Games between Israeli teams and the Soviet Union, Summer, 1956, *Cataedra 109*),2004 (pp. 11-130.

²⁰ For a copy of the agreement, see: Wingate Archives 1.10/23. Also see: Emanuel Gil, **The Worker's Story**, Tel Aviv, 1977, pp 263-264, 288. On the meaning of "fifty-fifty" also see Amir Ben-Porat, **From a Game to Merchandise, Israeli Football 1948-1999**, Hanegev University, 2002, pp. 91-108.

²¹ Amir Ben-Porat, Football and Nationalism during the Establishment of the State. In: Ilan Gur Zeev and Roni Lidor (ed.), **Sports Values and Politics**, Tel Aviv, 2007, pp. 142-151.

²² Maguire Josef, **Global Sport**. London. 1999, Oz Almog, From "Conquering the Mountain" to Conquering the Goal: The Professional Sports Revolution in Israel and its Impact on Society, **Mifne, 23** (1998), pp. 32-37. These processes with a focus on Israeli football, see Ben Porat (footnote 20), pp. 127 and on.

²³ Hagai Harif, The Shadow in the Field of National Pride, *Panim 25* (2003), pp 66-72.

²⁴ This issue has led to dozens of discussions and debates in the press, books and articles. See, for example, Gershon Wiler, *Jewish Theocracy*, Tel-Aviv, 1976; Aluf Haraben, *One of every Six Israelis, Reciprocal Relations between the Arab minority and Jewish majority in Israel*, Jerusalem, 1981, Eli Reches (ed.) *Arabs in Israeli Politics: A Dilemma of Identity*. Tel-Aviv University, Moshe Dayan Center, 1998.

²⁵ For a comprehensive discussion on Arab identity in sports, see: Tamir Shorek, *Identities on the Field, Arab Football in a Jewish State*, The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, 2006.