

Jewish Sports in the Diaspora, Yishuv, and Israel: Between Nationalism and Politics

INTRODUCTION

THE EMERGENCE OF ZIONISM, the Jewish national movement, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries involved a basic revolution in Jewish life and collective identity in the Diaspora. One of the main features of this revolution, whose ultimate goal was the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Eretz-Israel (Palestine), was the creation of the “New Jew” who would serve as the idealized symbol of national renewal. Zionism’s founding fathers regarded gymnastics and sports as important activities for repudiating the biases surrounding the Jew’s alleged physical inferiority.

After centuries during which body culture was removed from Jewish life, the Zionist Movement introduced a major revision of the attitude toward physical development. The enhancement of physical prowess that aided pioneering tasks, such as building and defense of the homeland, also contributed to creating a community of athletes eager to demonstrate the revived strength of the Yishuv and later of Israel. Gymnastics and sports not only promoted Zionism’s goal of revitalizing the nation, they also expressed deep political divisions in the Jewish collective.

This article focuses on a major area of research in Zionist history that has been somewhat neglected: the rise of Jewish athletic and sports associations in the Diaspora and Eretz-Israel. The development of these associations and clubs is analyzed, their ideological views outlined, and their involvement in the dialectical tension between national goals and the goals of political parties clarified. Beginning with the prestate period and continuing through the following decades, this article describes the changing perception of sports and athletic associations from the birth of Israel to the present.

THE BEGINNING OF JEWISH-NATIONAL SPORTS AND ATHLETIC CLUBS

The organization of Jewish national sports and gymnastic clubs began in Europe in the late nineteenth century.¹ One of the first clubs, the “Israelitischer Turnverein,” (The Israelite Gymnastic Club) was founded in Constantinople (today Istanbul) in 1895 and eventually became “Maccabi Constantinople.”² Jewish clubs were soon established in other countries too: “Gibor” (later “Shimshon”—Samson) in the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv (1897) and “Bar Kochva” in Berlin (1898) led to the founding of many more Jewish sports clubs especially in areas where German culture dominated. The “Jüdische Turnerschaft” (Jewish Gymnastic Movement) was established in 1903 and served as the umbrella organization for all Jewish sports clubs.

The emergence of Jewish sports clubs took place mostly in western and central Europe. In eastern Europe the process proceeded at a slower pace. The ideas of the Enlightenment, industrialization, and modernization penetrated Russia inchmeal, so that Russian Jewry was less exposed than western Jewry to the ideological influence and external features of the Enlightenment, such as the shift in the moral approach toward body culture. Also, the autocratic government of the czar prohibited freedom of organization and the formation of gymnastic clubs because of they were seen, and justifiably so, as means of awakening nationalism. The first Jewish sports club in eastern Europe was established in Lodz in 1912, and was followed by clubs in Odessa (1913) and Warsaw (1914).³

There were three major reasons leading to the establishment of these clubs:

First, anti-Semitism pervaded the gymnastic clubs and forced the Jews to leave and set up their own clubs. This was the chief cause for the founding of the first Jewish athletic club in Turkey. Young German and Austrian Jews employed in Turkey joined the German athletic club “Teutonia” but the club closed its doors to more Jewish members. In response, the Jews quit and established their own clubs.

There was a gap in “Deutsche Turnerschaft” between its inherent prejudices and its official charter that contained no specific anti-Jewish sections. While many German Jews were full-fledged members of the club, many others felt uncomfortable in it because of the “latent” anti-Semitism and tended to drop out or found their own gymnastic clubs. Arthur Ruppin (1876–1943; economist, sociologist, and “father of Zionist settlement” in Eretz-Israel) recalled in his memoirs the disagreeable feeling in physical

education classes. Theodor Herzl himself, father of political Zionism and founder of the World Zionist Organization) quit his student club because of its anti-Semitism, and noted that, “the school associations and gymnastic and singing groups were growing increasingly Aryan.” German clubs in the Hapsburg Empire affiliated with “Deutsche Turnerschaft” introduced a specifically “Aryan section” into their charter that forced the German Movement to expel twelve athletic clubs from its ranks.⁴

The second factor that influenced the establishment of Jewish national athletic clubs was the founding of general athletic clubs. These clubs were intended to strengthen the sense of nationalism by enhancing social solidarity and physical endurance for the coming national struggle. Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, a German nationalist and father of German gymnastics, was active in the period that Napoleon was conquering Prussia. Jahn dreamed of liberating Prussia and uniting the German principalities. He believed that physical education could be a powerful instrument for achieving this national goal. Tens of thousands of athletes were members of the “German Gymnastics Movement” (“Deutsche Turnerschaft”) that was founded in 1868. The methods employed gave full expression to nationalistic goals. Heavy emphasis was placed on the development of martial traits such as strength, endurance, discipline, and movement in unison, while making use of the required gymnastic apparatus.⁵ The connection between physical and national education was recognized not only in Germany but also in Denmark, Sweden, and France. Similar systems were developed in these countries, as well as in the districts of Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia that sought liberation from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and that expressed this urge in the establishment of a military-like gymnastic movement, “Sokol,” founded in 1862 by Miroslav Týrs.⁶

These movements had a powerful impact on the Jews’ desire to found their own national sports clubs. For example, the “German Gymnastics Movement” was a major influence on the “Jewish Gymnastics Movement” (established in 1903). The Jewish association was a “small-scale” rendition of its German counterpart as evidenced by its name, administrative system, insignia, gymnastic methods, and its rejection of competitive sports.⁷

The Czech “Sokol Movement” also had a decisive influence on Jewish clubs. “Shimshon” modeled itself after “Yunak,” the Bulgarian branch of “Sokol,” and “Maccabi’s” members identified with “Sokol” rather than the German Movement because of its anti-Semitic taint.⁸

The third factor was the Zionist Movement—the Jewish people’s *sui generis* national movement. The majority of the nation that was supposed to be represented by Zionism did even not identify itself with the movement’s

goals. Furthermore, other trends in vogue then among the Jewish people were intensely opposed to Zionism. These included the religious ultra-orthodox who believed that Zionism was “hastening the End of Days” (according to the ultra-orthodox the Messianic period would come about through divine, not human, intervention); Reform Judaism that rejected Jewish nationalist identity; and the socialist “Bund” (a Jewish anti-Zionist political party founded in eastern Europe in 1897) that championed the preservation of Jewish cultural identity in future socialist states.

Zionism was the only national movement the majority of whose followers dwelt outside of what they perceived as their national homeland. Some Zionists—including the founding fathers of the Zionist Movement, Leo Pinsker and Theodor Herzl, who were willing to accept territories other than the nation’s original homeland and whose written works, “Auto-emancipation” and “The Jewish State” respectively, did not even focus exclusively on Eretz-Israel. Another unique feature of Zionism was that as a national movement it defied definability. Religious affiliation aside, almost none of its supporters could claim cultural commonality at the time of Israel’s establishment.

This aspect of the Zionist Movement was one of the main reasons for the lack of consensus over goals and the means of their realization. Was Zionism aiming for statehood, and if so, did this imply a Jewish or bi-national (Jewish-Arab) state? Should the state be established in all of Eretz Israel? Should practical colonization be undertaken first or should it be preceded by political activity? Perhaps Zionism meant a spiritual-cultural center rather than sovereign statehood. Would the Jewish state have a socialist or capitalist society? Should it be administered by Jewish religious law (*Halacha*)? Would every Jew be allowed to immigrate or would immigration be selective?

Even the definition of “Zionism” was (and still is) a highly controversial issue. Nevertheless, I think that all of the Zionist trends agreed on three “meta-goals:”

1. The rejection of the Diaspora, and in its place the establishment of a homeland for the Jewish people in Eretz-Israel. Debate raged over the size of the homeland, its features, and the type of sovereignty that would develop in it.
2. The necessity to create a national culture and common identity for the settlers who came from such culturally diverse backgrounds. The new culture—the question of its essence notwithstanding—must be centered on the Hebrew language, that is, the Hebrew issue was non-

negotiable. Thus, the renewal of the Hebrew language became one of the Zionist Movement's greatest achievements.

3. The physical image of the Jew had to be transformed into a "New Jew." The expression, "New Jew," referred, *inter alia*, to a physical type that was the antithesis of the Diaspora Jew's negative stereotype. The Second Zionist Congress (Basle, 1898) discussed the deplorable state of physical education among the Jewish people. Max Nordau (writer, physician, one of the early leaders of the Zionist Movement) coined the term "Muskal Judentum" (muscular Jewry). This term expressed the desire to change the image of subservient, anxiety-ridden "Diaspora" Jewry and create a new Jewish ethos grounded in military skills and the refutation of denigrating racial biases regarding the Jews' inherent physical inferiority. The term also expressed the romantic notion of the return to ancient glory. Since the Jewish heroes of the past became objects of emulation, it was natural for Jewish sports clubs to adopt names such as Bar-Kochva (leader of the second century CE revolt against Rome), Shimshon, and Yehuda Hamaccabi (leader of the second century BCE revolt against the Greeks).

The image of the new muscular Jew exemplified a primeval, tough, passionate type of person who worked the land and was totally familiar with the 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.⁹

Despite the evident link between Jewish sports clubs and the Zionist Movement, the members of the clubs avoided defining themselves in Zionist terms. The first bulletin of Berlin's "Bar-Kochva" club, the majority of whose founders were Zionists, announced that, "we openly declare our support and loyalty to [Jewish] nationalism just as we faithfully and rigorously perform our obligations as citizens of the state." The charter of the "Jewish Gymnastic Movement" ("Judische Turnerschaft") that was approved by the Zionist Congress in Basle completely ignored the Zionist perspective and defined the Jewish nation as "the sense of affiliation between all Jews, based on common origin and history, and as the desire to preserve this shared Jewish source."¹⁰

The debate in central Europe over the definition of Jewish identity also entered the gymnastic clubs. Many Jews in Germany who defined themselves in "civilian" terms (Jewish national identity within the framework of German citizenship) did not identify with the Zionist Movement and its

goals. Some German Jews joined the Jewish sports clubs not out of ideological national reasons but because the non-Jewish clubs exhibited marked signs of anti-Semitism. Many Jews who opposed Jewish nationalism joined the German clubs because they felt that the formation of exclusively Jewish clubs repudiated the principle that Judaism was merely a “religious persuasion.” Despite the unqualified Zionist orientation of members of the Jewish clubs, a “neutral” definition of nationalism was adopted so that non-Zionists would also feel comfortable in them.

This position went through a re-examination after WWI. The Twelfth Zionist Congress (Carlsbad, Czechoslovakia, 1921) decided to establish the “Maccabi World Union” that, unlike the gymnastic movement, was defined as “a federation dedicated to the physical and moral rejuvenation of the Jews and the restoration [of] a Jewish country and nation.” The changes in the Zionist Movement undoubtedly facilitated “Maccabi’s” adoption of an openly Zionist definition. The Zionist Movement received a positive push following the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and the inception of the British Mandate in Palestine (1922). National and non-national Jewish identity in Germany expressed itself in the founding of non-Zionist national sports clubs such as the “Schild” and “Wintus.”¹¹

GYMNASTIC AND SPORTS CLUBS IN ERETZ-ISRAEL

The first sports clubs in Eretz-Israel were established during the Second Aliya (the large wave of Jewish immigration between 1904 and 1914). “Rishon Lezion” (later “Maccabi Tel-Aviv”) was the first sports club organized in the country (Jaffa, 1906); “Shimshon” was founded in 1909 by the Po’alei Zion party (Workers of Zion); and “Maccabi Jerusalem” was formed in 1911 as a result of contacts between Jewish youth in Eretz-Israel and Constantinople. Additional “Maccabi” clubs began to be organized in the Jewish colonies (*moshavot*) and in 1912 “Maccabi Eretz-Israel” was formed in Tel-Aviv’s Herzliya Gymnasium (High School) as the umbrella organization of all these clubs.¹²

It seems that “Maccabi” intended to represent agreed upon Zionist values while evading controversial issues. The Zionist Movement, however, found it difficult to define what these values were and how to go about the practical realization of Zionist settlement in Eretz-Israel. Therefore, “Maccabi” too was undecided about the definition of common national goals. The main issue in dispute at this time was over Hebrew labor, that is, the right of Jewish laborers to be employed by Jewish land owners on the

moshavot. The farmers regarded Arab labor as an economic boon and as a way of developing good relations with the Arabs, whereas the Jewish laborers believed that their “conquest of labor” was a key criterion in the creation of a normal, national (Jewish) society in Eretz-Israel. Sharp, sometimes violent, controversies erupted over these issues within “Maccabi,” reflecting the inability to find common values and producing early divisions in Hebrew sports that transformed it into a sectorial phenomenon.¹³

Another stage in turning Hebrew sports into a political issue came with the immigration of the Third and Fourth Aliyot (1919–1928) which significantly increased following the British Mandate in 1922, when the political structure of the Yishuv (prestate Jewish community in Eretz-Israel) began to crystallize and clearly-defined political camps were formed.

The “workers” camp began to organize prior to WWI, and grew significantly after the war. It was extremely well-organized, and the various political parties that formed it all belonged to the General Federation of Labor (Histadrut) which, besides being a labor union also assumed responsibility for class and national interests since it viewed the Hebrew (Jewish) worker as the vanguard in the new society in the making. The Histadrut was active in immigrant absorption, settlement, defense, and the entire spectrum of the workers’ personal, cultural, intellectual, and sports needs. It set up a separate workers’ sports club, just as it constructed its own health clinic (Kupat Holim), newspaper (*Davar*), workers’ factories, and so forth.

The urban bourgeoisie formed another ideological group known as the “citizens” camp. This group was less coalesced ideologically than the workers’ camp. Each party that made up the citizens’ camp represented a particular group in the private sector (e.g., farmers, merchants, craftsmen). The “citizens” were conspicuous in their support of private initiative and a capitalist economy, and their opposition to the socialist worldview and the Histadrut’s hegemony in the Yishuv. The Revisionist Party, the leading party in the citizen’s camp, had developed under its founding father, Zeev Jabotinsky, who set forth an uncompromising national answer to the whole complex of problems facing the Yishuv. In the 1930s, the Revisionists saw the domination of the workers’ camp as the major problem in Eretz-Israel. Another camp was the religious camp that included religious Zionists and the anti-Zionist ultra-orthodox. A fourth camp was made up of parties that endeavored to guarantee the interests of their particular group (e.g., Georgians, Yemenites).

The political camps not only struggled with one another over the ideological “color” of the society in the making, but also set up their own

institutions that became weapons in the ideological war. Each political camp ran its own health clinics, education trends, workers' organizations, youth movements, and even military undergrounds. Under these circumstances, the sports clubs too should be seen as part of the same phenomenon.¹⁴

"Hapoel (The Worker) Association" was founded in 1923. Despite its differences with "Maccabi," its prime goal was to serve as a sports club for workers within the "Maccabi" framework. However, the discord between the political camps in both the Yishuv and Zionist Movement forced the Histadrut to take the new sports association under its wing (1926)—an act that led to the formal politicization of Hebrew sports. But "Maccabi" refused to see the split in Eretz-Israel sports as an irreconcilable condition. Several attempts were made in the first years of "Hapoel" to reach a compromise that would enable joint activity among the various clubs and avert the politicization of Hebrew sports. From the beginning the attempts hit a snag, and Maccabi, which perceived itself as an apolitical sports organization, unaffiliated with any sector, gravitated almost willy-nilly into the "citizens" camp. (Anyone who was affiliated with the workers' camp joined "Hapoel.")¹⁵

Two more politically oriented sports organizations were formed. "Beitar," the Revisionist Party's youth movement, founded in Riga in 1923, began to develop sports activity and established its own federation with the same name; and "Elitsur" (founded in 1939) was Religious Zionism's sports club.¹⁶

The politicization of Hebrew sports was not only the result of local conditions but also of political developments in world sports. In the early 1920s, the International Workers' Sports Movement was established as an answer to Olympic sports that socialist parties in many countries considered bourgeois. Workers' sports were essentially political. They rejected the definition of "neutral" sports. Their aim was to set up physical activity that would safeguard the workers' health while advancing working class interests. "General" and "neutral" sports were seen as "bourgeois" activities with negative values, whereas the International Workers' Sports Movement strove to create sports for the masses ("not for the best but for the most") with athletic branches designed for the workers rather than for outstanding athletes. Sports organizations affiliated with the Socialist Workers' Sports International (Sozialistische Arbeiter Sport Internationale—SASI) also assumed military tasks (through para-military organizations such as the "Schutzbund" in Austria and "Plugot Hasadran" and "Hapoel" in Eretz-Israel) within the framework of workers' parties.

A short time after “Hapoel” was founded in 1927, it joined SASI. This created a paradoxical situation in Eretz-Israel sports. “Hapoel” gradually became the largest sports federation in the country, representing both international workers’ sports and the “leading” national camp in the Yishuv’s settlement project. “Maccabi’s” goal was to integrate Eretz-Israel sports into world sports organizations and strengthen its ties with Jewish sports clubs in the Diaspora. It established the “Amateur Sports Association in Palestine” and the “Palestine Olympic Committee.” Out of loyalty to SASI, “Hapoel” was careful to avoid making contact with any organizations other than FIFA (the International Federation of Soccer Association). Soccer’s immense popularity forced “Hapoel” to seek a compromise and join the Palestine Soccer Association which was affiliated with FIFA. Despite “Hapoel’s” link to the “pioneering” camp—it was accused by the other Yishuv sports organizations of preferring international class interests to national interests.¹⁷

Hebrew sports developed in two parallel levels: the foreign level and local level. The Yishuv’s nationalist interests were expressed at the foreign level. Sports activity strengthened the Yishuv’s ties with the Diaspora, where Yishuv propaganda was especially promoted by Eretz-Israel sports clubs’ trips abroad. The Yishuv’s connections with the Diaspora reached their climax with the inauguration of the Maccabiah Games¹⁸ (1932 and 1935) and international ties were reinforced by the participation of the Palestine championship team in the pre-world cup soccer matches. At the local level, divisiveness and political enmity reflected the Yishuv’s prevailing divisions, hampering the institutionalization of sports life in the country and, on occasion, leading to violence.¹⁹

THE DIASPORA AND ERETZ-ISRAEL

Political fragmentation appeared in Jewish sports in Eretz-Israel but not in the Diaspora. “World Maccabi,” that waged a political struggle in the Diaspora against sports clubs that represented Jewish ideological trends (such as the Polish Bund’s “Morgenstern”) stayed clear of the Yishuv’s sectoral problems. If “Maccabi Eretz-Israel” identified with a particular camp, then “World Maccabi’s” apolitical status would be damaged and Jewish sports in the Diaspora could become politically divided too. Indeed, this is what happened when “World Maccabi” tried to mediate in the Yishuv dispute by offering to adopt “Hapoel Eretz-Israel” (both “Maccabi Eretz-Israel” and “Hapoel” rejected the offer). In the early 1930s, most of

the people in the workers' movement in the Diaspora were members of "Maccabi." "Hapoel" in Eretz-Israel found it difficult to break into the Diaspora in order to organize a "Hapoel" federation and transform Jewish Zionist sports in the Diaspora into a political-sectoral affiliation. Members of the workers' movement in the Diaspora preferred to be the dominant group in "Maccabi" and not see the organization fall into the arms of the Revisionists who were especially strong in the Diaspora. None of this stopped the workers from joining "Hapoel" (after their immigration to Eretz-Israel) and perpetrating the political "tradition of division" in Yishuv sports. During the British Mandate, some of the most prominent leaders of "Hapoel"—such as Emmanuel Gil and Baruch Beg—had been members of "Maccabi" before their immigration.²⁰

Another difference between Diaspora and Eretz-Israel Jewry lay in the value that the sports clubs placed on the ethos of "muscular Judaism" and the "New Jew." Diaspora sports clubs affiliated with "Maccabi" actively promoted national consciousness and the idea of the "muscular Jew." "Maccabi" attracted many Jewish youth who were without a clearly-defined national identity. According to Alexander Rosenfeld, the president of Maccabi "[Maccabi] returned thousands of people who had drifted away from Judaism."²¹ Its sports activities served as a magnet for Diaspora youth who had been indifferent to the movement. The Jewish club engaged in national, cultural activity of a general nature that refrained from advocating a particular political line. Jewish clubs in the Diaspora had an obvious appeal to new members still smarting from the deprecatory Jewish stereotype and occasional emergence of anti-Semitism in the non-Jewish clubs. The atmosphere of Jewish nationalism in the clubs brought Jewish youth closer to Zionist ideas and provided the physical image of the tough "New Jew" as a counterweight to racial claims.

On the other hand, gymnastics and sports in Eretz-Israel during the Mandate suffered from alienation and apathy on the part of the Zionist establishment. Sports activity was never a leading factor in Jewish national revival in the Homeland, even though "muscular Judaism" was a central concept in the emerging Zionist ethos.

This paradox can be explained by the disparate experiences of immigrants from eastern and western Europe. Most of the new immigrants, as well as the majority of the Yishuv's leadership, hailed from eastern Europe and arrived in the country without any background in sports. Jewish sports had developed later in eastern European than in central Europe and were not sufficiently part of that culture to have allowed the Jewish masses to internalize the value of physical education and athletic activity.



Hapoel Kovna, 1938

Courtesy of the Archive of Physical Education and Sport, Wingate Institute

While immigrants from central and western Europe made an enormous contribution in many areas of the Yishuv, their participation in the Yishuv's political leadership was almost non-existent. These were the immigrants who were athletes. Values based on physical culture were likewise glossed over by the Zionist establishment.

This is not to say that the Zionist leaders derogated the ethos of the "New Jew." They perceived its practical realization not in terms of physical development based on gymnastic skills and sports, but on Hebrew labor, pioneering fulfillment, and the creation of a Jewish military force. The national leadership, reared in eastern Europe, regarded athletics and sports merely as bourgeois diversions or leisure pastimes.

In 1920, A.D. Gordon, one of the founders of "the religion of labor" wrote to "Maccabi's" main office in Eretz-Israel complaining that it had sent a gymnastics teacher to the Diaspora. Gordon noted that Jewish muscles should be built solely through physical labor. Gymnastics and sports might be "complementary to labor" but could not be an integral part of the national movement because they "would never bring about . . . the awareness of a commitment to labor." The book *Hashomer*²² tells of a Maccabi member who joined "Hashomer," but despite his powerful physique, proved incapable of enduring the rigors of guard duty. The story disparages athletics while at the time it stresses the advantages of courage

and determination of the pioneers who labored in the fields and carried out guard duty. The “New Jew” of Eretz-Israel was not necessarily viewed as a proponent of physical culture.²³

NATIONALISM AND POLITICS IN THE STATE OF ISRAEL

With the establishment of the State of Israel, sports came under state authority. Representative sports served the young state’s national interests. All-star teams and sports matches became tools for strengthening Israel’s international recognition, expanding contact with other countries, increasing ties with Jewish communities in the Diaspora, and attaining prestige and honor. In the early years of the state, Israel’s representative championship teams were a source of pride and identification despite their poor showing on the playing fields. People still remember the soccer games between Israel and the Soviet Union in 1956.²⁴

Despite Israeli sports’ new official status and national-functional relevancy, its sectoral nature remained essentially the same. On the surface “Hapoel’s” need for a separate existence seemed to be bereft of ideological meaning. International workers’ sports had suffered a crippling blow in World War II and ceased to be detached from the general sports federations. Even the Soviet Union realized the political and propaganda value of world sporting events and in 1952 began to participate in the Olympic Games that it had traditionally criticized as a showcase for bourgeois decadence. Israel’s sports federations, too, went through dynamic changes. “Hapoel” was no longer committed to its affiliation with international workers’ sports clubs. Despite Ben-Gurion’s shift “from class to nation” (that is, from working class to state interests) and Israeli sports’ new official status as representative sports, political differences and deep hostility still characterized Israeli sports clubs. Ideological-political camps still flourished in the early fifties. Israeli sports remained expressions of political rivalry; the mutual resentment between opposing clubs occasionally resulted in the paralysis of sporting events in the young state. The struggle took place mainly in sports institutions such as the Sport Association, Soccer Association, and Olympic Committee, and often frustrated the opening of regular leagues. An absurd situation was created in which the establishment of the Israeli Olympic Committee was postponed for several months and each center set up its own Olympic committee.²⁵

The need to organize sports life and athletic leagues forced the sports centers to work out a *modus vivendi*. The “fifty-fifty” arrangement was

signed in 1951 according to which the management of the Sports Union would operate on a rotational basis (six members from “Hapoel” and six from “Maccabi,” to the exclusion of “Beitar” and “Elitsur”). This arrangement was also binding on the Olympic Committee and remained in force until 1963, except in the Soccer Association that decided on proportional representation in its institutions in 1954. The “fifty-fifty” arrangement was an unmistakably political arrangement but, taking into consideration the atmosphere in the country, it was a pragmatic program that ushered “peaceful co-existence” into the various sports institutions and allowed leagues to be established.²⁶

The politicization of Israeli sports was felt in all aspects of sports life in the first years of the state. The centers seem to be tied to the umbilical cord of their political power bases. “Hapoel” continued to be glued to the Histadrut that was at the zenith of its power in this period of the Mapai (Eretz-Israel Worker’s Party) and workers’ parties-led governments. “Maccabi” formalized its links with the General Zionists (a liberal, middle-of-the-road party); “Beitar” was tied to Herut (a nationalistic, right-wing party) and regarded “Maccabi” as its ally (just as the General Zionists and Herut were political allies in the Knesset); and “Elitsur” continued to be identified with Religious Zionism (Hamizrachi and Hapoel Hamizrachi parties). The sports centers were established and financed by their respective political centers. The parties viewed the centers as means of gaining political power and as magnets for drawing young people and new immigrants into their camp.

The players and fans also chose their sports clubs according to political ideology. Sports were quite amateurish in the 1950s, and players tended to select their teams according to political orientations. This often worked to the benefit of the sports centers. “Hapoel” was a top-notch team, for example, because of its ability to provide employment to its players in Histadrut-run workplaces. The transfer of players from one club to another was practically impossible. The few who wished to switch clubs had to enter a “quarantine” (a period of non-activity from one to three years) and very few chose this track. Fans, too, chose their favorite teams primarily on the basis of political identification. “Maccabi,” “Hapoel,” and “Beitar” fans generally voted for the party that supported their sports centers.

The close identification between sports and political centers and the rivalry for control over Israeli sports created numerous problems. The choice of sports delegations and the composition of the all-star teams, especially soccer teams, were often made according to a political key rather than according to professional standards. Israeli sports were rife

with “favoritism.” When teams from the same center played against one another the stronger team would let the weaker one score so that it would not be “knocked down” to a lower league. Over the years many attempts were made to combat this phenomenon by freezing the leagues or holding “family friendly” games (teams from the same center would first play against each other, and only afterwards would teams from different centers compete), but none of these “devices” could overcome the widespread phenomenon.

In the mid-1960s, Israeli sports began to lose their political-sectoral identity. The transition from a “political” sports federation to an “economic” one was linked to the political, social, and economic changes that Israeli society underwent and the radical changes that took place in world sports.

The political blocs during the Mandate and early years of statehood were clearly defined and demarcated. Each party’s ideological platform related straightforwardly to social, economic, and security issues, and each party was engraved with an unmistakable socio-political identity. After the Six-Day War (1967) it seems that the parties’ ideological identities and the lines that differentiated between parties began to blur. The main issue that concerned them (and still does) was the future of the territories captured (or liberated) in that war. This issue has been so intense in Israel that it has overshadowed and almost blotted out the debate over the nature of the society being created. The question of Israel’s economic future ended with a triumph for capitalism, another “victory” that has made precise differences between political parties extremely difficult to discern. The major difference between today’s “radical left” and “radical right” lies in their position on the territories rather than on their socio-economic outlook. Israeli society is still sectoral, but for all practical purposes the ideological-political divisions are based on ethnic, religious, and economic differences, and minority rights.

The ideological muddle in Israel has also influenced the relations between the political sports centers. The centers have kept their organizational power but have gradually stopped serving as a focal point for party strength and political recruitment. The “fifty-fifty” arrangement has disappeared; players no longer choose their teams according to political affiliation but according to economic and personal interests; transfer from one center to another proceeds smoothly. Fans, too, no longer choose their team out of political identification but according to “community,” geography, or team performance. Excluding isolated cases, such as Jerusalem Beitar (and even this to a limited extent), teams no longer represent a

particular “political” line. Most of the traditional symbols, however, have been retained (such as the color red for “Hapoel”) but no one sees them as having any real meaning other than the “symbol and color” of their favorite club.

Another reason for the fading of political boundaries has been the dramatic economic changes that Israeli society has undergone. Since the late fifties the Jewish state has gradually become a capitalistic society. Industry’s expansion at the expense of agriculture has resulted in greater government aid to the private sector. (The collective and cooperative settlements, the kibbutzim and moshavim, are the traditional bastions of agriculture in Israel.) The Histadrut’s status as a public employer has gradually diminished; the private sector has become increasingly dominant; and the power of the managerial class and white-collar professions has risen. In the 1950s Israel was an egalitarian society compared to other Western societies. But each decade since then has seen a gradual widening of the social gap and an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth. The process climaxed in the 1990s with the privatization of the state economy and the demise of the Histadrut’s economic clout.

These processes have had an unprecedented impact on Israeli sports. The political model in which the players were only amateurs who played for the “symbol” has disappeared. In an economy that encourages professionalism and offers hefty financial reward, the athletes also relate to their profession as a special skill and demand certain benefits such as the right to switch teams, regardless of their ideological inclination, when a higher salary is involved. The shift from amateur to professional leagues has been a long process in Israel. It has been riddled with endless potholes because of the gap between the market forces that led to professionalism, and the vested interest of sports centers to retain their political-economic control and preserve the appearance of sports as amateur games. By the 1990s, Israeli sports resembled the rest of the Israeli economy that was hell-bent on privatization and turning everything into “merchandise.” The sports centers lost the bulk of their government support, and the Histadrut lost its economic assets, forcing it to release its protégé—“Hapoel.” Control and management of the teams and players passed into the hands of private owners and businesses (or to local authorities who accredit the urban clubs with “community” value) where a political signature is totally irrelevant. The players are no longer committed to or identified with their teams. They can switch teams freely depending on their aptitude and professional needs. Foreign ball players have come to dominate Israel’s professional teams, a phenomenon that symbolizes more than anything else the remarkable

distance that Hebrew sports have traveled from the bitter debate in “Maccabi” over the value of Hebrew labor as a national imperative, to the contracting of foreign labor in the sports clubs themselves.²⁷

The change in Israeli sports also came about as a result of developments in world sports. Spectator sports have become a global phenomenon that some observers term the “religion of the twentieth century.” Today, world cup games are witnessed by millions of people, as sports have become a prestigious and highly lucrative profession. The globalization of sports has contributed to the breakdown of cultural barriers. Sporting meets that are simultaneously broadcast throughout the world tend to obscure tribalism, provincialism, and nationalism, since support for players and championship teams (most of which are already multi-national) cuts across cultural and class boundaries.²⁸

There is no room for political-sectoral differences in the age of the globalization of sports. Israeli sports are part of the global village. Today the management of teams is dictated mainly by economic, professional, and media- and achievement-oriented considerations; ideological bent and party affiliation are utterly anachronistic variables. The political considerations that countries still take into account in the world of sports are of a national nature, that is, they pertain to foreign relations, prestige, propaganda, and so forth.

The political sports centers—“Hapoel,” “Maccabi,” “Beitar,” and “Elitsur”—that formed the unique phenomenon of Eretz-Israel and Israeli sports have not entirely disappeared; in fact, they still wield an influence in various sports institutions. The organizational structure of institutions such as the Olympic Committee and Soccer Association still includes representation according to a key in the bylaws of the traditional centers. In practice, the key’s significance is only political, not ideological. The sports centers are no longer closely linked to the political parties as in the past, and while the competitive clubs preserve their traditional names, the names have no political or economic meaning. For all practical purposes, the political divisions in Israeli sports no longer exist and what remains is only a pale shadow of the past. Paradoxically, the loss of the traditional centers’ political power has enabled them to concentrate more on the special goals that they took responsibility for when they were first established, and which became secondary interests because of the centers’ involvement and dominance in competitive sports. This means that “Hapoel” can now devote its time and energy to sports in work places and to sports “for the masses;” “Maccabi” can strengthen its ties with Jewish teams outside

Israel; “Elitsur” can develop physical education among religious youth; and “Beitar” can boost athletic activity in the nationalist youth movement.

Sports in Eretz-Israel and Israel went from an activity immersed in national goals to political-sectoral sports. With the gradual disappearance of political sports in the last decades the ring has come around full swing as sports have returned to developing a national consciousness—its original goal. In recent years, and especially since the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the traditional ethos that shaped Israel’s collective identity in the first years of the state has been on the wane. Sectoral “tribalism” that characterizes different social sectors today impedes the creation of the “glue” for uniting the disparate parts of Israeli society. When this “glue” appears today it is generally the result of dramatic, often tragic, events that elicit a sense of common destiny. I am referring mainly to terrorist attacks or disasters. The “positive” events that are engraved on Israel’s collective consciousness and that evoke feelings of shared identity are few and far between—and the majority of them are connected with sports. Maccabi Tel-Aviv’s feats on the basketball court and the Israeli athletes’ Olympic medals have awakened national pride more than any other events and have created a collective identity among all Israelis that has almost no parallel.²⁹

CONCLUSION

The evolution of sports in the Yishuv and the State of Israel has paralleled developments in Jewish society in the modern period. It has reflected the *sui generis* features of the Zionist Movement and the political changes in Yishuv and Israeli society. The attitude of Jewish society, the Yishuv, and Israel to sports activity was based on the realization of political goals that contributed to the shaping of Hebrew national identity. The more that political trends wanted to bestow national attributes on the “New Jew,” the more the sports clubs became the tools of social-political goals. This was especially true in Eretz-Israel, as opposed to the Diaspora where meta-national goals—such as the use of sports associations for mustering new disciples to Zionism and creating a healthy athletic image of the “New Jew”—were preserved and the Jewish sports clubs avoided sectoral identity.

The tension between the national use of sports for the needs of the Yishuv and state and the particularist use of sports for the needs of political parties is the leading theme in the history of sports in Eretz-Israel and the

State of Israel. The political tension in sports has dissipated only in recent years. Today, most Israeli clubs have lost their overtly sectoral identity, and are almost totally free of a particularist identity, or at best have a muted community identity. Hebrew sports have returned to their origins and now serve as the prime source of national pride.

NOTES

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1. There was a big difference between “gymnastics” and “sports” in the late nineteenth century. The gymnastics movements were opposed to sports, which were basically competitive and focused on results rather than process, whereas gymnastic exercises were designed for everyone and were aimed at the all-round development of physical skills. This argument petered out in the twentieth century when gymnastic clubs began participating in competitive sports. “Maccabi,” for example, defined itself from the outset as a “gymnastics association,” but among its activities it notes, “. . . the founding of Hebrew gymnastics and sports clubs.” (*Hamaccabi*, 2–3 (Summer 1919). The official name of its bulletin, *Hamaccabi*, defined itself as “a journal for gymnastics and sports affairs.”

2. For a comprehensive study on this club, see Dani Tzipper, *The Zionist Flag over the Bosphorus, Hamaccabi in Constantinople between Zionism and the Ottomans, 1895–1923* (Tel-Aviv, 2001) [Hebrew].

3. On the establishment of Jewish sports clubs, see *inter alia* Yosef Aviram, Meir Benahu, Immanuel Gil, Raphael Fenon (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Sport and Body Culture*, volume II, (Tel-Aviv, 1959) 457–64 [Hebrew]; Robert Atlas, *Bar-Kochva, Maccabi Germany 1898–1938* (Tel-Aviv, 1977) [Hebrew]; “Maccabi Russia in a General Historical Context” in George Eisen, Uri Miller, Haim Kaufman, Manfred Lammer (eds), *Sport and Physical Education in Jewish History* (Netanya, 2003) 116–125.

4. Harmot Becker, “The Jews and Anti-Semitism in the German Gymnastic Movement, 1810–1933,” in *Physical Education and Sport in Jewish History* (Netanya, 1977) 70–78 [Hebrew]; the quote is from Theodor Herzl, *Die Welt*, 5 October 1897; see also Arthur Ruppin, *Chapters in My Life, Youth and Early Maturity in the Diaspora* (Tel-Aviv, 1968) 97, 132, 133 [Hebrew].

5. For a summary of Yahan’s ideas, see Frederic Hertz, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, Benjamin Lowe (eds), *Sport and International Relations* (Illinois, 1978) 35–41. For a comprehensive survey of gymnastics development, see Yehoshua Aluf, “Gymnastics,” in *Hebrew Encyclopedia*, volume XV (Jerusalem, 1962) 678–701 [Hebrew].

6. See George Eisen, “A Brief History of the Sokol Sport,” in *The Proceedings*

of the 4th Annual Convention of the North American Society for Sport History (Eugene, OR, 1975) 46. See also Sokol in Czechoslovakia, (no name given) *Maccabi IV*, 1927, 5–6 [Hebrew].

7. For a detailed comparison between “the German Gymnastic Movement” and the “Jewish Gymnastics Movement,” see Yehoyakim Doron, Ph.D. diss. “Central Europe Zionism against German Ideologies, 1885–1914,” (Tel-Aviv, 1977) 384 ff. [Hebrew]. See also Yehoyakim Doron, “The Zionist Gymnastic Movement against the Background of German Social Values in the Second Reich (1894–1914),” in Yechiam Sorek (ed), *Selected Chapters in the History of Physical Education* (Netanya, 1986) 106–13 [Hebrew].

8. *Hamaccabi* often notes the link between “Maccabi” and “Sokol.” For example, Yosef Yekutieli points to “Sokol” as an example worthy of emulation by the Zionist leadership. (*Hamaccabi*, Winter 1926). Nahum Het stated that, “The Maccabi Movement always looked up to ‘Sokol’ to seek the correct path for the Jewish people just as ‘Sokol’s’ [path] was for the Czech people.” (*Hamaccabi*, Autumn 1937). For more laudatory comments on “Sokol,” see *Hamaccabi* Autumn 1927 and Summer 1936.

9. See Haim Kaufman, “The National Foundations and Components of the Term ‘Muscular Judaism,’” *Batnu’a*, III(3) (1996) 261–81 [Hebrew]; Yehiam Sorek, “Physical Culture and Sport in the Theories of the Zionist Movement’s Founding Fathers,” in Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (eds), *Physical Culture and Sport in Israel in the Twentieth Century, Idan*, 22, (Netanya, 2002) 9–24 [Hebrew]; Moshe Zimmerman, “Muscular Judaism—the Remedy for Jewish Anxiety,” *Zmanim*, 83 (2003) 56–65 [Hebrew].

10. The quote from the first issue of *Bar-Kochva* is taken from Robert Atlas, *Bar-Kochva, Maccabi Germany 1898–1938* (Tel-Aviv, 1977) 206 [Hebrew]. See the regulations of the “Jewish Gymnastics Movement” in Uriel Zimri and Immanuel Gil (eds), *Selected readings in the History of Physical Education*, volume I (Netanya, 1979) 89–91 [Hebrew].

11. Yogo Mayer Paul, “Jews, Equality-Egality, and Sport in Germany,” *Leo Baeck Yearbook*, 25 (1980) 221–41; George Eisen, “Zionism, Nationalism, and the Emergence of the Judische Turnerschaft,” *Leo Baeck Yearbook*, 28 (1983) 247–62; Zimri and Gil, *Leo Baeck Yearbook*, 28 (1983) 92–95.

12. Uriel Zimri, *Gymnastics and Sports Clubs in Eretz-Israel before the First World War* (Netanya, 1968) [Hebrew]. Haim Kaufman, “The Sport Club that Disappeared,” *Etmol*, 151 (2002) 18–28, [Hebrew].

13. Haim Kaufman, “The Clash between the Hapoel Association and Hamaccabi Federation during the Mandate over Participation in the Maccabi Games,” *Batnu’a*, III (1994) 52–55 [Hebrew].

14. Much material has been written on the political camps in Eretz-Israel during the British Mandate, see *inter alia* Mordechai Naor and Dan Giladi, *Eretz-Israel in the Twentieth Century* (Tel-Aviv, 1990) 218–229 [Hebrew]; Binyamin Eliav (ed), *The Jewish National Home* (Jerusalem, 1976) 242–280 [Hebrew].

15. Haim Kaufman, "The Founding of Hapoel Sport Federation, *Cathedra*, 80 (1996) 122–149 [Hebrew]; Haim Kaufman, "Maccabi versus Hapoel—the Creation of the Political Split in Eretz-Israel Sports," in Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (eds), *Physical Culture and Sport in Israel in the Twentieth Century*, *Idan 22* (Netanya, 2002) 89–112 [Hebrew].

16. On sports in "Beitar," see Shlomo Reznik, "The Sports Clubs in Beitar: Political Sports in a Divided Society," in Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (eds), *Physical Culture and Sport in Israel in the Twentieth Century*, *Idan 22* (Netanya, 2002) 184–85 [Hebrew].

17. Haim Kaufman, "The Ideological Link between Workers' Sports and the Hapoel Federation during the Mandate," *Batnu'a*, 3(1) (1995) 56–76 [Hebrew]. Amichai Alprovitz, "Israel and the Olympic Movement—Not Only Sports," in Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (eds), *Physical Culture in Israel in the Twentieth Century*, *Idan 22* (Netanya, 2002) 302–04 [Hebrew].

18. The Maccabiah International Games are recognized and approved by the International Olympic Committee. They are held every four years in Israel, and are open to athletes of the Jewish faith from all countries.

19. On sports in the service of the nation and the Yishuv's interests, see Hagai Harif, Ph.D. diss., "Sport and International Politics, the Political Functions of Representative Sports in the Yishuv and the State of Israel 1898–1960," (Ramat-Gan, 2002) 129–251 [Hebrew]. On eruptions of violence, see Haim Kaufman, "Maccabi versus Hapoel—The Creation of the Political Split in Eretz-Israel Sports," in Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (eds), *Physical Culture and Sport in Israel in the Twentieth Century*, *Idan 22* (Netanya, 2002) 98–100 [Hebrew]. On the importance of the Maccabi Games, see Zvi Zameret, "The Maccabi Games: The Jewish People's Olympic Games, in Kaufman and Harif, *Sport in Israel*, 113–128.

20. See Kaufman and Harif, *Ibid.*, 101–104.

21. *Hamaccabi*, Spring 1930, 244.

22. "Hashomer" (The Watchman) was an independent society of Jewish watchmen in Palestine in the early twentieth century.

23. On the gap between the ethos and the reality of physical education in the Yishuv, see Yitzhak Ram, "The Ideological Foundations of Physical Education in Eretz-Israel in the Beginning of the Twentieth Century," in Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (eds), *Physical Culture and Sport in Israel in the Twentieth Century*, *Idan 22* (Netanya, 2002) 51–80 [Hebrew]. See also Maya Dar, "And When is There Time to Exercise?—On the Apathy of the Establishment toward the Introduction of Physical Culture in Eretz-Israel," *Haya Haya, Bama Tzi'ira Libistoria*, 3 (2003) 73–92 [Hebrew]. A.D. Gordon's article first appeared in the daily *Davar*, 8 February 1926. This was the story of a Maccabi member in Hashomer, Zvi Nadav, "Half a Body Disappeared," *The Hashomer Book, Members Reminisce* (Tel-Aviv, 1957) 150–152 [Hebrew].

24. See Hagai Harif's Ph.D. diss., note 19; see also Hagai Harif, "We Must Clobber the Gentiles: The National Implication of the Soccer Games between the

Israeli and Soviet All-Star Teams in the Summer of 1956," *Cathedra*, 109 (2004) 111–130 [Hebrew].

25. See Alprovitz, "Israel and the Olympic Movement," note 17 above; and Haim Kaufman, "The Birth Pangs of the Olympic Committee," *Etmol*, 152 (2000) 8–10 [Hebrew].

26. For a version of the agreement, see Wingate Archives, 1.10/23; see also Immanuel Gil, *The Story of Hapoel* (Tel-Aviv, 1977) 263–264 [Hebrew]. On the meaning of "fifty-fifty," see also Amir Ben-Porat, *From Game to Merchandise—Israeli Soccer, 1948–1999* (Beer-Sheva, 2002) 91–108 [Hebrew].

27. For a discussion on these processes in Israeli soccer, see Ben-Porat, *From Game to Merchandise*, 127 ff.

28. Josef Maguire, *Global Sport* (London, 1999); Oz Almog, "From the 'Conquest of the Mountain' to Scoring a Goal: The Revolution in Professional Sports in Israel and its Influence on the Culture," *Mifneh*, 23 (1998) 32–37 [Hebrew].

29. Hagai Harif, "A Shadow Beclouds National Pride," *Panim*, 25 (2003) 66–72 [Hebrew].