

## **Processes That Shaped Sports in Israel During the 20th Century**

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The development of sport in any country is not a process in and of itself, but rather a reflection of historical, social, economical, political, and ideological processes that continuously shape the character of that country. Sport in Israel is no exception to this rule; therefore, the purpose of this article is to examine how certain historical events that took place during the 20th century influenced Israeli sport in its present state.

### **The Ideology of the Zionist Movement**

The Zionist movement, which was established by Theodore Herzl in 1897, coincides almost entirely with the 20th century. Zionism, which promoted the rejuvenation of the Jewish people and ultimately led to Jewish statehood, was a unique phenomenon in comparison with other liberation movements of its time. It aimed for the self-determination of a nation whose people, for the most part, were not to be found in their historical homeland and were dispersed around the globe. Nevertheless, the majority of Jews around the world maintained a strong historical–emotional awareness and connection to this ancient Biblical land. Although not all Jews immediately and unconditionally accepted Zionist goals and ideology, especially those who were highly religious or most assimilated into their communities, the Zionist movement strove to gain legitimacy within the Jewish community by promoting the idea of a national homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine.

Because the population that the movement addressed was dispersed throughout the world, two additional major goals were pursued. The first one was the creation of a new national culture through the revival of the Hebrew language and the creation

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of Hebrew poetry, literature, theater, and art. These elements were meant to reflect the revival of nationalism, thus creating a melting pot for Jewish people of different cultures united at that time solely by their common religion. The second major goal was the formation of the “New Jew,” who was expected to be different from the “Diaspora Jew” in both physical image and values. The expression *muscular Judaism*, coined by Max Nordau (Herzl’s associate in the Zionist movement), consisted of important ideological elements in the Zionist ethos, such as the desire to refute the image of the “Shtetl Jew” (Eastern European backward Jew) in reaction to racist political theories of the time, the physical rejuvenation of the nation, and the formation of a link between a person and his or her land, thereby building a foundation for national unity.<sup>1</sup>

The image of the Diaspora Jew as a weak and powerless person was partly based on reality but was also substantially exaggerated in the Zionist literature. For example, leaders of the Zionist movement such as Nordau, Mandelstamm, and Sokolov themselves described the Diaspora Jew in a derogatory manner.<sup>2</sup> To paraphrase, the Jew, who is always said to be groaning and coughing, is considered short, pathetic, and scrawny, and his movements are perceived as heavy to the point of misery. The Diaspora Jew is viewed as too “cerebral” and “spiritual,” lacking harmony of body and mind. The internalization of these anti-Semitic claims can be traced back to the *Haskala* (Enlightenment) movement, another source from which the Zionists obtained these negative images. The fact that these insulting descriptions quite accurately expressed the actual lack of physical activity among Eastern European Jews, however, cannot be ignored. Accordingly, the new Zionist philosophy expressed the desire to break free from the physical image of the feeble Diaspora Jew and to turn the image into a strong Jew who could physically cope with a hostile environment.

Muscular Judaism also aspired to develop military skills as a means of forming an orderly defense force. In the long run, therefore, the Jews regarded their sports unions also as organizations of protection in the Diaspora and as a guise for the security activities taking place in Palestine (i.e., prestatehood Israel). It is worth noting that the growth of Zionism, together with the emphasis on physical education as a highly significant means for the entire development of the New Jew, occurred simultaneously with the development of the race doctrine in Europe. According to this doctrine, the Jews suffered, as did the entire Semitic race, from inherited physical inferiority.<sup>3</sup> Muscular Judaism partially reflected these racist assumptions; for example, in his speech before the Zionist Congress in 1898, Nordau<sup>4</sup> called for the creation of a new breed of Judaism and went on to promote the romantic notion of a return to the ancient heroic past of the Jewish nation. As a result, the ancient past and its national heroes became a major object of identification, with the newly developing sports unions bearing the names of well-known heroes from the Jewish past, such as Bar-Kochba (Nordau’s own preferred hero, who led the revolt against the Roman Empire in 132–135), Samson, Bar-Giora (one of the leaders of the revolt against the Roman Empire in 69–70), and especially Yehuda the Maccabee (the most important leader of the Jewish revolt against the Seleucid empire in 166 BC).

This new Jewish preoccupation with sport became a central element in Zionist ideology in the creation of the New Jew, but it was also perceived as a unifying factor that was functional in directing the Zionist movement. More specifically, it

helped to foster the nurturing of a common identity, team spirit, unity of movement, discipline, and included everyone regardless of background or status. For example, *Maccabi*, which was the unifying organization of the national sports movement, explicitly perceived itself as serving the needs of the entire nation in its struggle for national liberation. It took on additional national tasks such as guard duty and fostering Hebrew language and culture.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that athletic activity was also attracting many Jews in the Diaspora who came to a Jewish club not necessarily for Zionist reasons, but were exposed to the national Zionist atmosphere through their participation. Therefore, the Zionist movement was not only a major amplifier of the Jewish preoccupation with sports in general but also led to the concrete formation of various national Jewish sports unions. Moreover, the image of the Muscular Jew, (i.e., a Jew is a man of the earth, an industrious pioneer who tills the land, is familiar with nature, and sees it as an organic part of his essence) was closely related to the agricultural settlement movement. For example, during his only visit to Palestine in 1898, Herzl was deeply impressed by the cavalrymen in Rehovot (one of the first Jewish agricultural settlements, established in 1891), who in no way reminded him of the “match sellers of the past.”<sup>6</sup> In the same period, Rabinzki—a well-known writer—spoke of “the work of the land which will heal the broken bodies of the sons of Israel.”<sup>7</sup>

Over the years Zionist ideology lost its significance as a major factor shaping the establishment and activities of Jewish sports organizations. Participation in Israeli sport became “normal,” no longer motivated by ideological considerations; instead, local patriotism and a sense of national pride are substitutes today for the ideological factors that Zionism attributed to regular athletic activities.

## The Role of Jewish Tradition

The formative years of prestatehood Israeli sports bear witness to the wide gap that existed between the declared ideology and its actual realization by the paragovernmental administration. The main principles of the ideology, which invented the term *muscular Judaism* in the Zionist ethos, seemingly created the impression that national sports would play a central role in the undertaking of the Jewish national revival. In reality, however, the situation was quite different. More specifically, prestatehood Israeli sport was viewed as quite marginal by the leading national institutions (i.e., the Jewish Agency and the National Committee) and was treated accordingly. For example, the support provided by the national institutions for sports was minimal; physical education struggled to maintain a nominal position in schools, and sports events received little exposure in the press.

This gap can be explained, at least partially, by the Eastern European origins of the leadership of the Jewish population of Palestine during the early years of the British Mandate. Whereas in Western Europe, especially in Germany, the Zionist movement had a strong impact on the establishment of sports unions, in Eastern Europe, which was under Russian control, their development was thwarted by at least two major factors. The first one was the Czarist regime, which prohibited any form of Jewish organizational life, let alone the establishment of sports unions. The second factor can be traced to the reluctance of the traditional Jewish community, which was historically quite hostile to any physical activity. An excellent example of Judaism’s alienated stance on physical fitness can be traced to the struggle against

Hellenistic reforms during the 2nd century B.C. when Greek sports customs became an essential element central to the lifestyle to be enforced on the Jews within the process of their assimilation into Greek culture.<sup>8</sup>

During the 18th century, physical fitness was associated with Jewish Haskala, a movement that emphasized ancient Greek values, such as viewing human beings and their physical needs in the center of thought. These ideas were rejected by and large by traditional Judaism—especially in Eastern Europe—and this rejection was at least in part responsible for the Jews' alienation from physical fitness in prestatehood Israel.<sup>9</sup>

This was the cultural heritage of the first leaders of the Yishuv (Jewish settlement in Palestine). Although they fought against the *traditions* of their parents, they did not completely reject their *values*. Because it was the Eastern European leadership that set the tone for many years (figures such as David Ben-Gurion, Itzhak Ben-Zvi, Levi Eshkol, and Golda Meir from the Second and Third *Aliya* [immigration] led the nation of Israel during its early years), sport was regarded as a low priority. As a consequence, a pronounced contradiction developed. Although the most visible signs of Zionist revival and awakening occurred in Eastern Europe, where the majority of Jews lived, most of the Jewish sports organizations were established in Western and Central Europe. Thus, a conflicting relationship often occurred between the actual awakening of the national Jewish movement and most of its sports unions. It should be noted that the first massive *Aliya*, which came from a Central European culture in which Jewish participation in sports was deeply ingrained, was to Palestine from Germany during the 1930's. This *Aliya*, however, hardly produced any substantial political leadership that shaped the character of the Yishuv—in sharp contrast to its dominance in areas such as economics or culture.<sup>10</sup>

This does not mean that the concept of muscular Judaism was completely rejected. In reality, however, the concept gained a much wider significance than just physical fitness, expressing mainly the need to form a Hebrew military force and encourage Hebrew labor. Although sports unions and those responsible for planning physical education at prestate schools were continuously emphasizing their ideological-national origins and commitments, they were in fact commonly perceived as merely providing entertainment and leisure activity rather than contributing to the accomplishment of national goals. One example of this approach can be found in a letter by A.D. Gordon, one of the leading philosophers of the Hebrew labor movement, to Maccabi in 1920. Gordon writes: "I understand exercise and sports as complementary to labor or as preparation for labor. But exercise and sports alone as a national movement, or as a unique movement trend, will never bring its followers to recognize the duty to labor."<sup>11</sup> Thus, it was physical labor (together with security missions, to be undertaken by the youth) that was meant to heal the Jewish people from "the illnesses of the Diaspora." Furthermore, it had economic and national value as a form of self-subsistence. As such, however, sport and physical activity were perceived as mere entertainment and therefore as unnecessary elements within "the heroic struggle for the national revival of a Jewish State"<sup>12</sup>.

In this context it should be noted that throughout the history of the Hebrew Yishuv and the State of Israel, an ethos of women who are completely equal to men and who carry an equal burden in all fields (including those considered "male") has

been fostered. Women fought in the underground military organizations, and today they have compulsory army service and hold positions of training and command. In addition, Golda Meir served as Prime Minister between the years 1968 and 1973. This ethos was created mainly during the formation of the Yishuv at the time of the British Mandate in Palestine (1918–1948) and was part of the image of the New Jew — the fighting *Sabra* (native-born Israeli) who is completely different from the Ghetto Jew (whose women held the traditional female role at home).

Historical development, however, showed this ethos to be inaccurate and rendered it a myth. For example, Bar-Eli and Spiegel<sup>13</sup> investigated patterns of stability and change related to women in Israeli elite sport. More specifically, they attempted to explore whether there was an increase over time in the participation of Israeli women athletes in the Olympic and *Maccabiah* Games (the Jewish Olympic Games) in terms of frequency, percentage, and proportion of participation, as well as number of types of sports in which women participated. In addition, the investigators attempted to follow the trends of (occupational) differentiation and segregation over time, as well as the specific patterns of women's differentiation (if one exists) in Israeli elite sport, as represented in the Olympic and Maccabiah Games.

In general, the results of Bar-Eli and Spiegel's study support the segmentation of the labor market approach that argues against a reduction in particularism in the social organization of labor. In other words, it seems that the processes revealed in the sport context are quite similar to those characterizing the labor market in general, not only in Israel but elsewhere. More specifically, the frequency, percentage, and proportion of Israeli male to female participation in both the Olympic and Maccabiah Games held between 1932 and 1992 have shown considerable stability (about 3–4 men per 1 woman), with the Olympic Games having a somewhat lower female participation rate. Although women were found to participate in a growing number of types of sports over time, high-average and stable levels of differentiation by gender were revealed in the Olympic and Maccabiah Games, respectively. In addition, an extremely high and stable concentration of women in separate "female" types of sports was revealed, especially in the Olympic Games. Bar-Eli and Spiegel concluded that a stable (occupational) differentiation of women exists in Israeli elite sport that is high in the Olympic Games and average to high in the Maccabiah Games. These amazingly stable tendencies were found to last even until 1996 in a later study conducted by Bar-Eli, Spiegel, and Yaaron.<sup>14</sup> Thus, women's status in Israeli sport seems to be quite inconsistent with the ethos of the New Jew. On the contrary, it is much more consistent with world-wide trends, which are mainly a function of socioeconomic forces (i.e., differential reward systems<sup>15</sup>) than with the Jewish religioethnic tradition affecting Israeli females' lives in general and their athletic careers in particular.

## The Sectarian–Political Society

One of the principal processes that has characterized Israeli sports for years, and which seems to be coming to an end, is politicization. This phenomenon existed mainly as a result of the sectarian nature of the development of the Yishuv, with various sport unions clearly identifying with different political movements.

In the 1920's the Jewish Settlement began to consolidate, with clear political camps being established. Despite repeated transformations, these camps, in their

basic form, became the foundation of the Israeli political system until the present time. The first of these was the “worker” camp, which began consolidating before World War I and grew substantially afterward. This political group was highly organized, and its various parties were united under the general *Histadrut* (Israeli Trade Union Organization). The *Histadrut*, besides being a professional union, regarded itself as an organization whose purpose was to carry out class and national struggles. According to this view, Hebrew workers were meant to be the pioneers leading the organization in order to accomplish the aims of the new society in the future state. The *Histadrut* perceived itself as having a leading role in the building of the nation and was, therefore, intensively involved, for example, in the absorption of immigrants into the *Yishuv*. It provided for the personal, cultural, and spiritual needs of workers—including their athletic interests.<sup>16</sup>

Another camp was formed among the urban bourgeois sector. This “civil” group was quite disparate in terms of ideology because each party actually represented a different professional sector (e.g., farmers, traders, and craftsmen). It was characterized mainly by its principal objection to socialist ideology and to the hegemony of the general *Histadrut* in the *Yishuv*. It supported private initiative and a capitalist economy. Of particular importance was the revisionist party, which developed within the civil camp; in addition to its liberal socioeconomic views, it fostered a clear national right-wing ideological identity. As a result of their active policy on these issues, the Revisionists became a major threat to the hegemony of the worker camp in the *Yishuv*.<sup>17</sup>

The religious political camp consisted of Zionists and ultra-orthodox, anti-Zionist parties. The ultra-orthodox Jewry regarded Zionism as a secular movement bringing about a natural as opposed to messianic redemption. As far as the ultra-orthodox were concerned, the development of physical fitness was perceived as an expression of modernization in general and of modern Jewish national culture in particular, both of which were to be strongly rejected. The ultra-orthodox Jews, therefore, shunned any involvement with physical fitness; moreover, they did everything possible to fight against the infiltration of modern culture in relatively religious cities such as Jerusalem. Religious Zionists, however, regarded Zionism as the beginning of redemption and as an expression of God’s will. Accordingly, physical fitness was perceived as a condition of national revival and as a means of strengthening the Jewish soul; it thereby acquired a kind of holiness.<sup>18</sup>

During the prestatehood phase, Jewish society lacked national public institutions. Therefore, each political group formed its own institutions, which also became tools in the ideological struggle among the various camps. For example, health funds, educational institutions, labor unions, youth movements, and underground army organizations were formed separately by each camp, with unique political identities. Similarly, sports unions were formed in prestatehood Israel that were also part of the very same process, being an outcome of the political struggle in the *Yishuv*. It should be noted that even much later, when the state of Israel was already established, sport was practically free from government control because it was linked to the political parties. The parties took on the sports organizations (*Maccabi*, *Hapoel*, *Elitzur*, *Beitar*) as a convenient tool for increasing the influence of their political ideology. This link has served to create a very strong parliamentary lobby for the sports organizations, which has been multisport in nature, a lobby

crossing the lines of government and opposition. This phenomenon can be traced back to prestatehood Israel.<sup>19</sup>

Initially, Hebrew sports were not meant to be political. With its founding in 1921 as an umbrella organization for existing local Maccabi unions founded in 1911–1912, Maccabi regarded itself as a physical exercise movement with super-status. It was meant to serve the needs of the entire nation in its struggle for national liberation, following the models of the “German gymnastics movement” and the “Sokol.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, at the beginning of the century, Maccabi functioned as an apolitical unifying framework for Hebrew youth from different backgrounds (such as farmers, workers, and urbanites) and was mainly supported by the middle class.<sup>21</sup> It tried its best to prevent the conflicts that were growing among its members, especially between the farmers and the workers, on issues such as Hebrew labor.

The politicization of Hebrew sports began with the formation of *Hapoel* (“the Worker”) between 1923 and 1926. The establishment of a sports union strictly for workers was a logical consequence of three processes: the growing number of workers in Palestine during the Third and Fourth Aliya period (1920–1928); the establishment of the Histadrut organization, including its various institutions intended to serve the working class in prestatehood Israel; and the increasing conflict among the political camps. In addition, international workers’ organizations were created at the beginning of the 1920’s, and Hapoel, which was supported by the Histadrut and the Left,<sup>22</sup> enthusiastically participated in their sport competitions.

The establishment of Hapoel as a separate workers’ sport union created a schism in prestatehood Israeli sport, contradicting Maccabi’s original purpose of forming super-status sports. In the early years of Hapoel, the Maccabi organization did everything possible to prevent this schism but was unsuccessful. As a result, Maccabi was driven to increasingly identify itself with the civil camp, developing strong links to the General Zionists (the Liberal and later the *Likud* Bloc) party. The politicization of prestatehood Israeli sports continued with the establishment of two more political sports organizations, namely *Beitar* and *Elizur*. Beitar was founded as a youth movement of the revisionist party in 1925; according to the revisionist military spirit, preoccupation with athletic activity was required for the purpose of achieving political goals through military means. In 1939 the religious Zionist movement founded its sport organization, *Elizur*, thereby completing the process of political separation in the Yishuv, which included most, if not all, societal domains, such as education, health, security (defense), and sports.<sup>23</sup>

The establishment of the State of Israel and the shift to the panoply of statehood did not put an end to the organizational politicization. For example, Hapoel and Maccabi had signed an agreement of cooperation in March 1948, but when the state of Israel was created two months later, the agreement was not enforced by either side. In 1951 two National Olympic Committees, one backed by Maccabi and the other by Hapoel, requested recognition from the International Olympic Committee. Both NOCs were refused recognition, and the possibility that Israel would not be allowed to participate at the Helsinki Olympics of 1952 became imminent.

At the urging of Hapoel, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs intervened, and Maccabi and Hapoel managed to work out a new agreement. According to this agreement, all sports bodies in the state would be run on a parity basis, each side represented by 50% of the members. That agreement held for about a dozen years,

and only in the early 1960s did the sports federations gradually adopt statutes of a truly democratic nature. As a result, Hapoel gained dominance in practically all national sports federations. It should be added that nationalization in the early 1950s would have, for all practical purposes, given Hapoel the same dominance because it was aligned with the party in power.<sup>24</sup>

The political schism and the resulting hostility among the sports unions lasted many years after the establishment of the State and influenced the structure of the leagues, national representation, and the distribution of resources for sports.<sup>25</sup> This structure continued to exist even after the nurturing ideology lost its significance. It should be mentioned here that after the declaration of statehood in 1948, most spheres of society, including the economy, the media, and the higher-education system, as well as the organization of sport, were regulated by the state and controlled by political parties. Since the late 1960s, however, greater autonomy has been given to the private sector, and the country is gradually moving toward a free-market economy.

During the 1990s, privatization processes occurred in several domains, and sport and higher education were among them. Consequently, at present Israeli society has become quite similar to most other capitalist societies in which wealth is becoming increasingly concentrated in fewer hands.<sup>26</sup> Because the trend toward capitalism has occurred under both the right-wing *Likud* party and the left-wing Labor party over the last three decades, it seems to reflect global developments in addition to the influence of internal shifts in Israeli politics. Thus, Israeli society's move toward capitalism and, in recent years, the privatization of sports organizations have brought about the beginning of the end of processes that began in the 1920's in the Hebrew Yishuv in Palestine.

Politicization influenced not only the structural level but also the quality of sports—especially on the competitive and elite level. The ideological basis upon which the unions rested obliged them to maintain a framework of amateur sports because resistance to professionalism was one of the ideological building blocks of all the Hebrew sports unions and, in particular, that of the dominant Hapoel. Because most of the competitive and highly popular ball teams belonged to political parties, professional and independent unions like those in Europe could not be established. The transition toward professionalism, however, gradually permeated the traditional unions and, towards the end of the 1990's, was almost complete.<sup>27</sup>

## The Legacy of British Mandatory Rule

After World War I the British Empire reached its peak and controlled large parts of the world. The Empire began to collapse after World War II, but its cultural heritage persists to the present day. For example, the most popular types of sports in countries previously governed by Great Britain, such as India and Pakistan, are often typically British sports, (e.g., cricket, hockey, and rugby).

Great Britain controlled Palestine for thirty years (1918–1948). During this period, the Yishuv in prestatehood Israel created autonomous frameworks for itself that were quite independent of British culture. The tendency was, for example, to develop a new Hebrew culture; therefore, other cultural influences were rejected because they could endanger the aspiring new national-cultural hegemony. Sometimes these changes were conducted quite zealously and violently; such was the

case with the “Regiment of the Defenders of the Language,” which demanded the use of the Hebrew language by force. As a result, English did not become the spoken language in use in Israel. Furthermore, many Jewish citizens did not have an appropriate command of the English language—a situation that has recently been changed because of degree to which American culture affects the State of Israel. In general, then, British culture was not favored by the Jewish population of the Yishuv and neither were some of their most popular sports, such as cricket and hockey, so closely identified with British colonialism.

One exception to this rule was soccer, which was played in prestatehood Israel even before the British occupation. The contribution made by the British to the development of this branch of sport, however, was decisive. More specifically, the British forces in Palestine fostered their own soccer teams and played against Jewish teams, which were gradually forming. The British also organized tournaments in which prestatehood Jewish teams participated. These tournaments attracted a great deal of attention and were a high priority among the various teams of the British army.

In 1927, High Commissioner Plummer made the decision to reduce the number of British forces in Palestine. As a result, a new phase in the organization of soccer began in prestatehood Israel. A soccer union was established in 1928, and its management included Jewish, Arab, and British members. British teams played in the Cup and League games, with the British Police Force even winning the Championship in 1932. Nevertheless, Hebrew teams increasingly set the tone, although a renewed boom in British participation in soccer began during World War II when a considerable number of British soldiers were stationed in Palestine. At that time the press was filled with accounts of soccer games between the British and Hebrew teams. Thus, in contrast to the Yishuv’s general lack of interest in most of the cherished pastimes of the British Empire, it could not resist the captivating charm of soccer. Apparently, the unshaken hegemony of soccer today among Israeli sports is a unique legacy left by the British Mandatory rule.

## Mass Immigrations

The national home created in prestatehood Israel was not meant to be the home solely of those inhabiting it, but rather was intended for Jews to emigrate to in the future. This concept characterizes the State of Israel to this day, for by definition it is the State of the Jewish people at large and not just the State of its present citizens. That is to say that every Jew—wherever he or she resides—is considered a potential citizen of the State and can become one by choice.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the development of sports in pre- and poststatehood Israel, as in all other fields, is not only a product of internal processes but is also an outcome of the different waves of *aliyot* (immigrations), which dramatically influenced the demographic, cultural, economic, and social equilibrium of the Jews in prestatehood Israel, as it continues to do today. The *aliyot* in Zionist historiography were given numbers (the First, the Second, etc.) until 1939, after which they acquired titles such as the Illegal Aliya of 1939–1947, the Mass Aliya of the 1950’s, the Russian Aliyot of the beginning of the 1970’s and 1990’s, etc.

The beginning of institutionalized sports in prestatehood Israel occurred during the Second Aliya period (1903–1914), under the influence of an awakening in

national Jewish sports in the Diaspora and the formation of the “Jewish Gymnastics Movement” during the sixth Zionist Congress in Basel in 1903. The first sports society in prestatehood Israel was established in Jaffa in 1906 under the name of “Rishon Lezion Jaffa,” which over the years became known as “Maccabi Tel-Aviv”—one of Israel’s leading sport clubs up to the present. As was previously mentioned, Maccabi Eretz Israel, the umbrella organization of local Maccabi unions in Palestine, was established in 1912.<sup>29</sup> The founders of sport unions in prestatehood Israel were, for the most part, *olim* (new immigrants) from Eastern Europe (mainly from Russia and Poland) that lacked tradition and knowledge in the field of sports. Records from that period reveal a lack of suitable physical education teachers; therefore, from time to time there was a need to import physical education teachers from countries with a rich sport tradition, such as Germany. Even the approval of physical education as a school subject met with difficulties that, at least in part, stemmed from resistance by parents who saw this as a waste of time and/or feared their children would be injured.<sup>30</sup>

A more significant development in prestatehood Israel’s Jewish sports occurred during the Third and Fourth Aliyot (1919–1924). For example, the establishment of Hapoel during the Fourth Aliya was influenced by the large wave of working-class immigrants; during the Third Aliya this sector grew from 2,000 to 32,000 people. It is significant that a large part of this immigration came from Poland, because in contrast to the youth of the Second Aliya who came without any sports background, the youth of the Third and Fourth Aliya were, to a greater extent, already active in the Jewish sports unions established in Poland after World War I.

The most substantial demographic increase during the British Mandate period occurred during the Fifth Aliya (1932–1939), when the number of Jews in prestatehood Israel doubled from 200,000 to 400,000. This aliya, when compared with previous ones, included a major population of Jews from Western Europe, especially Germany (about 60,000), who imported their established sports traditions to prestatehood Israel. As a result, development intensified in the various branches of sport, the number of athletes and trained physical education teachers significantly increased, and higher professional standards were set. Moreover, in this period, the Maccabiah Games were initiated, with two Maccabiot taking place—in 1932 and 1935.<sup>31</sup>

The Maccabiah Games, which are considered to be the Jewish Olympic Games, were originally initiated by Maccabi, the first Jewish world sport organization, and were first conducted in Palestine in 1932; by 1997 the Maccabiah Games had been held 15 times (in principle, every four years). It should be noted that a substantial number of the participants in the early Maccabiot did not return to their native countries, but became active citizens and athletes in prestatehood Israel.

The mass immigrations after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 have also contributed their share to the development of sport. For example, one can list the unique contributions of new immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who are now dominant among Israel’s representatives to many international sport competitions.

## The Geopolitical Status of Israel

The international status of Israeli sport, as well as factors determining its success or failure, is an outcome of the unique geopolitical status of Israel. One of the central factors in the formation of the State of Israel has been its relationship with

its Arab neighbors. For most of its history as a state, Israel's neighbors have failed to recognize its existence, and Israel has been involved in an on-going political and military struggle for survival. This reality has determined the policies and actions of the State and has influenced all of its systems, including sports.

The ongoing political conflict has had several consequences. The most immediate one was the fact that Israel has found itself in regional isolation, as opposed to "normal" countries that frequently compete with their neighbors and mutually improve their athletic achievements as a result. Moreover, in addition to their refusal to compete with Israeli athletes, the Arab states used all their influence to keep Israeli sports out of international tournaments and organizations. As a result, Israeli participation in the Mediterranean Sea Games, for example, was denied. Furthermore, Israel has been kept out of the Asian Games since the 1970's. What's more, security problems have arisen as a result of this situation; Israeli athletes have been under constant threat of terrorism, which reached an apex with the murder of 11 members of the Israeli Olympic Team at the Munich Olympics in 1972.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, many countries have chosen not to invite Israeli athletes unless the tournaments were major ones. This has seriously damaged Israel's ability to participate in friendly, nonofficial competitions, which are crucial preparations for official competitions.

Israel participated in the Olympic Games for the first time in 1952 in Helsinki; two years later Israel participated for the first time in the Asian Games, which were held in Manila. Israel has taken part in all subsequent Olympic Games with the exception of the 1980 Moscow Games when it joined U.S. President Carter's boycott.<sup>33</sup> An excellent example of security considerations playing a major role in this context can be seen in events that occurred in 1956. More specifically, after the Sinai military campaign of 1956, while the army reserves were still mobilized, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion decided to intervene and determine the size of the Israeli delegation to the Melbourne Olympics. He drastically reduced the size of the delegation and included only two delegation heads (one from Hapoel and one from Maccabi), two male athletes, one female athlete, and a basketball official who had been invited by the international basketball federation (FIBA).<sup>34</sup>

As for Israel's boycott of the Olympic Games in Moscow, in early 1980 the government forced the issue with the sports organizations. On May 22 of that year, a few days before the end of the registration period for the Moscow Olympic Games, the Olympic Committee of Israel, under pressure from the *Likud* government, reversed its previous decision to participate in the Games and joined the Carter-initiated boycott. It was reported at the time that the government hinted strongly that if the decision were not reversed, it would change the law of the Sports Betting Board (on whose income the sports movement had come to rely) so that economic assistance would be substantially reduced.<sup>35</sup>

After the 1974 Asian Games in Teheran, Israel was forced to end its involvement in Asian sports as a result of political pressure from the Arab states. After its expulsion from sports on the Asian continent, Israel decided to pursue integration into the European sports scene. A major obstacle, however, was the objection of the Soviet Union, which continued until the political upheavals in the Communist Bloc in 1989. That year Soviet athletes appeared in Israel for the first time after a 22-year boycott dating from the end of the Six-Day War. Since then, Israel has come close to full integration into European sports.

As mentioned above, Soviet pressure dealt a hard blow to Israel because it was not permitted to play against any of the Eastern Bloc countries despite its acceptance by various institutions such as the UEFA (i.e., the United European Football Association) or FIBA. For example, in 1977, Maccabi Tel-Aviv participated in the European Basketball Cup. The Soviet and Czech champion teams refused to host the Israeli team or to be hosted in Tel-Aviv. As a result, Maccabi Tel-Aviv won two games by default; the remaining two games between Maccabi Tel-Aviv and these teams took place on neutral fields in Europe. Paradoxically, this situation helped Maccabi Tel-Aviv, contributing to the team's winning the European Champions' Cup for the first time. It should be noted that for several years afterwards, games between Maccabi Tel-Aviv and Soviet teams were played within the framework of the European Champion's Cup and took place only in neutral countries such as Belgium.

Although Israel's sport organizations were searching for ways to become integrated into European sports in the beginning of the 1950s, there was pressure from the government, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to integrate into Asian sport. The official government policy at that time was that because Israel was part of the Asian continent, it should establish links with that continent, despite the fact that Israel was surrounded by hostile Arab states with which relations of any kind could not be established. In retrospect, however, it seems obvious that from a professional point of view, integration with Europe, where sport is more qualitative, would have been of greater benefit to Israeli sports. The controversy ended as a result of external circumstances, as mentioned above, when Israel was ejected from Asia in 1976 by the Federation of the Nations of Asia under pressure from Arab nations. The alienation of Israel from Asia and the fact that for many years Israel was not accepted by UEFA because of Soviet pressure obliged the Israeli national soccer team, for example, to go as far as Oceania and the South Pacific for the Pre-Mondial Games in 1985.<sup>36</sup>

In recent years the situation has seen some improvement. Nevertheless, peace with Egypt and Jordan, as well as improved relations with Arab nations not sharing a border with Israel (such as Morocco and the Gulf nations) have not yet brought about friendly competitions between their athletes and those from Israel. The disintegration of the Communist Bloc has also decreased Israel's isolation. As a result of these developments (i.e., the increasing openness toward Israel by other countries and Israel's simultaneously decreasing isolation), the quality of Israeli sport has begun to improve steadily.

## Conclusion

The fact that Israeli sport, on an international scale, is usually considered to be mediocre cannot be explained simply by the fact that Israel is a small country. After all, countries of similar size and population, such as Holland, Denmark, Uruguay, or even Jamaica, have made much more impressive achievements in this area. It seems that the situation of sport in Israel is, to a great extent, an outcome of historical processes discussed in detail here. Such processes have shaped the general character of society in Israel and the status of sports in particular. These conclusions should be further validated through future research.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Max Nordau, *Zionist Writings* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Zionist Library, 1956) 108-109.
- <sup>2</sup>See, for a review, Haim Kaufman, "The National Elements and Components of the Term 'Muscular Judaism'," *Movement 3* [Hebrew] (1996): 263.
- <sup>3</sup>Shmuel Etinger, *History of Israel in Modern Time* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1968), 159-162.
- <sup>4</sup>Max Nordau, *Zionist Writings*, 117.
- <sup>5</sup>Haim Kaufman, "The National Elements," 277-279.
- <sup>6</sup>Theodor Herzl, *In Front of Nation and World* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, The Zionist Library, 1961), 343.
- <sup>7</sup>Shmuel Almog, *Zionism and History* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), 79-80.
- <sup>8</sup>Haim Kaufman, "The Relation Between Judaism, Zionism and Physical Fitness—An Historical Perspective," *Movement 5* [Hebrew] (1999): 226-248; Manfred Keammer, "Jason's Gymnasium in Jerusalem" in *Proceedings of the 1972 Pre-Olympic Seminar on the History of Physical Education and Sport in Asia*, ed. U. Simri, 51-70 (Netanya, Israel: Wingate Institute, 1972).
- <sup>9</sup>Haim Kaufman, "The Relation Between Judaism, Zionism and Physical Fitness," 226-248.
- <sup>10</sup>Mordechai Naor and Dan Giladi, *Eretz-Israel in the 20th Century* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Israel Defence Ministry, 1990), 231-234.
- <sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, footnote 2, 278.
- <sup>12</sup>Haim Kaufman, "The Relation Between Judaism, Zionism and Physical Fitness," footnote 2, 276-279.
- <sup>13</sup>Michael Bar-Eli and Adara Spiegel, "Israeli Women in the Olympic and Maccabiah Games, 1932–1992: Patterns of Stability and Change," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 31 (1996): 385-406.
- <sup>14</sup>Michael Bar-Eli, Adara Spiegel, and Michal Yaaron, "Patterns of Participation of Israeli Women in Olympic and Maccabiah Games, 1932-1996," *Movement 4* [Hebrew] (1998): 295-318.
- <sup>15</sup>Ronit Hanegbi, "Short-term Careers of Female Tennis Players in Israel," *Physical Education and Sport* 52 [Hebrew] (1997): 25-26.
- <sup>16</sup>Haim Kaufman, "Zionist Sports Unions—From National Sports to Political Sports," *Zmanim* 63 [Hebrew] (1998): 89-88.
- <sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.
- <sup>18</sup>Aharon Arend, "Physical Culture in the Rabbinical Literature in Recent Generations," in *History of Sport in Israel*, ed. Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif, (published within the framework of "Idan" Series), (Jerusalem:Yad Ben-Zvi, In Press).
- <sup>19</sup>Michael Bar-Eli and Uriel Simri, "The Governmental Sports Policy in the State of Israel," in *History of Sport in Israel*, ed. Haim Kaufman and H. Harif, (published within the framework of "Idan"-Series), (Jerusalem:Yad Ben-Zvi, In Press); Uriel Simri, Gershon Tenenbaum, and Michael Bar-Eli, "The Governmental Sports Policy of the State of Israel," in *National Sports Policies: An International Handbook*, ed. Laurence Chalip, Arthur Johnson, and Lisa Stachura, 241-252 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996).
- <sup>20</sup>George Eisen, "Zionism, Nationalism and the Emergence of the 'Judische Turnerschaft,'" *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 28 (1983): 247-262.
- <sup>21</sup>Haim Kaufman, "The Confrontation During the Mandate Period Between Hapoel and Maccabi on the Background of the Maccabiah Games," *Movement 2* [Hebrew] (1994): 52-60.
- <sup>22</sup>Haim Kaufman, "The Establishment of the Hapoel Sport Association," *Kathedra* 80 [Hebrew] (1996):122-149.
- <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, footnote 16, 90.
- <sup>24</sup>Michael Bar-Eli and Uriel Simri, "The Governmental Sports Policy in the State of Israel"; Haim Kaufman, "The Birth of the Israeli Olympic Committee." *Etmol* 152 [Hebrew] (2000): 8-10.

<sup>25</sup>Nurit Reshef and Jeremy Paltiel, "Partisanship and Sport: The Unique Case of Politics and Sport in Israel." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 6 (1989): 305-318; Nurit Reshef and Jeremy Paltiel, "Partisanship and Sport: The Unique Case of Politics and Sport in Israel," in *Sport Sociology: Contemporary Themes*, ed. Andrew Yiannakis, Thomas McIntyre, and Merrill Melnick, 51-64 (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1993).

<sup>26</sup>Amir Ben-Porat, *State and Capitalism in Israel* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993).

<sup>27</sup>Amir Ben-Porat, "The Commodification of Football in Israel," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 33 (1998), 269-276; Amir Ben-Porat, "How Much has 'Hapoel' Done? The Transformation of Israeli Soccer into Merchandise," *Megamot* 39 [Hebrew] (1999): 517-534.

<sup>28</sup>Itzhak Raphael, "The Struggle for Mass Immigration," in *Mass Immigration, 1948-1952*, ed. Mordechai Naor (published within the framework of "Idan" Series), 19-30 [Hebrew] (Jerusalem; Yad Ben-Zvi, 1986).

<sup>29</sup>Uriel Simri, *Sports Unions and Pre-Statehood Israeli Sport before World War I*. [Hebrew] (Netanya: Wingate Institute, 1971).

<sup>30</sup>Meir Bnayahu, *Zvi Nishri: A Biography* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Physical Education Teachers' Organization, 1951).

<sup>31</sup>Mordechai Naor and Dan Giladi, *Eretz-Israel in the 20th Century*, 122-142, 154-177, 230-251; Haim Wein, *The Maccabiah-Games in Eretz-Israel* [Hebrew] (Netanya: Wingate Institute, 1980); Geirge Eisen, "The Maccabian Games," (PhD. Diss., University of Maryland, 1979).

<sup>32</sup>Amichai Alperovich, "Israel and the Olympic Movement: Not Only sport," in *History of Sport in Israel*, ed. Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif, (published within the framework of "Idan"-Series), (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, in press).

<sup>33</sup>Hagai Harif, "Sport and Foreign Policy: Israel and the Boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games, 1980," in *History of Sport in Israel*, ed. Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif, (published within the framework of "Idan"-Series), (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, in press)

<sup>34</sup>Michael Bar-Eli and Uriel Simri, "The Governmental Sports Policy in the State of Israel."

<sup>35</sup>Hagai Harif, "Sport and Foreign Policy."

<sup>36</sup>Uriel Simri, *Sports and International Politics* [Hebrew] (Netanya: Wingate Institute, 1986).