

SPORTS AND JUDAISM

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In a famous 1980's satirical comedy film, one scene depicts a flight attendant asking a passenger if he would like something to read on the trip. He asks for something with a very short text, and she hands him a magazine called “*Greatest Jewish Athletes*” described in the film as “the world's shortest book.” This exemplifies a commonly accepted notion that Jews generally do not participate in sports, and if they do, they certainly do not excel in them. This chapter will examine this perception, and show why it is a misconception, in the past as well as today. It will also attempt to show how the attitude of traditional Judaism towards sports is both complex and multi-layered. Is there a difference, from the Jewish perspective, between participating in sports and watching them as entertainment? Are any sports more forbidden or permitted from a Jewish viewpoint? Let us examine these and other questions through the sources.

SPORTS IN THE JEWISH BIBLE

References to and the participation of Jews in sports are already found in the Prophets and the Psalms. The practice of shooting arrows at a target is mentioned in the books of Samuel, Job and Lamentations.¹ The idea of attaining proficiency in slinging a stone to hit a target can be seen not only in the famous story of David and Goliath, but also in other contexts in Samuel and Zachariah.² Long jumping³ and running⁴ are used as metaphors by King David, indicating that these activities were already prevalent at that time, and that is the reason they could be used as imagery in poetry and music. All of these sports and skills mentioned, like those in all other societies in ancient times, relate to the aptitude that was needed in these activities as a preparation to wage war, and only later did these activities become entertainment sports.

There are also numerous references to feats of strength in the Torah, as this aptitude of brute strength, often needed and used in numerous sports, seems to be admired in Judaism. Jacob used his considerable physical strength to remove the large stone covering the town well, an act that normally required several shepherds to accomplish.⁵ Moses performed a similar feat of strength for the daughters of Jethro.⁶ Samson's great strength is well-known, and it was this unique quality that allowed him to kill one thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey.⁷ One of the physical characteristics that made King Saul worthy of the monarchy was his unusual great height and strength.⁸

¹ I Samuel 20:20, Job 16:12, Lamentations 3:12

² Judges 20:16, I Samuel 17:40, Zachariah 9:15

³ Psalms 19:6

⁴ Psalms 18:30

⁵ Genesis 29:6-10

⁶ Exodus 2:15-19

⁷ Judges 15:15-16

⁸ I Samuel 9:2 with Malbim commentary

But the most dramatic sports reference in the Jewish Bible is the story of the confrontation between Avner and Yoav.⁹ These two opposing camps during King David's rule met, and each side selected twelve athletes to compete against each other in various sports. This athletic confrontation and competition did not end well, as immediately afterwards both sides engaged in war, in which the forces of Avner defeated the army of Yoav. This first negative association of sports and Judaism foreshadowed some of the later opinions about sports in Jewish thought.

SPORTS IN THE TIME OF THE TALMUD

Although no direct description of sports activities is mentioned in the Talmud, there is ample evidence in many of the Talmud's legal discussions to infer that sports were an integral part of Jewish life in Talmudic times. For example, in describing the Temple service performed by the *Kohanim*-Priests, the very first and prestigious daily service was to remove the ashes from the Altar. Since many *Kohanim* desired this privilege, a footrace was held, and the fastest *Kohen*-Priest would be granted this honor.¹⁰ If the result of the race was a tie, then a lottery would be held to determine the winner. Later on, after one Kohen was injured in a race, they abandoned this practice and only conducted lots to determine which Kohen would perform this service. This shows that not only were activities we associate with sports encouraged, but it was even a part of the daily activities in the Temple (as long as it proved safe).

In determining which objects become ritually impure and which do not, the Mishna discusses the status of a ball, and which type of balls are ritually pure and which are ritually impure.¹¹ The inside of those ancient balls were made of cloth or grass. This demonstrates that balls used for playing sports were prevalent in Mishnaic times.

In describing the final day of the Sukkot holiday, now called Hoshana Rabbah, a day in which the *Arava*-willow is beaten as part of the service, the Mishna declares that after the service, the children would play some kind of sport or game with the *Lulavim*-Palms Branches and eat the *Etrogim*-Citrons.¹² The Talmud explains this practice¹³ and Rashi gives the details, writing that the adults would try, as a sport or game, to take the Lulavim from the children as a way of adding to the joy of the holiday.¹⁴ After citing Rashi's explanation, Tosafot disagree and says that this was a sport played exclusively by the children.¹⁵

In a different context, the Talmud deliberates the culpability of accidentally killing an individual with a ball that ricochets off a wall.¹⁶ Once again, Rashi describes in greater detail how this game was played in Talmudic times, which is remarkably like the sport of handball played today.¹⁷

SPORTS IN JEWISH COMMUNITIES AFTER TALMUDIC TIMES

In the thirteenth century, a question of Jewish law was presented to Tzadok ben Aryeh the Doctor.¹⁸ He was asked about carrying a leather ball on Shabbat, a ball filled with hair or a ball made of wood, and whether these could be used to play sports on Shabbat, which he forbade. Thus, we see that Jews were also actively playing ball sports in The Middle Ages. The Tosafot commentary,

⁹ II Samuel 2:12-17

¹⁰ Mishna, Yoma 2:1-2

¹¹ Mishna Kelim 29:1, 10:4, 23:1

¹² Mishna Sukkah 4:7-8

¹³ Sukkah 46b

¹⁴ Rashi commentary on Sukkah 46b

¹⁵ Tosafot commentary on Sukkah 46b, s.v. "Miyad"

¹⁶ Sanhedrin 77b

¹⁷ Rashi commentary on Sanhedrin 77b

¹⁸ Shibolei Leket, Shabbat 121

which was previously cited in discussing the sports played on the last day of Sukkot, also mentions¹⁹ that in his time (France and Germany in The Middle Ages) it was the custom at Jewish weddings for the friends of the groom to engage in jousting contests while riding on horses! This was done in order to fulfill the obligation to make the groom and bride happy at their wedding. In comparison, some of the outrageous activities and wild performances seen at some religious Jewish weddings today (for the same purpose) actually seem very mild. An authority in Jewish law around the same period actually rules²⁰ that when jousting at weddings, if one of the Jewish jousters gets hurt, his clothing is ruined or the horse is damaged, the injured party cannot sue for damages since the purpose was to gladden the groom and any damage is understood as accidental.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yoel Halevi (known as Raviyah) lived in Germany a century earlier and writes of a question in Jewish law presented to him involving a suit of armor.²¹ A Jew borrowed a suit of armor from his friend in order to participate in a tournament, and he left a certain amount of money as a surety. The armor was lost, and only much later did the friend demand more compensation than originally given as surety. Dr. Aptowitzer, the editor of this volume who cites this text, asserts that this is first written proof that Jews participated in sport tournaments as early as the 1100's. Tosafot also mentions ball playing in his time.²²

In 1386, there were also tournaments in Wiesenfeld, Germany involving Jews. In the 1400's, sports competitions in Germany, in which Jews actively took part, also involved running, jumping, throwing and bowling. At a popular festival in fifteenth century Rome, Jews participated in its sports competitions, in which each day of the week was designated for a different category according to age and ethnicity. Tuesday was reserved for Jews. Jews excelled in these games in the years 1487, 1502 and 1513. In the sixteenth century, a famous Jew named Ott was so outstanding at the Augsburg, Germany games, that he was invited by the Austrian prince to train his courtiers.²³

The problem of playing or not playing ball games on Shabbat has been an issue in the Jewish community for centuries. In every society that this is discussed, there necessarily must have been Jews who clearly desired to play sports on Shabbat and who were playing at other leisure times already. In the sixteenth century, the Shulchan Aruch ruled that playing sports on Shabbat and the Festivals was forbidden for Jews of Sephardic descent, but Rabbi Isserles permitted these sports activities for the Ashkenazi world.²⁴ Rabbi Isserles, in a different section, again emphasizes the permissibility of sports activity on Shabbat.²⁵ But all agreed that playing sports was permitted and apparently took place extensively in the Jewish community on non-Shabbat days. In the early twentieth century, the issue of playing sports on Shabbat was still a raging debate, and the pre-eminent authority on Jewish law, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, writes that though certainly sports add to the joy of the Festival, it should be restricted to children and not be played by adults.²⁶

In contemporary times, in fact, there are ample records of Jews both participating and excelling in professional sports, contradicting the stereotype that Jews are not athletes. In the United States, for example, Jews have participated in all the major sports of baseball, basketball and American Football. Dolph Schayes, for example, was designated and honored as one of the 50

¹⁹ Tosafot commentary on Sukkah 46b, s.v. "*Miyad*"

²⁰ Or Zarua, Sections 2, Hilchot Sukkah and Lulav 315

²¹ Responsa of Raviya, 1027, brought in "Sefer Mavo Raviyah"

²² Tosafot Commentary on Beitzah 12a, s.v. "Chag"

²³ Encyclopedia Judaica, 15:292-293

²⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 308:45

²⁵ Rabbi Moshe Isserles (Rema) on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 518:1

²⁶ Mishne Berurah commentary on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 518, no. 9

greatest NBA (National Basketball Association) players ever. In swimming, until Michael Phelps broke his records, the greatest swimmer was Mark Spitz who achieved seven gold medals at the 1972 Olympics. Nancy Lieberman, one of the greatest women's basketball players ever, played and coached in the WNBA, and is a member of the Basketball Hall of Fame. Aly Raisman captained the gold medal-winning American Gymnastic team and also received an individual gold medal in gymnastics at the 2012 Olympic Games. But in order to demonstrate how extensively Jews were involved in sports, we will select just one country and one specific sport as an example – baseball, America's pastime.

The very first professional baseball player ever in 1866 was a Jew named Lipman E. (Lip) Pike. In the early days of baseball, William Nash, a third baseman, was a member of the pennant winning Boston teams of 1890-1893. James Roseman, an outfielder, was a player on the New York team that won the pennant in 1884. Erskine Mayer, a pitcher, led his team to win twenty-one games in each of the 1914 and 1915 seasons with Philadelphia, and in those same seasons, Benjamin Kauf was the batting champion of the Federal League. Buddy Meyer won the American League batting title in 1935 with a .349 average, with a .303 lifetime batting average and two World Series. Hank Greenberg, the superstar of his era, was looked up to by all Americans, and hit fifty-eight home runs in 1938 (second only to Babe Ruth for 23 years), won two MVP awards and is in Baseball's Hall of Fame. Al Rosen was the Most Valuable Player (MVP) in 1953, and Larry Sherry won the MVP of the 1959 World Series. Sandy Koufax was arguably the best pitcher in baseball ever, and the youngest man ever elected to baseball's Hall of Fame. Both he and Hank Greenberg refused to play in the World Series on Yom Kippur, an act of principle to their Jewish faith that was very difficult due to its unpopularity at the time. (Most Jewish baseball players have never had to face this conflict.) Koufax later won two games in that World Series, including the finale that won the championship for his 1965 Dodgers team.

Steve Stone won twenty-five games in 1980 and received the Cy Young Award as the best pitcher. Ian Kinsler (born in 1982) is a three time all-star, who went 6 for 6 in one game (and hit for the cycle) and is one of less than fifteen players ever to hit thirty home runs and steal thirty bases in the same season. Finally, Ryan Braun won the MVP award in 2011, and is one of the premier players in the game (despite his 2013 suspension).

Clearly, Jews have been active in baseball (and all professional sports), and have often risen to the top ranks. Thus, anyone who claims that Jews do not play sports and do not excel in sports is clearly mistaken.

JEWISH ATTITUDE TO SPORTS

There is no clear statement in the Torah, Mishna and Talmud Bavli concerning how Judaism regards sports. There is one opinion in the Jerusalem Talmud cited below that the town of Tur Shimon was destroyed because they played sports. Yet, the foot racing up the Temple Altar implies competition dependent on one's physical condition were not only tolerated and maybe even approved of. And, yet, an analysis of the term in Hebrew for sports (as we will see below) seems to indicate a negative attitude of Judaism towards participation in these kinds of activities.

Part of the Jewish attitude towards sports can be gleaned from the Hebrew verb for engaging in sports, used both in the Prophets as well as today in Modern Hebrew: *Lisachek*. This is the identical verb used in other contexts in the Jewish Bible, giving it its meaning in the context of sports as well. This verb, *Lisachek*, is used by King David to indicate derision, and by Jeremiah to indicate mocking.²⁷ On the other hand, this verb is used elsewhere by King Solomon and his father King David

²⁷ Psalms 104:26, Jeremiah 48:26

to indicate happiness and laughter.²⁸ In Judges, when Samson is brought into the arena after his hair is cut, the verb is indeed utilized to indicate a sporting activity,²⁹ but in Proverbs it is again used to indicate foolishness.³⁰ Therefore, sports seem to be associated with mocking and derision, but also with laughter and foolishness. This is borne out by a similar word in Hebrew (where the Hebrew letters “*Tzadi*” and *Sin*” are sometimes interchangeable), the verb *Litzachek*, which alternately signifies mocking, playing and joking (according to most commentaries).³¹ The idea of sports offering a diversion from “real life” in order to engender happiness but also foolishness was continued later in the use of the English word for this activity – sport. The origin of the verb in English is actually “disport” which signifies “to divert one’s thoughts.” Thus, the Jewish idea of sports as a diversion from the real goals in life was seen as both a foolishness to be mocked, and yet as something which brought smiles to the faces of participants.

And yet, with all the derivations of the word mentioned above, we can find no place in the Torah, Prophets, Talmud or later rabbis that specifically prohibits Jewish participation in sports, or even an outcry to desist from such activities. The great Resh Lakish, whose thoughts and opinions are found on hundreds of pages in the Talmud, usually arguing with his brother-in-law, Rabbi Yochanan, used to be an accomplished athlete before he became Observant. Before he became a Sage, Resh Lakish sold himself to the Lydians, terrorizing cannibals, with a plan to kill them to rid the world of this danger. The Talmud records that he prepared a rock enclosed in a sack to be able to defeat the Lydians. He knew the Lydians allowed their victims any last request and thus acquiesced to being tied to chairs, at which point Resh Lakish slew them with his sack (see Gittin 47a, Shottenstein Talmud, note 7). There is no condemnation of this activity in the Talmud.³²

It is known that one of the reasons that the Second Temple was destroyed was because of Sabbath desecration.³³ The Midrash³⁴ states that Tur Shimon was destroyed because people played ball on Shabbat. One opinion in the Jerusalem Talmud³⁵ however, says that Tur Shimon was destroyed because people played ball and does not mention Shabbat. Nevertheless, engaging in sports, if not encouraged, was certainly accepted in Judaism. The fact that the High Priest allowed a running competition to determine the “winner” who would receive the first honor of the daily service in the Temple, mentioned above,³⁶ demonstrates that activities we associate with sports were not only permitted, but accepted as part of daily religious life.

This attitude continued into the twentieth century (and presumably today). When Rabbi Moses Feinstein was asked if it is legitimate for an observant Jew to become a professional athlete, he dismissed any notion that it might be forbidden to engage in activity that might result in injury, or even death, and clearly permitted playing sports in order to earn a livelihood. (This cannot be said to be the Jewish view concerning all occupations.)³⁷ An earlier Torah giant of the nineteenth century, Rabbi Epstein, explained the fascination of Jews (and all people) with sports as an activity that was pleasant and desired by the masses.³⁸

²⁸ Ecclesiastes 10:19, Psalms 126:1-2

²⁹ Judges 27:16

³⁰ Proverbs 10:23

³¹ Genesis 21:9, Exodus 32:6, Genesis 19:14

³² Gittin 47a

³³ Shabbat 119b

³⁴ Midrash, Eicha Rabbah 2:4

³⁵ Jerusalem Talmud Taanit 24b

³⁶ Mishna Yoma 2:1

³⁷ Responsa Igrot Moshe, Choshen Mishpat 1:104

³⁸ Aruch HaShulchan, Orach Chaim 518:8

ENGAGING IN SPORTS AS A MEANS OF EXERCISE

A Jew need not take part in a sports competition for the purpose of winning (see chapter about Competition) in order to be active in sports. Sports can also be used as a means to exercise the body. And improving the health of the body is actually a religious act, one of the 613 Torah commandments, to protect one's body from harm.³⁹ One commentary⁴⁰ quotes the Maharsha, who asks why at the end of the verse about protecting the body it also mentions that Jews should not have any idols or physical representations of G-d. What is the connection between these two diverse ideas in the same verse? He answers that just as converting a totally spiritual G-d into a physical being violates a religious Torah principle, so, too, by ignoring and not protecting the body that G-d gave them, Jews also violate a religious principle of the Torah. Thus, exercise of the body as a means to keep it healthy seems to be a religious act. So, too, Isaiah taught that just as G-d guides souls to make them better and maximize them, so too, G-d guides bodies to maximize them as well.⁴¹

Maimonides, the pre-eminent Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages who was also a physician (and wrote medical books), stressed the importance of keeping the body healthy. He states⁴² that a healthy body is what G-d demands of human beings, and Jews cannot fulfill the precepts of the Creator or come to fully know Him unless their bodies are healthy. Maimonides further writes that as long as a person exercises and is not too bloated from overeating, that person will not fall ill and the body will remain strong. If a person remains sedentary, even if he or she eats properly, that individual will experience pain regularly throughout life.⁴³ In another context,⁴⁴ Maimonides states that all physical activities, including exercise (as well as eating, sleeping, etc.) should be done for the purpose of creating a healthy body, which then can help a person acquire the correct ideas and proper values as a Jew. In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides even enumerates examples of physical exercises to be practiced, including playing ball, wrestling, repeatedly raising one's arms and breath control.⁴⁵ He goes on to say that some view these sports as foolishness, but Torah scholars see them as means to achieve the true goals of a Jewish life.

One contemporary rabbi echoes the general attitude of Maimonides, but warns the Jew not to reverse his or her priorities by making exercise a priority and the spiritual commandments less significant. As long as an individual realizes that the exercises are for the ultimate purpose of the spirit and that the body's health is only a means to an end, then physical exercise is to be encouraged.⁴⁶ In 1903, the Chafetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan) gave a talk to his students in which he also stressed maintaining the balance between spiritual and physical aspects of Judaism, but in the reverse. He said that students in his Yeshiva in Radin, Poland, should not spend too much time learning Torah while totally ignoring their bodies. It is important to make sure that the health of the body remains strong and a person does not become ill. He advised walking at night and swimming in the river. He also warned the students not to be tempted to learn so much Torah that they ignore entirely the needs of their bodies, because in the end, they could become ill and be unable to learn Torah properly, and so lose even more time from learning Torah.⁴⁷

³⁹ Deuteronomy 4:9, 4:15

⁴⁰ Orot HaChumash, Parshat Va-etchanan 4:15

⁴¹ Isaiah 58:11

⁴² Maimonides, Hilchot Deot 4:1

⁴³ Maimonides, Hilchot Deot 4:14-15

⁴⁴ Maimonides, Introduction to Shmoneh Perakim

⁴⁵ Guide for the Perplexed 3:25

⁴⁶ Taam VaDaat (Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch) Va-etchanan 4:9

⁴⁷ Mussar Talk of Rabbi Kagan in the Radin Yeshiva, 1903

Various personal stories about leading rabbis of the twentieth century concerning their actions or attitudes regarding physical exercise also show the importance of this activity in Jewish thought. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, founder and head of the Torah VeDa'ath Yeshiva in New York, always stressed the importance of physical exercise. When he was a student in the Lomza Yeshiva in Europe, he was known as the best swimmer in the Yeshiva.⁴⁸ Since it is a Torah obligation to teach one's child to swim,⁴⁹ he reasoned that every parent must first know how to swim well. When he was asked if it is proper for Yeshiva students to ride a bicycle, Rabbi Kamenetsky answered that if he only had a bicycle to ride in his youth, he would not have had to walk so much in his later years in order to maintain his health. Rabbi Abraham Kook (1865-1935) writes about the importance of maintaining a healthy body, and that the body is no less holy than the spirit G-d has given each human being.⁵⁰ His son, Rabbi Tzvi Yehudah Kook, spoke about his father when the elder Rabbi Kook was a student in Riga, and lived with two "roommates" who would become great European rabbis. These rabbis used to wrestle each other in order to maintain their health. The Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Shlomo Goren (1918-1994), former Chief Rabbi of the Israeli Army, used to do fifty pushups daily. And the sainted Chafetz Chaim once remarked that he should do physical exercise but refrains only due to laziness.⁵¹

Rabbi Raphael Halperin (1924-2011) was great Torah scholar who learned in the Chevron Yeshiva (Jerusalem) and Lomza Yeshiva (Petach Tikva). At the age of eighteen, he became a professional body-builder and then a champion wrestler in 1950. In the 1950's, when Rabbi Halperin met Rabbi Aaron Kotler, founder of the Lakewood Yeshiva, Rabbi Kotler told him admiringly, "We have many rabbis, but you are the only religious champion athlete." Other rabbis told him that his victories in the wrestling ring sanctified G-d's name.⁵² Another contemporary Chief Rabbi of Israel wrote that the commandment to preserve one's body is a positive Torah commandment, and that almost the entire Torah can be violated in order to preserve one's physical body/life.⁵³ He goes on to say that keeping one's body healthy is a spiritual act, and then debates whether this obligation is actually a Torah commandment or only demanded by the rabbis. In any event, it seems that the majority of rabbis in contemporary Judaism view sports or any other exercise to be a valid Jewish activity that should be encouraged.

SPORTS AS ENTERTAINMENT

Although we have demonstrated above that sports participation is permitted in Judaism and that sports as exercise is to be encouraged, it is equally clear that the normative Jewish view of sports for entertainment purposes seems to be discouraged or even forbidden. The first Jewish reference to sports as entertainment for the masses can be seen in the story of Samson. When the Philistines thought that Samson no longer had any strength left after cutting his hair, they took him from jail into the arena to have sport with him (*Viyisachek Lanu*-Let him make sport for us).⁵⁴ They used Samson in the stadium as a grand spectacle, the sport of entertainment – until G-d helped Samson demolish the entire structure and destroy those Philistines (as well as himself). But this Biblical story involving non-Jewish Philistines does not demonstrate the antipathy of the rabbis towards Jews going to arenas to watch sports as a spectacle.

⁴⁸ "The Development of the Body and Jewish Law", Dr. Aaron Arend, Development of the Jewish Body, Israeli Ministry of Education, 2007, page 47.

⁴⁹ Kiddushin 30b

⁵⁰ "Orot" of Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, section 80

⁵¹ "The Development of the Body and Jewish Law", Dr. Aaron Arend, Development of the Jewish Body, Israeli Ministry of Education, 2007, page 47.

⁵² "The Development of the Body and Jewish Law", Dr. Aaron Arend, Development of the Jewish Body, Israeli Ministry of Education, 2007, page 46.

⁵³ Responsa, Binyan Av (Rabbi Bakshi-Doron) 73:1

⁵⁴ Judges 16:25-31

In the time of the Greeks, the Book of Maccabees describes the Jewish Hellenists who wanted to completely adapt the ways of the Greeks as part of their culture. The very first thing they did was to build a House of Sport or Gymnasium in Jerusalem, and then they ceased circumcising their sons, leaving traditional Judaism completely.⁵⁵ Thus, we see that building houses of sport used for entertainment is tantamount to adapting the ways of non-Jews and abandoning Judaism.

The very first verse in Psalms praises Jews who do not follow the “counsel of the wicked.” What is the “counsel of the wicked?” The Talmud explains that these are people who visit (Roman) stadiums to witness, view and be entertained by performances of sport, magic, etc.⁵⁶ But the Talmudic passage continues with another opinion: Rabbi Nathan who says that Jews should go to (Roman) stadiums, because the custom then was that the shouting of the crowd helped decide if a victim was to be killed or not be killed, and if the Jews went, they might save potential victims from death. In addition, in order to allow the Jewish widows of the victims of these “sports” to remarry after their deaths, it was necessary that Jews actually witness the death in person. Finally, the passage concludes that Jews should not go to (Roman) theaters or circuses since these prominently display the Roman idols. Therefore, we see that the entire atmosphere of such sports spectacles is antithetical to Judaism, especially if the purpose in attending such events is only to revel and be entertained.

The controversy about Jews at sporting events for entertainment purposes continued to be discussed even after Talmudic times. A question was asked of Rabbi Yisrael MeBruna (1400-1480) if Jews are permitted to watch non-Jews “at the track” – i.e., horse races by non-Jews. The rabbi answered that if the purpose of watching these events was to buy horses or learn the sport in order to participate, then it is permitted. But if it is purely for fun, then it is forbidden.⁵⁷ In the contemporary period, this question has again been asked of leading rabbis. Rabbi Menashe Klein was asked about the permissibility of Jews attending sporting events that involve gambling, such as horse racing. He says if the primary purpose is to watch the event and not to win money, then it is not forbidden as gambling (see chapter about *Gambling in Judaism*). But then he also discusses the question of attending sporting events even without wagering, just for pleasure. He first says that there is no formal prohibition about watching sports. But then he writes that every minute watching sporting events takes away from Torah learning and encourages even more time-wasting activities. For this reason, as well as that it is not the right “atmosphere” for observant Jews (based on the Talmud’s point that this is a place of “bad counsel”), he forbids attending such sporting events, and then even prohibits watching or listening to these events on television and radio for the same reason mentioned above – taking time away for Torah learning.⁵⁸ Rabbi Moses Feinstein was asked a similar question – i.e., if observant Jews can attend stadiums with sporting events in our days.⁵⁹ Although attending these events does not violate the general prohibition of “imitating the ways of the non-Jews,” Rabbi Feinstein nevertheless decries the frivolousness of the activity itself as well as the people who attend such events, which make such an activity forbidden. It also takes away time from Torah learning, as mentioned above.

The majority opinion, then, is that experiencing sports as entertainment is a violation of the prohibition of participating in frivolous activities with frivolous people, as well as diverting time that could be used more productively and in a more Jewish manner.

⁵⁵ Book of Maccabees 1:14-17

⁵⁶ Psalms 1:1, Avodah Zara 18b

⁵⁷ Responsa Mohari MiBruna 71

⁵⁸ Responsa Mishne Halacha 6:270

⁵⁹ Responsa Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah 4:11

ARE WRESTLING AND BOXING PERMITTED IN JUDAISM?

In November 2008, a boxer named Yuri Foreman won the WBA super welterweight boxing championship in Las Vega, Nevada. Normally, this would not create big news, even in the Jewish world. But Yuri Forman is not only Jewish but also an Orthodox Jew, who was studying to be a rabbi. How could an observant Jew possibly legitimately box? Isn't it forbidden according to Jewish law? On the surface, it seems that the sports of boxing and wrestling should be permitted just like any other sports. Wrestling is already found in the Torah, when Jacob wrestled with a "man," an angel of Esau, say the commentaries.⁶⁰ We even saw above that the roommates of Rabbi Kook wrestled with each other. What could be the problem or issue of Jews wrestling or Jews boxing?

Unlike other sports, in wrestling and especially in boxing, the chances of inflicting damage and bodily harm on the opponent are very high, since essentially that is the goal of the activity in defeating an opponent -- inflicting bodily damage. The same verse used above to encourage exercise and keep the body healthy is also the same verse that may prohibit boxing and wrestling, because these activities almost always result in some bodily damage, which may violate the prohibition of keeping the body healthy.⁶¹ The Talmud clearly states that causing someone else bodily harm is forbidden, just as causing bodily harm to oneself is forbidden. (See the chapter on Dwarf Tossing for an expansion of this theme.)⁶² If harming another human being intentionally is forbidden, then all wrestling and certainly all boxing by a Jew should be forbidden. And yet we see that these sports are permitted in certain circumstances. How could this be?

Maimonides helps to provide an answer to this question. Although he rules it is forbidden to harm one's own body and certainly someone else's body, the prohibition is only if it is done between two people so angry at each other that they come to blows.⁶³ The wording of Maimonides, "*derech nitzayon*-in the manner of arguing," is based on the Torah word in the verse describing two people arguing that causes them to come to blows (and accidentally strike a pregnant woman).⁶⁴ Therefore, only if people were arguing with each other and intending to cause bodily harm out of anger would a person be forbidden from striking another person. But a blow to the body in the course of a sporting match apparently would be permitted. On the other hand, Maimonides also rules that while it is permitted to intentionally destroy someone's property if the owner allows you to do so, it is forbidden to damage someone intentionally even if the person allows you to hurt him or her (since people's bodies belong to G-d and not to us).⁶⁵ Nevertheless, if the purpose of the sport is not merely to cause bodily harm and damage such as in boxing and wrestling, but to defeat the opponent, perhaps this type of blow is indeed permitted.

This very question was asked of Rabbeinu Asher in the fourteenth century.⁶⁶ If two people were wrestling and one person struck a blow to the opponent's eye which prevented him from seeing, is the opponent who inflicted the damage liable in the same manner as someone who intentionally inflicts damage on someone else, or not? Rabbeinu Asher answers that normally a person is liable even if the blow was not intentional. In this case, however, because both opponents entered the ring willingly and knowing that damage might occur in the course of the bout, and because the blow was not intended to inflict permanent damage, then both opponents accept the risk when they enter the ring, and a participant in the sport is not liable. This would seem to permit

⁶⁰ Genesis 32:25-26 with Rashi commentary

⁶¹ Deuteronomy 4:9, 4:15

⁶² Bava Kama 91b

⁶³ Maimonides, Hilchot Chovel Umazik 5:1

⁶⁴ Exodus 21:22 with Rashi commentary

⁶⁵ Maimonides, Hilchot Chovel Umazik 5:11

⁶⁶ Responsa Rosh 201:6

such an activity from a Jewish perspective. This view of wrestling and boxing and the liability for damage it may cause was codified by the son of Rabbeinu Asher in his book, Tur.⁶⁷ Based on these rulings, Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, also rules that wrestling and boxing are indeed permitted, and that any damage as a result of the match does not make an individual liable for damages.⁶⁸

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this ruling has been upheld. It was reported that in the Yeshiva of Brisk (Brest-Litovsk) at the beginning of the twentieth century, Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik used to box with his students, and was not worried about possible damage since it took place in the context of a sporting event and not due to hatred.⁶⁹ In the 1950's, the Chief Rabbi of Israel was asked about having organized boxing matches in a Jewish school in England for observant boys. Rabbi Unterman reiterated that, according to the wording of Maimonides, only if the damage comes with the intention of anger between two people arguing can a person be held liable for inflicting a harming blow.⁷⁰ Just as the inflictor of lashes in a Jewish court is not liable for causing damage, and just as a Mohel is not liable for any minor damage as a result of a normal circumcision, so too, damage inflicted unintentionally in the course of a boxing match cannot be deemed as libelous. Hence, boxing is a legitimate Jewish sport and Yuri Foreman can continue his career in boxing, even as an Orthodox Jew.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is "to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way." Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.

⁶⁷ Tur, Choshen Mishpat 421:5

⁶⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 421:5

⁶⁹ "The Rav Thinking Aloud: Transcripts of Personal Conversations with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik," David Holzer, page 13.

⁷⁰ Responsa Shevet Yaakov, Section 1, page 230