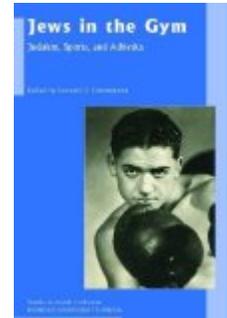


Leonard J. Greenspoon, ed.. *Jews in the Gym: Judaism, Sports, and Athletics*. Purdue University Press, 2012. 240 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-61249-239-1.



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The past decades have witnessed a growing interest in modern Jewish body culture. In applying methodologies and emphases from disciplines such as the history and sociology of sports, recent studies have enhanced and complicated our understanding of the modern Jewish experience. The study of Jewish body culture tends to underscore the dual role it played as an effective vehicle for both facilitating Jewish assimilation and displaying a distinctive Jewish identity. In highlighting the tensions embedded in this duality, such studies often shed new light on the negotiation of Jewish identities in modern popular culture.[1] Leonard Greenspoon's edited volume *Jews in the Gym* follows this tradition and presents various case studies of Jews' participation in sporting events and of Jewish intellectuals' reflections on sports and athleticism. Without a geographic or temporal focus, the articles in this volume—mostly based on papers given at a 2010 conference—belong to various genres: from analysis of extraordinary archival materials (for example, Rebecca Alpert's "The Jews of Black Baseball") to close

readings of texts on the principles of the Jewish faith (for example, Steven Riekes on Maurice Samuel's *The Gentlemen and the Jew*) and biographical portraits of veteran athletes (William Kornblum, Erin Sodmiak, and Phil Oberlander's "Grappling with Ghosts").[2] The variety of perspectives, approaches, and findings in this volume reinforces Greenspoon's introductory remark: in the realm of "Jewish sports history," much is still left to be "covered, uncovered and discovered" (p. xiii). The diversity of topics in this volume demonstrates several potential paths for intriguing future research.

The variety of themes and approaches in *Jews in the Gym*, however, also discloses its main weakness. In its effort to cast such a wide and varied net, the book has a number of significant gaps. As its back cover states, the volume is aimed at various groups of readers and it often raises issues that very loosely relate to the interests of academic scholars. Some of the articles seek to address contemplative (and arguably redundant) questions such as, Is it possible to be a "good Jew" and

a “great athlete”? In revisiting authors such as Josephus, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and Max Nordau, these articles aim to defend the connection between Judaism and sports. The few readers who strongly believe that “the connection between Jews and athletics [is] far-fetched” would probably reconsider their position. Nevertheless, these types of articles do little to enhance our understanding of “Jewish sports history,” or Jewish history in general. Moreover, the term “sports” (or “sport” in some of the articles) is liberally applied throughout the volume to various activities that belong to entirely different categories (for example, “spectacle entertainments” in ancient Rome, Zionist folk dance, Jewish eroticism, etc.). These themes obviously belong to the general realm of Jewish body culture, but they have little in common with modern competitive and often commercialized sports. Whatever female folk dancers in Mandate Palestine and female Jewish basketball players in North America had in common, it was not “sports.” Without a better definition of the shared framework, it is hard to evaluate and analyze the various case studies and their contribution to our knowledge of Jewish experience.

Regardless of its weaknesses, Greenspoon’s volume includes some thoughtful arguments and intriguing test cases for the historical role of athletic activity. Loren Spielmann’s essay “Playing Roman in Jerusalem: Jewish Attitudes toward Sport and Spectacle during the Second Temple Period” interestingly demonstrates how King Herod used Roman style “games” in order to solidify his status as the “king of all Jews.” According to Spielmann, the games appealed mostly to diaspora Jews and intended to “court their support as [Herod] transformed Jerusalem into the capital of world Jewry” (p. 14). Ori Soltes (“Sports and the Graphic Novel from Diaspora to Diaspora: James Sturm’s *The Golem’s Mighty Swing* and JT Waldman’s *Megillat Esther in the Tree of Contexts*”) writes on two contemporary comic books that deal with the performance of Jewish identity through physical activi-

ty. His analysis of James Sturm’s *The Golem’s Mighty Swing* (2001) shows the interwoven layers that comprise the memory of the evolution of Jewish identity in contemporary American culture. For some reason, Soltes discussion of comics disregards the role of Jewish filmmakers in establishing the visual imagery of Jewish physicality in the twentieth century. Similar disregard is apparent, and is more surprising, in Nathan Abrams’s article on Jewish athletes in film, “The Jew in the Gym: Judaism, Sports, and Athletics on Film.” Abrams provides an interesting reading of the film *Chariots of Fire* (1981), which portrays the Jewish athletes as an embodiment of colonial English assimilation. His assertion that the Jew of cinema has always been in either one of two distinct categories—weak and smart or strong and shallow-minded—discounts the works of dozens of Jewish filmmakers who portrayed a rich variety of “Jewish identities” on the screen, from 1920s German cinema to 2010s American cable television. Steven Riekes’s reading of Maurice Samuel’s book on Judaism and physical competence is plausible. Less so is his apparent agreement with Samuel that Judaism is inherently in opposition to the glorification of warriors and fighting. A reading of the musings of several nationalist rabbis in today’s Israel would probably undermine this conviction. Steven Riess’s survey “Antisemitism and Sport in Central Europe and the United States c. 1870-1932” thoughtfully adds a historical framework that is absent in many articles in this volume. The topic is nevertheless too broad to be dealt with justly in a twenty-page article. His conclusion, namely, that sports was not an efficient venue for Jewish assimilation in Europe, is true for particular cases in particular periods.

Reality was much more nuanced, as convincingly demonstrated in Mihály Kálmán’s article about Jewish fencing and Hungarian national identity, “Cutting the Way into the Nation: Hungarian Jewish Olympians in the Interwar Era.” Kálmán’s focus on Jewish members of the Hungarian Olympic team emphasizes the duality that

stands at the core of modern Jewish body culture and—in a more or less explicit way—is the main theme of several articles in this volume: excelling in physical activity enabled Jews to display their entitlement to both assimilation and dissimilation. David Leonard’s account on the reception of the Israeli NBA player Omri Casspi (“A Global Game: Omri Casspi and the Future of Jewish Ballers”) highlights the vague boundaries between acculturation and particularism. Ironically, the intricacies of the identity politics of commercial sports made the Israeli Casspi a symbol for the integration of American Jewish athleticism into the ultimate arena of American culture. Rebecca Alpert’s essay “Buster Haywood and the Jews of Black Baseball” adds another layer to the tensions embodied in the performance of Jewish identities through modern sports. She shows how baseball effectively linked Jewish acculturation with racial integration in American society of the 1940s. Linda Borish’s description of female Jewish basketball players (“Jewish Women in the American Gym: Basketball, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Early Twentieth Century”) underscores a similar effort to negotiate identities in the American public sphere. In this case, ethnic identities were complemented by and contrasted with gender identities. Her argument depicts sports as a remarkable framework, in which the practice of acculturation enabled female immigrants to display various aspects of their distinctive identity. This depiction would fit many other modern societies in which sports played a role in the acculturation of immigrants. It is especially evident, for instance, within the Jewish community in 1920s-30s Palestine, where immigrant athletes simultaneously represented their country of origin, their class, and their town of residence, as well as the Zionist movement in general.[3]

The discussion of Zionist sports in Nina Spiegel’s article “Spotting a Nation: The Origins of Athleticism in Modern Israel” overlooks these assimilatory aspects of athletic activity in the Jewish community in Palestine. Instead, she emphasizes

the role of sports in exhibiting and promoting Jewish nationalism. According to Spiegel, in contemporary Israel there is a “significant value placed on athletic ability” (p. 189) because the Zionists utilized sports for their nation-building efforts before 1948 (in order to advertise ideas such as the “New Jewish Man,” etc.). This argument is sound, though not necessarily original. One has to wonder, though, if sports is really an extraordinarily important component of life in current Israel (in comparison, say, to the United States). Moreover, the Zionist emphasis on body culture included hikes, dances, paramilitary training, and, mainly, physical work; most of it had little to do with the commercialized, competitive sports of today.

Jeffrey Gurock’s article “Gyms and the Academy: Professional and Personal Reflections on Stepping up to the Scholarly Plate” provides an informative, helpful survey of the American historiography of Jewish sports (also, out of the three authors who mention Adolf Hitler, Gurock is the only one who spelled his name correctly). The final part of his article, however, focuses on a different topic, the (antisemitic?) discrimination against Israel by international sports organizations. The conclusion is that while American Jews utilized sports as a means to achieve equal membership in modern society, international organizations—from Hitler’s Olympic Games to FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association)—exploit sports to exclude Israeli Jews from the international community. This (perhaps hyperbolic) reasoning is not without merit; we should definitely take it into account when considering the roles of sports in modern Jewish identity politics. The argument should not end here, though: Israeli sports’ authorities and fans also have their share in discrimination and exclusion (the Beitar Yerushalaim soccer team, whose fans include many leading Israeli politicians, would not admit Arab players to the club; racist slogans and cheers are the norm among Israeli sports fans, and are commonly met with disre-

gard and “understanding” from the authorities). Naturally, Israeli sports authorities and fans are no more violent or inclined to racism than those of the average European clubs; but they cannot be seriously depicted as mere victims of such hideous phenomena.

The capability of modern sports to simultaneously display various different self-perceptions—and different social ambitions—makes it an important object of investigation for historians. *Jews in the Gym* contributes to this expanding field a variety of case studies in a variety of contexts. The authors of this volume exemplify a range of research approaches to the associations between sports and Jewish identities: analysis of Jewish participation in athletic activities; analysis of Judaism’s position(s) vis-à-vis sports; and examination of the ways popular culture mediates Jewish athleticism. The diversity of approaches would appeal to different groups of readers, with different interests, and make it a valuable item in many college and university libraries. While this volume is not a significant contribution to the study of “Jewish sports history,” it is a decent introduction to the fundamental and intricate relations between body culture and Jewish identities in the twentieth century.

Notes

[1]. For instance, Steven A. Riess, ed., *Sports and the American Jew* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998); Todd S. Presner, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Jack Kugelmass, ed., *Jews, Sports, and the Rites of Citizenship* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Michael Brenner and Gideon Reuveni, *Emancipation through the Muscles: Jews and Sports in Europe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); and George Eisen, ed., “Jews and Sports: A Century of Retrospect,” special volume of *Journal of Sports History* 26, no. 2 (1999).

[2]. The book is the proceedings of the Twenty-Third Annual Symposium of the Klutznick

Chair in Jewish Civilization and the Harris Center for Judaic Studies held in Omaha, Nebraska, in October 2010.

[3]. For instance, Lorenz Peiffer and Moshe Zimmermann, eds., *Sport als Element des Kulturtransfers: Jüdische Sportler zwischen NS-Deutschland und Palästina* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2013).

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