

## **Jews, Sisyphus and Sports – ( With tongue in cheek!)**

by Rabbi Dr. Nathan Lopes Cardozo

The need to engage in sports is self-understood. Exercising and keeping our bodies in good condition is considered a mitzva of the highest priority.

Still, there is little evidence that Jews in earlier times were ever seriously involved in sports. No doubt this is due to the historical conditions of the Second Temple period. With Alexander the Great's conquest of the Land of Israel (332 BCE), Hellenist culture began to infiltrate, and attempts by Antiochus Epiphanes to Hellenize Judea led to the outbreak of the Maccabean revolt. When the Jews were forced to appear naked in the Greek gymnasiums, causing them to try and conceal the fact that they were circumcised, their opposition to Hellenism increased, and sports, which was identified with the Greeks, became taboo. This was even more apparent when the Olympic Games were connected with idolatrous cults, particularly of the Greek deity, Hercules.

Little information is given in the Talmud about sports, except that according to one opinion, Jews were permitted to go to the Greek stadiums while gladiatorial games took place, "because by shouting one may save the victim." (1) This was indeed exceptional, as the Sages forbade the attendance of events such as theatrical performances, circuses and athletic competitions, since these were used to mock Jews and Judaism, and they often involved unethical and cruel practices. Most interesting is the dispute between Rabbi Yosef Karo (2) and Rabbi Moshe Isserles (3) on whether one is allowed to play ball on Shabbat and festivals. (4) Only in modern times have Jews increased their involvement in sports.

What is most remarkable is the fact that millions of people seem to believe they are sportsmen simply because they watch a game. It is fascinating to see tens of thousands of fans completely mesmerized as they watch a ball being kicked around by 22 fellows. The fact that these players are prepared to run themselves ragged for the benefit of thousands is a topic that requires our attention.

What is even more fascinating is watching the thousands sitting in the stands shaking their heads in approval or disapproval while shouting bits of advice to the team members. They are the "experts" who seem to believe that it is they who should be playing for the fans, since their football skills are of a much higher quality than those of "the amateurs" on the field.

What is the secret behind this fascination? Obviously, watching a game has nothing to do with sports. It seems, however, to serve as therapy. Many of us have to go to work and be submissive to our employers. We can't tell them what we really think of them. When we shout at the soccer player, informing him that

he's a *shlemiel* who doesn't know how to handle the ball, are we perhaps really shouting at our bosses? It brings tremendous relief and rids us of our bottled-up frustration. We are able to abandon the artificial courtesy that we are obliged to show at work. As human beings, we need that.

There are, however, other recreational activities that should command our attention. Psychologists have not yet been able to fully explain sports such as tobogganing and skiing. While this author greatly enjoys these pastimes, it cannot be denied that there is something most bizarre about them. It is difficult to understand why we are prepared to climb a mountain for more than a quarter of an hour, leaving us sweating and breathless, only to undo it all in a matter of a few seconds by hurtling down the same mountain. It's almost discouraging, reminding us of Sisyphus, the famous personality in Greek mythology, who was doomed to roll an immense boulder up a mountain. Every time he slipped, he had to start all over again. It makes you wonder. For Sisyphus this was torment, while for us it's a winter sport! We must conclude that man is prepared to suffer agony as long as he convinces himself that it's a sport. This, again, warrants our attention. We are indeed strange beings!

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(1) *Avodah Zarah* 18b.

(2) Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575) authored the *Shulchan Aruch*.

(3) Commonly known as "the Rema" (1520-1572), he wrote a commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*.

(4) *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 308:45; 518:2,4.