

Physical Exercise and Training In Ancient Jewish Lore

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Hygiene was in ancient times much more developed than people imagine. Physicians, philosophers, and even theologians admonished their audience (or patients) to adopt a healthy way of life. The Jewish medieval authority Maimonides (twelfth century), who was a trained physician, included detailed suggestions on how to live a healthy life in his theological masterpiece *Mishneh Thora*. Maimonides warns against loss of strength that may result from living a sedentary life and from lack of physical exercise. Even in the Bible, the book Ecclesiastes puts sedentary scholars on their guard: "Much study is a weariness of the flesh" [Eccl. 12: 12]. A talmudic statement seemingly suggests that the physical strength of scholars had diminished from generation to generation: "From the time of Moses till the generation of Rabban Gamliel the students stood up while learning the law. After the death of R. Gamliel disease (or weakness) came down on the world, and they learned while being seated" [b. Megillah 21a]. Rabbi Yohanan gave the following advice: "Do not sit too much, it provokes hemorrhoids; do not stand too much, this is harmful to the heart; do not walk too much, this is injurious to the eyes." He accordingly advised to sit one third, stand one third, and walk one third of the way [b. Kethubot 111a]. Rabbi Judah remarked that people and animals who live in a town where there are many ascents and descents (acclivity) die in half their days. At second thought, he says, no, they do not really die, they age prematurely [b. Erubin 56a]. Other sages stated: "Whoever eats and does not walk thereafter at least four cubits, the food he ate will rot (i.e. will not be digested), which will bring forth foul odor from the mouth" [b. Shabbat 41a]. Not only digestion, sleep as well is influenced by activity, as is stated in Ecclesiastes: "Sweet is the sleep of a working (i.e., physically active) man, whether he eats little or much: but the repletion of the rich (i.e., idle) will prevent him from sleeping" [Eccl. 5: 11].

After this data on the place of physical exercise in hygiene, let us consider physical training and fitness in ancient Jewish lore. Obviously, Jews pertaining to the Pharisaic sect did not visit Roman (or Herodian) amphitheaters and the Sages several times insisted that a Jew should not visit the heathen theaters and circuses.¹ The context in the Talmud is more in the modern sense of entertainment (illusion, magic, etc.) than in the Greco-Roman sense of gymnastics, or gladiators, or fighting animals. If the Jews were in principle rather encouraged to study the law than to indulge in physical exercise, keeping the body in good shape was not neglected, or even considered inferior to intellectual activity.

Wherefrom do we know that the Almighty feels honored by the presence of people of high (impressive) stature (ba 'alei gomah)? From a statement of the prophet Amos (2:0): "Yet I destroyed the Emorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars, and he was strong as the oaks." The talmudic text does not elaborate, but it seems clear that the author of this statement had in mind what Amos added further in the same chapter while foretelling that the Lord would spare none of his unfaithful people: ". . . The strong shall not retain his force, nor shall the mighty man deliver himself; not shall he who handles the bow stand; and he who is swift in foot shall not deliver himself; nor shall he who rides the horse deliver himself. . ." (Amos, 14:15). There are in this quote quite a number of references to physical exercise, to running, riding, drawing the bow, and to physical strength which of course is of no avail against the Lord's wrath, but nonetheless "honor the Lord."

"The glory of young men is strength" says Proverb 20:29, adding "and the beauty of old men is their white hair." Another

proverb (which may be variously interpreted) says: "A wise man is strong, and a man of knowledge increases strength" (Proverbs, 24:5).

Turning now to sports and physical training, there are in the Bible a number of references to running and racing. For instance, Samuel, explaining to the people the practices of kings, warns them that the king will take their sons to be his horsemen, and "some shall run before his chariot" (I Sam. 8: 11). Indeed, when Absalom usurped the throne of his father David, he had chariots and horses prepared, "and fifty men to run before him" (II Sam. 15:1). At the court of king Assuerus (Artaxerxes) there were also runners who conveyed letters to remote provinces (cf. Esther 3: 15.). In the times of Ezechias there were as well such postal runners who brought letters from the king "from city to city" (II Chron. 30: 6: 10). Some warriors of the tribe of Gad were particularly "apt for battle" among David's small army, and were "as swift as staggards [stags] upon the mountains" (I Chron. 12:9).

It is stated in the Talmud that "the runners are allowed to go out on the Sabbath day with their special dress over their shoulder. Eyen people who are not professional runners are allowed to do so."² Another sage recalls a saying of the prophet Jeremiah: "If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses?" This parable is expanded in the Talmud into the following story: "A man affirmed: 'I am able to run three Persian miles before a bunch of horses in a marshy region;' there came forward a footman who ran before him for three (shorter) miles on dry land and he was exhausted."³ So they said to him: 'If this was the result when you ran before a footman, what would it have been before horses! If on a distance of three ordinary miles, what on a distance of three Persian miles? If on dry land, what would have happened on marshy ground!'"⁴ Another story is told in tractate Niddah about a sage who ran after a deer but was unable to catch up with it.⁵ In Hellenistic times, Jews of Judaea were involved in running competitions and in chariot races. For instance, an inscription found at Aphrodisias in Caria, and dating back to the times of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, tells us that among the names of victorious competitors to a race, there were several names of sportsmen coming from Palestinian cities.⁶

From Flavius Josephus we learn that Herodes-the-Great built theaters and a hippodrome. He established athletic contests every fifth year in honor of Caesar (Ant. XV, 268). Josephus states that "the use of such buildings and the exhibition of such performances have not been traditional with the Jews" (Ant. XV, 268). Herod also organized races of two-horse and four-horse chariots, as well as mounted horse-races (Ant. XV, 270). King Herod had two bodyguards who were esteemed for their athletic skills, and after having been dismissed from the guard they became instructors in gymnastics and received gold and other gifts (Ant. XVI, 314).⁷

The Jewish people, from the first moment they set foot on the Holy Land, were exposed to constant wars; martial arts and exercise were therefore practiced no less than in neighboring cultures. We are informed that David was an expert in throwing stones with his sling (I Sam. 17:40). Spear-throwing was also widely practiced. There was near Jerusalem a place called Goren Kidon which may have been a training ground for spearlancers.⁸ The practice of bow and arrows was perhaps the most popular martial art. David's friend Jonathan, in order to warn him off from his own father, King Saul's, wrath, devised a special way of throwing the arrows "at a mark" (I Sam. 20:20). A skilled archer is a symbol of power and strength, as featured in Psalms: "As arrows in the hands of a mighty

man, so are the children of one's youth: happy is the man who has his quiver full of them: they shall not be put to shame, they shall speak with their enemies at the gate" (Ps. 127:34-5). Josephus informs us about a Jewish soldier in the army of Alexander named Meshullam (Mosollamos) who was "a very intelligent man, robust, and, by common consent, the very best of bowmen, whether Greek or barbarian" (Ag. Apion 1,201).¹⁰

Fencing is also documented in biblical times. There happened once a frightening passage of arms between twelve youths of the house of Ish-boshet (Saul's son) and twelve servants of David. This was supposed to be 'play,' but it became a slaughter. "They caught everyone his fellow by the head, and thrust his sword in his fellow's side; so they fell down together" (II Sam. 2:16). The weapon used was the sword (herev), but lances were used as well.¹¹

Leaving wars and battles, let us consider other physical activities, such as dancing, swimming, rowing, the ball-game and gymnastics. "Let Israel rejoice in Him who made him. . . Let them praise his name in the dance. . ." writes the Psalmist (Ps. 149:2-3).¹² But the Children of Israel also danced around the Golden Calf (Ex. 32:19). Young girls particularly enjoy dancing (Jer. 31:3). Eighty varieties of dancing were known to Pharaoh's daughter, according to the Midrash (Levit, Rabba 12:4).

There may be found in the Bible several references to swimming, as in Isaiah: When Moab will be trodden down as straw in the dunghill, "he shall spread out his hands in the midst of it, as he that swims spreads out his hands to swim" (Isa. 25:10-11).¹³ It is stated in the Talmud that a father should teach his son to swim (b. Kid-dushin 29a, 30b).¹⁴ People used a kind of barrel (havith) while learning to swim (Makkoth 36b).

No actual mention of rowing as an entertainment can be found in the Bible. Isaiah, refers to 'galley with oars,' although nothing proves that they were owned by Israelites (Isa. 33:21).

Ball games were seemingly popular in talmudic times. The Tossefta describes those who play with a ball (kaddur) and their ball escapes to the open space (reshuth ha-rabim) on the Sabbath-day (Tos. Shabbat X (XI):. 10; also IX(X): 6).¹⁵

Gymnastics includes a number of physical exercises, although it is ridiculous to consider the patriarch Jacob a trained weightlifter owing to the fact that he lifted (alone), or rather rolled the heavy stone from over the well, in order to water the flock of Rachel (Gen. 29:8-10). Or to present him as a successful wrestler, as he fought a man (or an angel?) throughout the night, and prevailed (Gen. 32:25-26). More interesting is a remark of Jerome (based on Zach. 12:3), which indicates that there was an old custom in the towns of Palestine to use heavy round stones in order to try one's force in lifting them up.¹⁶ High jumping is alluded to in Psalms: "For by thee I run through a troop, and by the lord's help I leap over a wall" (Ps. 18:30)¹⁷ It was customary to enjoy some physical exercise after a (warm) although the term "mit' amelin" is sometimes interpreted as having massages performed, rather than doing exercise (b. Shabbat 147b). The eleventh-century commentator R. Hananel explains: people used to extend and bend their arms and legs, thus warming themselves up and sweating, which was a kind of medical nostrum.¹⁸

To sum up, the ancient Hebrews and the Jews in the classical and Byzantine period indeed shunned on the one side the cult of bodily beauty and strength (as pertaining to the Greco-Roman culture). On the other hand, they encouraged attaining bodily fitness. Even Tacitus, who can hardly be considered a philosemite, remarked: "Their males have healthy bodies, able to cope with hardships."¹⁹

Mainonides also provides additional stimulating data that are relevant to our topic. From his medical work, *The Aphorisms of Moses (Pirkei Moshe)* come a few statements contained in Chapter Eighteen which deal mainly with physical exercise:

18.2 *The best kind of physical exercise is one which tires the body while straightening the soul and making it happy, as for instance hunting, or playing with the ball. Such psychological effects may even cure diseases.*

18.4 *The best and most successful exercise is the one which*

evacuates what is stored deep into the body (fat? humors?).

18.9 *Too violent exercises dry up and harden the body; they diminish sensitivity and intelligence. Thus wrestlers, weight lifters or those carrying heavy burdens are of low intelligence.*

18.13 *The time most suitable for physical exercise is after complete digestion of the evening meal*

18.11 *Old people need exercise as they need to warm up their body. Neither should they remain motionless nor too active. Too much exercise would cause their frail warmth to cool down to extinction.*

The first quote is particularly enlightening. Physical exercise should be practiced not just in order to tire the body, but it should also make the soul happy. This is how sports should be practiced, and we know only too well that in modern times this ideal situation has sadly deteriorated. As it seems, exercise is perhaps in a sense "too violent" and therefore "diminishes sensitivity and intelligence."

From Maimonides' theological (halakhic) work *Mishneh Thora*, we shall pick out a striking text on 'walking'. Maimonides holds that a man should be in full control of his life, and walking is one manifestation of one's way of life. Maimonides therefore writes:

"A wise man should not walk with a proud posture and outstretched neck [cf. Isa. 3:16]. He should not walk with mannerism bringing heel to toe, as do women and haughty people. Neither should he run about in the street as do lunatics. One should not droop while walking, looking like hunchbacks, but look downwards like being in prayer. His gait in the street should be that of someone who is occupied with his affairs. From the way one walks in the street it may be recognized whether he is wise and thoughtful or stupid and foolish." [Hilkhot De'ot, Ch. 4(15)].

Paraphrasing and expanding talmudic lore, Maimonides warned the scholars quite clearly: "Whoever is always seated and does no physical exercise—even if he eats only healthy food and follows medical advice—will always be sickly and weak."²⁰ Should we not even today listen to the voice of our great medieval scholar?

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¹See B. Abodah Zara 18B; Tos. Avodah Zarah 2: 5-7.

²See b. Shabbat 147a and Tos. Shabbat V (VI): 11.

³A Persian mile was four times longer than the ordinary mile (= 2000 cubits).

⁴Sanchdrin 96a.

⁵Niddah 24b.

⁶Quoted in Emil Schuerer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* rev. ed., (Edinburgh: Clark, 1973), I:45ff. Schuerer also quotes a work entitled *Expositio totius mundi*, by an unknown author of the fourth century in which a variety of sports and contests that were practised in the most important cities of Syria are listed.

⁷See my *Medicine and Hygiene in the Works of Flavius Josephus* (Brill: Leiden, 1994), 65.

⁸See 1. Chron. 13:9. "Kidon" is the Hebrew word for spear.

⁹The word "hez" (arrow) appears more than fifty times in the Hebrew Bible. For the mark for arrow-throwing see also Lam. 3:12.

¹⁰This supposed to be a quote from a work of Hecataeus of Abdera (4th-3rd cent. B.C.E.), a contemporary of King Alexander and Ptolemaeus.

¹¹See in the same chapter (11 Sam. 2:23) how Abner smote Asa'el with a lance (hanith).

¹²See also Ps. 30:12, and the opposite in Lam. 5:15.

¹³See also Ez. 47:5; I Macc. 9:48.

¹⁴Also Tos. Kidushin 1:11; Midrash Kohelet Rabba to 9:9.

¹⁵There are several references to ball-playing in the Midrash, even to a ball-game among girls (Kohelet Rahha to 12:11).

¹⁶See also commentary of Rashi (Rabbi Solomon Yizhaqi, eleventh century) on I Kings 1:9 where the text speaks of a place called 'stone of Zohelath'.

¹⁷Repeated in 11 Sam. 22:30. See also Zeph. 1:9 (jumping over the threshold).

¹⁸Rabbi Hananel relates to b. Shabbat 147b.

¹⁹Tacitus, *Histories* V:6; (London: Heinemann, 1969), 185.

²⁰Maimonides adds: "As lone as a man does some physical exercise and is active physically, as long as he is not overeating, and his bowel-movements are easy, he will not get sick and his strength will increase" (Mishneh Thora, Hilkhoth De'oth, 4: 14-15).