

Current Jewish Questions

Boxing / Mixed Martial Arts

I. Jewish Boxers and MMA Fighters

1. Allen Bodner – Boxing: A Jewish Sport

Jews' participation in professional boxing in the interwar period is not as surprising as it might seem to be.

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Sports/Sports_and_Judaism/America/Boxing.shtml?p=0

When Jewish sports fans are asked to name Jewish boxers, invariably they will mention Benny Leonard and Barney Ross, the famous champions. Sometimes Ruby Goldstein, a contender, will be added, and more infrequently "Slapsie" Maxie Rosenbloom, a great light-heavyweight champion. And there it ends.

Even knowledgeable sports fans have no notion that there were many outstanding Jewish champions and contenders, and thousands of Jewish boxers in the twenties, thirties, and even forties. "How was it possible?" they will ask. "It is so contrary to Jewish tradition and culture. It is astounding."

In fact, Jews entered the ranks of American boxing in large numbers and by 1928, were the dominant nationality in professional prizefighting, followed by the Italians and the Irish. Ten years later, Jews sank to third place, preceded by the Italians and the Irish.

When World War II ended and the G.I. Bill of Rights and other avenues of advancement became available, boxing was no longer attractive to the Jews as participants. By 1950, there were virtually no Jewish boxers, and their number has been minuscule ever since. A similar decline occurred among Jewish trainers, but Jewish managers, promoters, and matchmakers continue to maintain a presence.

On the surface, it seems unlikely that Jews ever participated in such a brutal sport. It is assumed that Jewish pursuits were traditionally more cerebral and that education played an overriding role in the Jewish culture. Who would box when he could go to college and become a professional?

But going to college and becoming a professional were not necessarily options for the vast majority of Jewish youths in the 1920s and 1930s. When that choice as well as other economic opportunities became possible, after the Second World War, Jewish boxing rapidly disintegrated.

Jews in Proportion

During the years 1910-1940, there were twenty-six Jewish world champions. This was an impressive achievement, particularly in an era when there were only eight weight classes, instead of the myriad that exist today (to say nothing of the multiplicity of sanctioning bodies).

But this success must be viewed in the context of overall Jewish participation in boxing. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s approximately 16 percent of the champions were Jewish, but nearly one-third of the fighters were also Jewish. While there were indeed Jewish champions, Jews did not excel out of proportion to their number of participants and were, in fact, underrepresented at the championship level. In boxing, at least, Jews could be average, a possibility that was not available in other sports such as baseball.

At the 1907 Hanukkah meeting of the Menorah Society at Harvard University, Harvard's president Charles Eliot stated that the Jews "are distinctly inferior in stature and physical development . . . to any other race."

Dr. Eliot lamented the loss, since the days of the Maccabees, of the martial spirit among Jews and thought it would be beneficial if "many of you joined the militia."

Eliot's pejorative description of Jewish physical prowess ignited some controversy. A considerable number of Jews perceived themselves as Eliot did, agreed with him, and urged the Jews to attain greater bodily strength and ability. Others were outraged by what they considered to be thinly disguised anti-Semitism, and argued that Jews were no different from anyone else physically.

What motivated so many Jewish young men to careers as prizefighters? Was it a response to the kind of criticism leveled by Eliot? Was there a need to prove the manliness of Jews who had been persecuted for so many centuries and who consistently appeared to be physically helpless and unable to defend themselves? Did the Jews who became boxers believe thereby that they were representing Jewish people or, more pointedly, Jewish power?

Why Boxing?

Most Jewish boxers denied that they were acting for anyone other than themselves and their fans, and asserted that their only thoughts in becoming boxers related to the desire to earn money, and had nothing to do with their Jewishness or other Jews, except as they were fans. But the responses are really more complex than that and more subtle. From some of the fighters, we discern a sense that in various ways their ethnicity played a more defining role than they would admit or have thought about.

The thesis that Jewish boxers represented the Jewish people as a whole is a theme that recurs, with variations, throughout Jewish boxing literature. In discussing the motivation of the Jewish boxer, Jimmy Johnston, a well-known (non-Jewish) promoter of the 1920s and 1930s declared:

"You take a Jewish boy and sooner or later his race is decried. He tries so much harder to fight back for himself and for his people since he regards himself as a representative of all Jews. The knowledge that more than one Jew is on trial when he fights gives him an incentive for training more faithfully and taking greater pride in his work."

Related to the "mission" theme is the thesis that boxing helped the fighters to acculturate as Americans. While this may have applied to many Jewish fans, it played no conscious major role in the boxers' thinking. They were already Americans. Living as they did among Jews on the lower East Side of Manhattan or the Brownsville section of Brooklyn; the vast majority imagined no broader society into which they were seeking entree.

A Pragmatic Approach

They boxed because they loved it and sought to make money, not because they wished to negate the stereotype of the Jew as weakling or to be accepted as Americans. If they were aware of the stereotype at all, they could not have cared less.

Even the boxers who fought in the 1920s, such as Oscar Goldman and Sammy Farber, did not think they had to prove anything to anyone but themselves. Yet, as their testimony indicates, there were manifestations of ethnic pride and identity in their roles as Jewish boxers.

The boxers knew of no fabled Jewish worship of education. To them and their families the choice was not boxing or college, but boxing or work. In the depression days of the 1930s, college was a remote luxury, even for second-generation Jews such as the boxers.

It is true that by 1936, 11 percent of the second-generation Jews had entered the professions and the ranks of Jewish boxers were thinning. In New York, where Jews made up 25 percent of the population, they

comprised 65 percent of the lawyers, 64 percent of the dentists, and 55 percent of the doctors. But the boxers were not part of the Jewish population for whom it was feasible to enter the professions.

It should not be assumed from the boxers' lack of "national purpose" that they were not proud Jews. They were and are. Their ethnic identity was never in question. Most of them wore Stars of David on their bathrobes and trunks until religious symbols were banned in the 1940s. Usually, they considered themselves part of the Jewish community, and they participated in major Jewish holidays and rituals. They lived at home until they were married, and contributed to the family's upkeep (as did the Irish and Italians). Like 95 percent of the Jews in New York at that time, they married Jewish women and generally remained married.

Was the preeminent position of Jews in boxing during its "Golden Era" really so astonishing? Boxing was part of the urban Jew's effort to get ahead. It provided opportunity, and had Jews not played such an important role in boxing during those years, it would have been even more surprising.

Boxing in Context

Howard Sachar, in his book *A History of the Jews in America* (1992), reports that in 1911, 75 percent of the prostitutes in New York and other major urban areas were Jewish; 50 percent of the brothels were owned by Jews. In 1921, 20 percent of the jail population in New York State was Jewish, and practically 100 percent of the bootleggers were Jewish.

And what of Murder Incorporated and the pervasive Jewish mob influence in New York and other cities? According to Sachar, Jews dominated prostitution and the liquor trade in major portions of Eastern Europe and continued these activities in the New World. Where the Jews discerned opportunities, they took advantage of them. While boxing was a new activity for Jews, it was no different from anything else that urban Jews were doing to advance their economic position in life.

In 1955, Thomas Jenkins traced the history of the dominant nationalities in boxing, and concluded that the second generation of practically all urban immigrant groups gravitated to boxing. He thereby explained the ethnic succession of the English, Irish, Italians, Jews, blacks, and others. The ascendancy of Jewish boxers was a natural and predictable demographic phenomenon of Jewish immigrants and cannot be attributed to unusual causes.

This thesis is supported by the testimony of the boxers themselves. When other opportunities appeared after the war, Jews quickly vanished from the scene as contestants, although they continued their role in entrepreneurial aspects of the sport, which were forms of white-collar business enterprise.

In the precipitous disappearance of Jewish boxers from the ring, the Jewish experience does run counter to that of the other nationalities whose decline in boxing was more gradual. As to their entering the ring, however, perhaps the most unusual aspect of the Jewish boxing experience in this country, especially to a people whose history is so studded with apocalyptic events, is how thoroughly normative it actually was.

2. Dmitry Salita, Orthodox Fighter, Returns to Ring for One Last Shot at Title Inspirational 'Star of David' Fights in Brooklyn

Raphael Gellar November 07, 2013.

<http://forward.com/articles/187157/dmitry-salita-orthodox-fighter-returns-to-ring-for/?p=all>

After Dmitriy "Star of David" Salita's fight against Hector Camacho Jr. was cancelled at the beginning of the year, Salita was not sure what would happen next.

The 31-year-old welterweight boxer has a career record of 33 wins, one loss and one draw over his 12 year distinguished career. Salita, an Orthodox Jew with roots in the Ukraine, has been a role model for several young Jewish athletes and established his own promotion company in 2010 called "Salita Promotions".

Salita has one more chance to rejuvenate his career. He believes that if wins the upcoming fight, he will be able to keep his dream alive of fighting in one more world title bout. If he loses, chances are he will see retirement looming.

Raphael Gellar: A few months ago, you told me you were considering retirement after the cancellation of your last fight, what changed?

Dmitry Salita: I was considering retirement for lack of good opportunities. Boxing is full of politics and with the Camacho fight falling out the way it happened, was very bad. I did stay in shape and hoped that some of the opportunities that I was working on would materialize and luckily this one did.

Why did you start your own promotion company?

I started my company in 2010. We promoted some of my fights as well as other well-known world class fighters', world champions and contenders. I value the relationship that I have with the boxing community the boxers and trainers. I think there is a lot of potential and I am working hard to materialize it. We are working on boxing shows for the next few months. I enjoy the process and am excited about the possibilities

How do you manage to balance the time between religion and work?

Both religion and my work have found a way to function side by side. My goal of religious life is to incorporate it into my business and every day activities, that's what I have been taught and I strongly believe that message. I train in Boca Raton, and the Jewish community here has been very warm and welcoming.

3. Meet The Orthodox Rabbi Who's Also A Mixed Martial Arts Fighter

22-year-old Yossi Eilfort recently fought—and won—his first amateur match

Hannah Dreyfus January 23, 2014

<http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/160561/meet-the-orthodox-rabbi-whos-also-a-mixed-martial-arts-fighter>

Rabbi Yossi Eilfort isn't really all that different from other young, Orthodox rabbis. The 22-year-old goes to shul, wears a kippah, and observes the Sabbath. Oh, and he's a Mixed Martial Arts fighter.

The young Californian recently fought—and won—his first amateur MMA match by a technical knockout, or TKO, in the second round, Fox News reports. Eilfort began training only six months ago under former UFC fighter, Thierry Sokoudjou—plus he sits out on Friday nights and Saturdays.

"I never knew a Rabbi could fight!" Sokoudjou says in the clip below, shaking his head bemusedly. "I never thought a rabbi would be interested in fighting...I needed to give him a kill-pill—he's too nice!"

But being 'nice' in the ring is integral to Eilfort's principles. "It's very uncomfortable to hit someone else," Eilfort explained. "I make sure I'm hitting him on the side of the face, I make sure not to hit him in the head. I made sure not to strike as hard as I could. Everyone who watched said, 'You were way too nice!' but I feel that I did what I needed to do, and I didn't do any extra."

So, nu? How did a nice Jewish boy end up choosing martial arts as a hobby?

"I wanted a physical, personal, and mental challenge," said Eilfort, who practiced Krav Maga for 12 years before stepping into the Octagon. He hopes to one day become a police chaplain and provide security and safety seminars to religious students. His goal is to encourage fitness in the Orthodox Jewish community and promote an awareness of self-defense.

"I believe if we're not challenging ourselves, we're wasting time," he added.

III. Injuring Others in Jewish Law

<p>4. B. Sanhedrin 85a But did not R. Ammi say in R. Johanan's name: [Even] if one smote his neighbor with a blow inflicting less than a perutah's worth of damage, he is punished with lashes? — By 'exempt', non-liability to monetary compensation is meant.</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין פה:א והאמר רבי אמי אמר רבי יוחנן: הכהו הכאה שאין בה שוה פרוטה - לוקה! - מאי פטור דקאמר - פטור מממון.</p>
<p>5a. B. Sanhedrin 58b Resh Lakish said: He who lifts his hand against his neighbor, even if he did not smite him, is called a wicked man as it is written, And he said unto the wicked man, "Wherefore wouldst thou smite thy fellow?" (Ex. 2:13) "Wherefore hast thou smiteth is not said, but wherefore wouldst thou smite, shewing that though he had not smitten him yet, he was termed a wicked man.</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין נח:ב מגביה עבדו שבת, סימן אמר ריש לקיש: המגביה ידו על חברו, אף על פי שלא הכהו - נקרא רשע, שנאמר + שמות ב' + ויאמר לרשע למה תכה רעך, למה הכית לא נאמר, אלא למה תכה, אף על פי שלא הכהו נקרא רשע.</p>
<p>5b. Beit Yosef HM 34:2 It is written regarding rabbinic disqualifications it was needed to declare that someone without raises a hand to hit his friend is called "wicked" and this disqualified to give testimony.</p>	<p>בית יוסף חושן משפט סימן לד:ב כתב גבי פסולי דרבנן בעו הכרזה דמי שהגביה ידו על חברו נקרא רשע (סנהדרין נח:) ופסול לעדות.</p>

IV. Self Harm

<p>6. B. Bava Kamma 91b It must therefore be said that Tannaim differed on this point, for there is one view maintaining that a man may not injure himself and there is another maintaining that a man may injure himself.</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי בבא קמא צא:ב אלא תנאי היא, דאיכא למי"ד: אין אדם רשאי לחבל בעצמו, ואיכא מ"ד: אדם רשאי לחבל בעצמו.</p>
<p>7. B. Bava Kamma 90b It once happened that a certain person uncovered the head of a woman in the market place and when she came before R. Akiba, he ordered the offender to pay her four hundred zuz. The latter said to him, 'rabbi, allow me time [in which to carry out the judgment];' R. Akiba assented and fixed a time for him. He watched her until he saw her standing outside the door of her courtyard, he then broke in her presence a pitcher where there was oil of the value of an isar, and she uncovered her head and collected the oil with her palms and put her hands upon her head [to anoint it]. He then set up 'witnesses against her and came to R. Akiba and said to him: have I to give such a woman four hundred zuz?' but R. Akiba said to him: 'your argument is of no legal effect, <u>for where one injures oneself though forbidden, he is exempt</u>, yet, were others to injure him, they would be liable: so also he who cuts down his own plants, though not acting lawfully, is exempt, yet were others to [do it], they would be liable.</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי בבא קמא צב:ב ומעשה באחד שפרע ראש האשה בשוק, באת לפני רבי עקיבא, וחייבו ליתן לה ארבע מאות זוז. אמר לו: רבי, תן לי זמן, ונתן לו זמן. שמרה עומדת על פתח חצרה, ושבר את הכד בפניה ובו כאיסר שמן, גילתה את ראשה והיתה מטפחת ומנחת ידה על ראשה, העמיד עליה עדים וברא לפני רבי עקיבא. א"ל: לזו אני נותן ד' מאות זוז? א"ל: לא אמרת כלום, <u>החובל בעצמו אף על פי שאינו רשאי - פטור, אחרים שחבלו בו - חייבים, והקוצץ נטעותיו אף על פי שאינו רשאי - פטור, אחרים - חייבין.</u></p>

V. Allowing Others to Harm You

<p>8a. M. Bava Kamma 8:7 If the plaintiff said: 'put out my eye, cut off my arm and break my leg,' the offender would nevertheless be liable; [and so also even if he told him to do it] on the understanding that he would be exempt he would still be liable. If the plaintiff said: 'tear my garment and</p>	<p>משנה בבא קמא ח משנה ז האומר סמא את עיני קטע את ידי שבר את רגלי חייב על מנת לפטור חייב קרע את כסותי שבר את כדי חייב על מנת</p>
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break my pitcher,' the defendant would still be liable, but if he said to him: '[do this] on the understanding that you will be exempt,' he would be exempt, but if one said to the defendant: 'do this to a third person on the understanding that you will be exempt,' the defendant would be liable, whether where the injury was done to the person or to his chattels.

8b B. Bava Kamma 93a

IF THE PLAINTIFF SAID: PUT OUT MY EYE ... ON THE UNDERSTANDING THAT HE WOULD BE EXEMPT, HE WOULD STILL BE LIABLE. IF THE PLAINTIFF SAID: TEAR MY GARMENT ON THE UNDERSTANDING THAT YOU WILL BE EXEMPT HE WOULD BE EXEMPT. R. Assi b. Hama said to Rabbah: Why is the rule differing in the former case and in the latter case? — He replied: [There is liability in] the former case because no man truly pardons the wounding of his principal limbs. The others rejoined: Does a man then pardon the inflicting of pain, seeing that it was taught: 'If the plaintiff had said, "Smite me and wound me on the understanding that you will be exempt," the defendant would be exempt.' He had no answer and said: Have you heard anything on this matter? — He thereupon said to him: This is what R. Shesheth has said: The liability is because [the plaintiff had no right to pardon] the discredit to the family. It was similarly stated: R. Oshaia said: Because of the discredit to the family, whereas Raba said: Because no man could truly pardon the injury done to his principal limbs. R. Johanan, however, said: Sometimes the term 'Yes' means 'No' and the term 'No' means 'Yes' [as when spoken ironically]. It was also taught likewise: If the plaintiff said, 'Smite me and wound me,' and when the defendant interposed, 'On the understanding of being exempt, the plaintiff replied, 'Yes,' there may be a 'Yes' which implies 'No' [i.e., when spoken ironically]. If the plaintiff said, 'Tear my garment,' and when the defendant interposed, 'On the Understanding of being exempt, he said to him, 'No', there may be a 'No' which means 'Yes' [such as when spoken ironically].

לפטור פטור עשה כן לאיש פלוני על מנת
לפטור חייב בין בגופו בין בממונו:

תלמוד בבלי בבא קמא צג:א

אומר סמא את עיני כו'. אייל רב אסי בר
חמא לרבא: מאי שנא רישא ומאי שנא
סיפא? אמר ליה: רישא, לפי שאין אדם
מוחל על ראשי אברים. אייל: וכי אדם
מוחל על צערו? דתניא: הכני, פצעני, על
מנת לפטור - פטור! אישתיק. אמר:
מידי שמייע לך בהא? אמר ליה, הכי
אמר רב ששת: משום פגם משפחה.
איתמר, ר' אושעיא אמר: משום פגם
משפחה; רבא אמר: משום שאין אדם
מוחל על ראשי אברים שלו; רבי יוחנן
אמר: יש הן שהוא כלאו, ויש לאו שהוא
כהן. תניא נמי הכי: הכני, פצעני, על
מנת לפטור? ואמר לו הן? הרי יש הן
שהוא כלאו; קרע את כסותי, על מנת
לפטור? ואמר לו לאו? הרי לאו שהוא
כהן.