

Olympic Jews?

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THE SCENE AT Ben-Gurion airport this week was rather astonishing.

More than a thousand young male fans came to welcome the two Israeli Judo fighters—one female, one male—who had won a bronze medal each at the Olympic games in Rio.

It was a very raucous welcome. The crowd went wild, shouted, pushed, raised fists.

Yet judo is not a very popular sport in Israel. Israeli sports enthusiasts pack the soccer stadiums, as well as the basketball courts. But in these two sports, Israel is far from winning any medals.

So Israeli crowds suddenly became judo fans (some called it “Jewdo”). People who did not go wild with enthusiasm were considered traitors. We did not hear anything about the judo champions who got the gold or silver medals. Were there any?

WE CAN only imagine what would have happened if the Israeli Olympic contingent had included Arab athletes. Arabs? In our contingent?

True, Arabs constitute some 20% of the Israeli population, and some are very active in sports. But God—or Allah—saved us from this headache. None made it to Rio.

But there is another question that should have drawn attention. Israel is—by its own official definition—a “Jewish state”. It claims to belong to the Jewish people. It considers itself, in a way, the headquarters of “world Jewry”.

So why does no one in Israel take the slightest interest in the medals won by Jews and Jewesses in other national delegations? Where is Jewish solidarity? Where is Jewish pride?

Well, it simply does not exist where it counts. In the Olympic Games, a highly nationalistic event, nobody in Israel cares about the Diaspora Jews. To hell with them.

It seems that in sport, more than anywhere else, the distinction between Israelis and Jews is fundamental. So fundamental, indeed, that the question did not even arise. Who cares.

THE QUESTION did come up in the course of a debate which arose recently.

It started with a small article of mine in the liberal Israeli newspaper, Haaretz. I pointed out that some of the best and the brightest of Israeli youth have emigrated and

struck roots in foreign countries. Oddly enough, their most popular new homeland is Germany, and the most preferred city is Berlin. I asked the emigrants politely to come back and take part in the struggle “to save Israel from itself”.

Some of the Israelis in Berlin declined politely. No, but thanks, they said. They feel at home in the former Reichshauptstadt, and have absolutely no intention of coming back to Israel.

I was struck by the fact that not one of the writers even mentioned the Jewish community in Berlin or anywhere else. They don't see themselves as members of the Jewish communities around the world, but rather of a separate, new Israeli Diaspora. Like most Israelis, they harbor a secret contempt for Diaspora Jews.

But this cannot hold. Except for those few who are completely liberated from religion and tradition, Israelis abroad will still need to be married by a rabbi, their newborn sons to be circumcised by a rabbi, and at the end to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Soon enough, they will be full-fledged members of the local Jewish communities.

For these Jews, the entire process will have been completed within six or seven generations, from Diaspora Jew to Israeli, from Israeli back to Diaspora Jew.

THE FOUNDER of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, believed that after the creation of the “Jewish State” (not necessarily in Palestine), all the Jews in the world would go and settle there. Those who did not, would just assimilate in the countries where they lived and cease being Jews.

This was a simple idea, because Herzl was a naïve person, who knew very little about the Jews. Because of that, he did not conceive a future difference between the Jews in the Jewish State and all the others, who would stay where they were or emigrate to other countries, like the USA. The term “Jew” came to mean many different things.

Jews were proud to speak of a “Jewish people”, a unique people dispersed around the world. As a matter of fact, there was nothing unique about it: this was the normal situation in the Byzantine empire, and later in the Ottoman Caliphate. Some aspects of it were maintained in the British Mandate, and exist even today in the laws of Israel.

Under this system, called by the Turks “millet”, peoples are not territorial units, but geographically dispersed religious communities governed by their own religious leaders, subject to the Emperor or Sultan. The Jews were no different in this respect from the Hellenes, the various Christian sects or, later on, the Muslims.

Only with the advent of modern nations, based on territories, did Jews become almost unique. Other religious peoples reformed themselves and became modern nations. The stubborn Jews rejected change and remained a dispersed ethnic-religious entity.

Herzl and his followers wanted to change this and to belatedly turn the Jews into a modern nation, with a “fatherland” of their own. That was the meaning of Zionism.

So why did they not make a clear distinction between the members of their new nation and the Jews around the world? Well, there never was a clearly defined Zionist ideology, like the Marxist one. Also, they were afraid that a clear-cut separation from Jewish religion would harm their cause. So they left it muddled-up—Jewish religion, Jewish Diaspora, Jewish people, Jewish State, all the same.

The idea was that making no distinction between a Jew in Berlin and a Jew in Tel Aviv made it easier for Jews around the world to go to Israel. Nobody thought about the fact that this bridge had two directions. If it was easy to go from Berlin to Tel Aviv, it was equally easy to go from Tel Aviv to Berlin. That's what is happening now.

THIS MIGHT well not have happened, if the new nation created by Zionism had been called by a new name.

A small group of intellectuals once proposed just that. They wanted to call the members of the new nation in Palestine “Hebrews”, while continuing to call the members of the Diaspora “Jews”. This was strongly condemned by Zionists. Though popular slang did unconsciously adopt this distinction, it took no official hold.

With the creation of the State of Israel, there seemed to be a natural solution: There was the Jewish Diaspora and there was the State of Israel. Jews in Israel became Israelis and were proud of it. When asked abroad what they are, they would naturally answer “I am an Israeli”, never “I am a Jew”. I strongly suspect that a young Israeli emigrant in Berlin today would still give the same answer.

But there is a problem: more than 20% of Israeli citizens are Arabs. Are they included in the concept of the Israeli nation? Most of them, and almost all Jewish Israelis, would answer with a No. They consider themselves a Palestinian minority in Israel.

The simple solution would be to recognize “Israeli Arabs” as a national minority, with full minority rights. But the Israeli leadership is quite unable to do that. Therefore we have a rather grotesque situation: the Israeli government registration authority, which asks for the individual's “nationality”, refuses to register “Israeli” and insists on “Jewish” or “Arab”. (In Israel, nationality does not mean citizenship.)

An appeal was made by a group of Israeli citizens (including me) to the Supreme Court against this decision, but it was rejected.

Once I had an argument about this with Ariel Sharon. I asked him: “What are you first, an Israeli or a Jew?” He answered without hesitation: “First of all I am a Jew, only then an Israeli.” My answer was the opposite: “I am first an Israeli, only then a Jew.”

Sharon was born in a communal village and knew next to nothing about Judaism. But he was educated in the Zionist education system, which is totally committed to producing Jews.

If he were alive today, Sharon would certainly have congratulated the Israeli judokas. It would not have crossed his mind to ask about Jewish Olympic stars.