

# The Jewish Hercules: How Sports Created Space for Hellenic Judaism in Salonica

Makena Mezistrano

A 1950s photograph captures the eleven men of Salonica's Iraklis (or Hercules) soccer team, one of the oldest athletic teams in Greece. The players stand in front of a packed crowd at the Pan-Thessalonikan Athletic Club of Constantinopolitans, or PAOK, stadium. Even though the photo isn't in color, I know their uniforms are a patriotic blue and white, inspired by the Greek flag. A handwritten roster on the photo's verso lists the teammates' names: Paraskos, Seravithis, Karpozilos. But the fourth name on the roster—the player standing fourth from the left in the photo—stands out. His name is Jack Abravanel: Salonican-born Jew, Bergen-Belsen survivor, and my grandfather—or, in Greek and Ladino, my Papu. In a city transformed by Nazi persecution and a willful amnesia on the part of the Greek government, Jack engaged in a unique form of Jewish protest in Salonica.

Compared to the more overt protests staged by Salonican Jews in the decades before and after the Holocaust, Jack's was more subtle. As the sole Jewish player on Iraklis, he challenged the boundaries that the Greek state had attempted to draw between Hellenic and Jewish identity after the city became part of the new Greek state in 1912. For the Jewish and non-Jewish spectators who watched him play, Jack became an important symbol of Hellenic Judaism—a dual identity embodied by other Jewish athletes who came before him.

Jack and other Jewish athletes were certainly not the first to negotiate a Hellenic Jewish identity in Salonica, but athletic competitions emerged as an exceptional space for Jews to embody this duality, because the sports arena was noticeably more tolerant than other public spaces in Salonica. By contrast, the commercial port, historically closed on Shabbat to accommodate the majority of Jewish workers, was also closed on Sundays in 1924 to favor the Orthodox Christian day of worship. The only way for Jews to avoid losing two days of income was to

**Jews in Salonica often complicated the monolithic identity that the state was attempting to craft due to their multilingualism, public support of the former Ottoman rule, and for some, Zionism.**

work on Saturday. Similarly, in 1923, for the first time, Jews were forced to vote in a separate electoral college. The costly sacrifice required to vote within the newly defined majority would have been conversion to Orthodox Christianity. To play on Greek sports teams did not generally require these major abandonments of Jewish identity; even if Jewish players abstained from playing on Shabbat, it would not have constituted a major financial loss, and was therefore a much different calculus. Thus, the sports arena became a unique space in which Jews could most successfully embody Hellenic Judaism before an audience of Jewish and non-Jewish spectators alike.

Changes to the international marketplace and the local government were part of the Greek state's project to establish a nationalist history and identity, both of which erased the former "backward" Ottoman administration. Jews in Salonica often complicated the monolithic identity that the state was attempting to craft due to their multilingualism, public support of the former Ottoman rule, and for some, Zionism. All of these orientations posed a threat to this nationalist definition of Greekness, and were viewed as anti-Greek. But athletic competitions were a place where this threat was momentarily suspended. With this opening, many Jewish athletes thrived on Greek teams and were publicly celebrated. One particular moment of Jewish athletic excellence occurred at Greece's first international soccer match, held on a Sunday in Athens in 1929, when Salonican-born Alberto Nahmias scored the first goal for Greece against Italy. Nahmias and other Jewish athletes thus simultane-



*Iraklis (Hercules) team photo taken at Salonica's PAOK stadium, c. 1950. Author's grandfather, Jack Abravanel, fourth from left. PAOK stadium had previously been the cemetery for the local dönme community, Jewish followers of the false messiah Sabbatai Zvi, who converted to Islam en masse in the seventeenth century. The dönme (also known as ma'aminim, or "believers") and Salonica's general Muslim population were forced out during a 1923 population exchange with Asia Minor.*

ously became Greek heroes for non-Jews and also powerful representatives for the Jewish community—and symbols of Hellenic Judaism to all. This dual identity was itself a protest, intentional or otherwise. If the stadium was a microcosm of Greece's image on the world stage, a Jewish athlete's public achievement showed that a successful Greek state did not necessitate the erasure and exclusion of Salonica's Jews in the name of Greek nationalism.

Seven years after Nahmias's goal, Hellenic Judaism faced its greatest threat. As the Greek state continued to craft its nationalist past, the enduring Jewish presence in Salonica became a contentious issue. From 1917 and through the 1930s, government and university representatives, and members of the Orthodox Christian population, advocated expanding the Aristotle University campus over Salonica's Jewish cemetery. These were the largest Jewish burial grounds in all of Europe, and the longest-standing evidence of a Jewish presence in

Salonica. Protest against this proposal was overt and multifaceted, but one strategy deployed by Jewish community leaders was to position the lengthy epigraphs on the tombstones, which often included the deceased's accomplishments, as a record of the region at large. Thus, the cemetery was not only vital in documenting a Jewish past, but also a Greek past.<sup>1</sup> Amid the cemetery crisis, Jewish athletes from Salonica were still becoming Greek heroes, lauded by the Orthodox Christian spectators who watched them play. Each protest—defending the cemetery, and Jewish athletic achievement—demonstrated the indispensability of Salonican Jews within Greek culture.

Being a Jewish athlete in Salonica carried different implications after the Holocaust, as the burden of Jewish representation fell squarely on individuals. Survivors who returned to the city had to reconstruct their identities without the majority of Salonica's Jewish institutions, such as the cemetery, which was demolished in 1942. Survivors also had to negotiate the identities imposed upon

them: their trauma and subsequent demands for official compensation earned them the Greek classification of *omiros*, or hostages—a bureaucratic description of their victimhood, and an identity marker that only accentuated their Otherness in Greek Salonica. In the eyes of much of the Orthodox Christian public, Jews were a nuisance, battling to reclaim property that many Orthodox Christians had come to view as their own. Now the price of “becoming Greek” did not necessitate abandoning Shabbat observance or converting, but rather forgetting past injustices in order to quietly reenter society—which, for many survivors, would have been an unimaginable insult to the memory of their deceased. Without most of the city’s Jewish institutions left to fortify a physical representation of Hellenic Judaism, that burden now fell to a select few.

When Jack stepped onto the field at PAOK stadium in 1950, he entered into that exceptional space of which many Salonican Jewish athletes before him had taken part. Jack’s Jewish contemporaries who watched him play saw that vision of Hellenic Judaism reemerging, and the protest against their community’s erasure by the Greek state was reinvigorated once again.

**Now the price of “becoming Greek” did not necessitate abandoning Shabbat observance or converting, but rather forgetting past injustices in order to quietly reenter society...**

Looking at the photo of my Papu standing with Iraklis and the crowd in the background, I hear the memories of a young Jewish spectator, another survivor who would become Jack’s brother-in-law, who proudly listened to a crowd of Orthodox Christians cheer for one player as he ran toward the goal: “Abravanel, Abravanel.” As they applauded his success, Jack demanded that his predominantly non-Jewish audience publicly acknowledge that their Greek hero was a Jew.

---

**MAKENA MEZISTRANO** is the assistant director of the *Sephardic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle*. She holds a BA in English Literature and an MA in Biblical and Talmudic Studies, both from Yeshiva University. Her maternal grandparents are Holocaust survivors from Salonica.

---

i See Devin E. Naar, *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

## Prophetic Protest in the Hebrew Bible

Marian Kelsey

The Hebrew Bible contains many examples of protest against God. Such protest was crucial to the role of a prophet. It is normally understood as intercession, in which the prophet pleads for God’s leniency regarding human transgression. Yet the word “intercession” obscures the fact that prophets do criticize God, however cautiously they phrase it. Sometimes God allows the criticism, and changes his plans accordingly, and sometimes the criticism is rejected. The protest itself is, however, expected, even demanded, by God. In the book of Ezekiel, God complains that “I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would

**A well-known example of prophetic protest is Abraham negotiating with God in an attempt to spare Sodom and Gomorrah.**

not destroy it; but I found no one” (Ezek 22:30). God demands that we exercise moral judgement, even toward God—although, needless to say, he will not always accept our rulings.

A well-known example of prophetic protest is Abraham negotiating with God in an attempt to spare Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18). God tells Abraham that he intends