

## PERSPECTIVES

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Eight times a year, The Kantor Center publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture written by members of its team. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: [kantorce@tauex.tau.ac.il](mailto:kantorce@tauex.tau.ac.il)

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## Jews and Roots

### What football teaches us about Israeli-German relations

*Uriya Shavit*

Ask any sports fan: a football match is worth watching only if you root for one of the teams. Whether it is the World Cup, the Malaysian third division, or kids playing in the backyard, you cannot avoid picking your favorite based on one made-up reason or another.

A satirical Hebrew-language Israeli Facebook page, “The Jews Root”, established in April 2016, has attempted to make the choice of Israeli soccer fans easier. During international competitions, it offers short historical analyses of the crimes committed by different nations against the Jewish people, concluding with a calculated selection between two teams.

In the 2020 Euro that ended this month, “The Jews Root” reached almost 20,000 followers. Whether it was Spain against Switzerland, England against Ukraine, or Denmark against the Czech Republic, the page cynically informed its readers which nations saved Jews, which did not, and which persecuted and murdered them, offering a bottom line as to which national team deserves Jewish support.

The page features a picture from an iconic comical act by the Kameri Quintet, a popular Israeli television show from the 1990s. That act introduced a Herzl-like Jewish sports politico who tries to convince the referee to allow a short, fragile Israeli track

runner to start the race a few meters ahead of his tall gentile competitors in order to “lessen the humiliation” of the Jews. When his request is declined, the Herzl-like figure declares what has since become a catchphrase: “Haven’t the Jewish people suffered enough?”

There’s a truth in any joke; the truth in “The Jews Root” is that Jewish history no longer guides most Israelis when picking their favorites in Europe – and that is why they are comfortable joking about it.

Not long ago, but long after “valid to all countries except Germany” was omitted from Israeli passports, it was obvious which national team Israelis despise most and hope fails in the World Cup or the Euro. It was Germany. The Mannschaft had fans in Israel, including a Holocaust survivor who is one of its most influential public figures. Yet, these fans remained closeted. To publicly endorse the German team, or even to do so among friends, was almost a taboo.

That approach has radically changed in recent years. Already in 2010, a survey conducted by a leading Israeli polling company, Dahaf, found that no less than 25.1 percent of Israelis (and 30.5 among the men surveyed) would like to see Germany win the World Cup out of four finalists.

The Netherlands used to be the obvious European favorite for Israelis, in part because of the good reputation the Dutch falsely acquired for their conduct in the Holocaust, in part because of their attractive playing style. The survey gave the Dutch team the slimmest of margins over Germany, with only 27.7 percent of Israelis (31.1 among the men surveyed) hoping to see them win the cup.

More shocking was the finding that almost ten percent of Israelis (and 13.5 of the men surveyed) rooted for Germany from the start of the tournament – that is, when Brazil, Argentina, and good old England were still playing.

Ever since, displays of support for the German national team and German teams have been quite common in Israel. These include, for example, a Bayern Munich Fan Club with thousands of members. During a public screening of the Germany-Portugal match during the last Euro at the Azrieli Towers, a young Israeli man, wearing the official Germany jersey, sitting in the front row, went out of his way to make sure everyone noticed precisely where his heart belongs.

One reason for the shift is that since 2006, German football is no longer associated with the mechanicalness, aggressiveness, and win-by-any-means-necessary it was famous for (rather unjustifiably) in the 1970s and the 1980s. It was reborn as creative, bold, multicultural – and somewhat less efficient. More football fans across the globe grew fond of it, and Israelis were no exception.

On a broader level, the changing approach to German football owes to a rapid transformation in Israeli attitudes toward German society and the German state at large. Over the past three decades, Germany has gradually become an Israeli favorite. A study by the German Bertelsmann Foundation found that whereas in 1991, only 48 percent of Israelis had a favorable view of Germany, by 2007, 57 percent did. By 2015, already 70 percent of Israelis had a favorable opinion of Germany, according to another study conducted by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Pariah Germany of the 1950s has become, for many Israelis of the 2000s, Germany, the best friend.

The historical transformation was encouraged by three interrelated processes. One, sad yet unavoidable, was that younger generations of Israelis were less emotional about the land in which the annihilation of their nation was masterminded. Another was that Germany shined as Israel's most trusted and powerful diplomatic ally in Europe.

Most importantly, Israeli-German relations deepened and matured following several decades of bottom-up enterprises, including high-school delegations, academic exchanges, and trade partnerships. The foundation of these diverse and cautiously construed efforts was a German recognition of the historical responsibility of their nation (albeit not always of Germans as individuals) for the most atrocious of crimes, and the understanding that the past could never be forgiven – or forgotten.

Opposing prejudice should mean opposing it for all. Three years ago, on a train in Norway, I argued with an old man who wanted to keep the window shut. At some point, he barked at me that I must be a German because only Germans are so impolite. The glorious irony of the moment was too good to miss, so I cautioned him that racial bigotry is an offense in his country. His behavior reminded me of a story a German banker once told me. When he worked in London, an English colleague, who watched one too many Fawlty Towers episodes, greeted him every morning with a Hitlergruss. When the German had enough and explained to his colleague why this isn't funny, his colleague replied: "I knew you Germans have no sense of humor!"

Germans and the Germany of today should be judged by who they are, rather than by whom their grandparents were. Opinions polls and social media that suggest that Israelis are becoming increasingly comfortable doing just that mark a positive development.

However, the change of heart also carries the risk of unintentionally relativizing and obscuring the past. "The Jews Root", a funny commentary against the politicizing of football, conceals a real danger. Given the state of Jewish history instruction in Israeli high schools, it is actually far from obvious that all its readers appreciate the joke. If they accept the misconception that Jewish history is nothing more than a tale of suffering and persecutions, they will do their heritage injustice. If they'd be convinced that Germans are just one link in a long chain of European nations who did the Jews horrible things at some point in the past, they would do their history injustice.

Germany bears a unique responsibility for a unique crime, and Israelis, whomever they chose to root for today, should always have that in mind.

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Uriya Shavit is Head of the Kantor Center.