

# Why Did Beit Shean Let Betar Win? Latent Ethnic Solidarity and the Sports Ethic in Israel

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“You are not going to believe what you are about to see,” the Spanish television broadcaster warned his audience. He was reporting on a soccer game in Israel—not a subject of everyday interest for the international news media. Yet this particular match between Hapo’el Beit Shean and Betar Jerusalem, which took place on May 2, 1998 in the Kiryat Eliezer stadium in Haifa, was very much out of the ordinary. In fact, it was one of the strangest soccer games ever seen in Israel. A huge headline in *Yedioth Ahronoth* on May 3, 1998 summed it up in one word: “Shame.”

What had happened? During the final eight minutes of the game, with the score tied at 2–2, the Beit Shean team had “moved aside” and allowed Betar to score a winning goal. In the words of a *Yedioth Ahronoth* commentator: “I have watched soccer for 25 years, and I do not remember ever seeing such a bizarre, embarrassing, and shameful spectacle as the last eight minutes in Kiryat Eliezer.”<sup>1</sup>

Taking place in the penultimate round (29 out of 30) of the 1997–1998 soccer season, this game was particularly important. As in European countries, Israeli soccer teams compete in a hierarchical framework of leagues, the top two of which are known (since 1998) as Ligat ha’al (the premier league) and Haligah haleumit (the national league). Twelve teams compete in each league, and at the end of each season, the bottom two teams in Ligat ha’al are relegated to the national league, while the top two national league teams are promoted to the premier league. Betar at this point was in first place in the premier league, and a victory in this game meant an almost certain championship over its rival, Hapo’el Tel Aviv, which was scheduled to play at the same time against Hapo’el Petah Tikvah. Beit Shean, in contrast, was situated close to the bottom of the top-ranked league, such that a loss to Betar entailed the real risk of being relegated. In this regard, a third game taking place on May 2 was also significant: that between Hapo’el Beersheba and Hapo’el Jerusalem, which was being played at the Teddy stadium in Jerusalem. In the event that Beersheba lost its game, Beit Shean would be able to retain its position in the premier league even if it lost the game against Betar.

All three games had been scheduled for the same time, 5:45 p.m. At the last minute, however, the match between Betar and Beit Shean started nine minutes late. This delay proved to be crucial.

The start of the game augured well for the underdog team. After four minutes, and against all odds, Beit Shean scored a goal and led 1–0. In the middle of the first half, word came that Beersheba was trailing in its match against Hapo'el Jerusalem, 0–1. Thirty-nine minutes into the game, Beit Shean received a penalty kick, giving it an opportunity to widen its lead to 2–0. Eitan Tayeb, a gifted defensive player, took the kick but sent the ball well over the goal post. It was the first penalty he had missed in five years of professional play. Five minutes later, Betar scored a goal and tied the score at 1–1.

In the middle of the second half, Betar scored another goal and pulled ahead 2–1. Television cameras filming the scene focused on one of Betar's players talking to Eitan Tayeb. "If in Teddy [Stadium] it's all over," the Betar player appeared to be saying, "no one [inaudible], okay?" Tayeb nodded as if in agreement.<sup>2</sup> Players on both teams did not appear to be playing very hard for the next few minutes.

Meanwhile, Betar's rival, Hapo'el Tel Aviv, scored a goal to take a 1–0 lead in its match against Petah Tikvah. And, ten minutes before the end of the Betar-Beit Shean match, the Beersheba-Jerusalem game ended with a victory for Hapo'el Jerusalem. The situation was now as follows: Betar needed to be assured of a clear victory over Beit Shean, not merely a tie, in order to clinch the championship; whereas Beit Shean's place in the premier league was secure, regardless of whether it won or lost.

As word spread regarding Beersheba's defeat, there was a perceptible shift of mood in the bleachers. As reported by Arel Segal, a journalist and avowed fan of Betar, "during the second half, the fans of Beit Shean broke into a loud song. They were not chanting for their team, they were chanting for Betar. From the second they heard that Beersheba's game was over, they suspended their local partisanship and switched to the anthem of "Yerushalayim, Yerushalayim [Jerusalem, Jerusalem]".<sup>3</sup>

Then, in the 86th minute of play, the unexpected occurred. Almog Hazan, a young player on the Beit Shean team, scored his first goal in a professional match, kicking the ball in from 20 meters to tie the game at 2–2. With this, Betar's championship was put into jeopardy. In theory, Hazan's fellow players should have been ecstatic—yet very few of them came over to congratulate him. David Amsalem, a Betar defense player, murmured some words in the direction of Hazan: "But why?! You didn't go down [to the lower league]! You didn't go down!"<sup>4</sup>

From that moment until the end of the game, about eight minutes in all, Betar was given no less than 12 opportunities to score a winning goal, which it finally did in the very last seconds of play. The match is remembered in Israeli soccer folklore as the "shoelaces game," a reference to the fact that Eitan Tayeb was filmed in the act of tying his shoelaces in the middle of a corner kick that eventually resulted in Betar's winning goal. Tayeb had already tied his shoelaces four minutes earlier, in the course of another Betar attack.

Tayeb became the tragic hero of this game. Only a day before the match, in an interview appearing in *Kol ha'ir*, a Jerusalem weekly, he was quoted as saying that his lifelong dream was to play for Betar. Speaking about the upcoming game between

Beersheba and Hapo'el Jerusalem, he noted that “if [Hapo'el] wins, and we know that, then it will be an open game, a completely different game.” During the same week, five of Beit Shean's players were quoted in a local newspaper in Haifa, saying that they were rooting for Betar to win the championship.

Among the sports commentators in every Israeli newspaper there was total consensus: the players of Hapo'el Beit Shean had been strangely passive during the last minutes of the game, essentially letting Betar win the game and, with it, the Israeli championship (*alifut haligah*). Even more interesting, however, was another view agreed upon by all: “this is not about selling out for money. . . . Beit Shean is a nice team that doesn't ask for payment—everything comes for free, wrapped up as a holiday present.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, this was not a normal case of corruption (which is not an unknown phenomenon in Israeli soccer). No one claimed that Beit Shean “sold” the game. Why, then, did the team do what it did? The answer, it appeared, was self-evident, something every Israeli sports fan “should know,” although it was not explicitly stated.

Local newspapers were less subtle and more upfront in identifying the reason. Yehudah Nuriel, another fan of Betar, wrote in *Itan Tel Aviv*:

Recently we wrote about the distinction, which is somewhat rough, but still essentially correct, between “black teams” and Ashkenazic teams in the league. . . . Dear friends: from the 60th minute, the fans of Beit Shean started to cheer for Betar. Why? Because they are from our family. Because they really want us to succeed. . . . When the team's considerations are irrelevant, the black fan will almost always prefer the success of a sister team over a white team.

Nuriel was referring to a well-known demographic fact, namely, that the vast majority of both Betar and Beit Shean fans were Mizrahim—that is, Jews of Middle Eastern or North African origin. Hapo'el Tel Aviv, in contrast, has always been known as an “Ashkenazic” team, even though its fan base is actually quite heterogenous.

The claim that Hapo'el Beit Shean threw the game because of ethnic solidarity was made only by sports commentators such as Nuriel and not by the players or fans of the team. Even those among them who admitted that there was something unusual in the game explained it as a sudden decline in motivation after Beit Shean's place in the premier league was secured, or else cited concerns regarding a violent reaction on the part of Betar fans should their team lose. None of them explicitly expressed the ethnic solidarity ascribed to them by Nuriel.

Two aspects of this particular incident are worthy of analysis: the widespread coverage and almost unanimous condemnation of Beit Shean by the mainstream media; and the fact that, generally speaking, the “reason” behind the game's outcome was stated only implicitly, the assumption being that it was a matter of common knowledge. As I will show, the Beit Shean team's display of ethnic solidarity contradicted two major aspects of the popular consensus.

First, ethnic solidarity in and of itself contradicts the sporting ethic, according to which athletes are expected to make their best effort to win. Their identity as athletes should overshadow any other attributes—ethnic, religious, or racial—and it should be strong enough to eliminate any potential sympathy with their adversaries. Second, according to classic Zionist ideology, Jews constitute one nation, and loy-

alty to this nation should transcend any other allegiances. The expression of Mizrahi ethnic identity (*mizrahiyut*) is often regarded as clashing with this ideology and, as such, illegitimate. Whereas certain expressions of Mizrahi solidarity are often to be found, particularly in such “non-political” spheres as sports and music, Beit Shean’s players and fans went one step too far when they gave priority to ethnic solidarity over the sports ethic. As will be seen, they paid a steep price in consequence.

### **Mizrahi Political Consciousness in Israel**

Following the wave of mass immigration in the 1950s and 1960s, Israel developed into an ethnically stratified society, with the population of the middle and upper classes largely comprised of Ashkenazim. Mizrahim occupied an intermediate place between the Ashkenazim and the Israeli Arab citizens who were relegated to the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy.<sup>6</sup> Although the boundaries between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim are much more diffused and blurred than those between Arabs and Jews, inequality between different Jewish ethnic groups is evident. The income gap between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim is tangible and, for second-generation men, has even been growing since the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> In 1988, 20 percent of foreign-born Ashkenazic men were professionals, managers, or technicians, compared with only 6 percent of foreign-born Mizrahi men. Among the Israeli-born members of the two groups, the gap was even wider: 50 percent and 20 percent, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Gaps in the occupational status of Mizrahim and Ashkenazim remain even after controlling for differences in educational attainment and socioeconomic status.<sup>9</sup>

Many of the Mizrahi immigrants of the early years of the state were directed to housing in urban slum neighborhoods, or else were sent to “development towns,” including Beit Shean, that were mainly located on Israel’s periphery. According to varying estimates, a total of 25–40 percent of the Mizrahi population lives in 28 development towns.<sup>10</sup> A cornerstone of Israel’s national project of “Judaizing” the country, these development towns have resulted in the creation of segregated and low-status Mizrahi ethnic spaces. In a study from 1995 that ranked all 118 Israeli Jewish urban localities according to their aggregate quality of life indicators, 18 of the lowest-ranking 20 towns were development towns. Such gaps have led to silent grievances and to public protest, as well as to the emergence of a low-status Mizrahi ethno-class of fluctuating political orientation.<sup>11</sup> Beginning in the 1960s, development towns became a bastion of opposition to the ruling Labor party, which was considered to be responsible for a discriminatory policy against Mizrahim.

Collective grievances, however, did not translate into a viable and effective Mizrahi political consciousness.<sup>12</sup> Some scholars have pointed to the partial inclusion of Mizrahim in the Zionist project as a reason for this absence of consciousness. Yehouda Shenhav, for example, has shown how the dynamics of collective identification by Israeli Mizrahi Jews were informed by Zionism, both in its colonialist and nationalist aspects. Whereas the colonialist aspect of Zionism led to Mizrahim being viewed as the “other” and as a separate ethnic group, the nationalist aspects of Zionism defined Mizrahim as part of a homogenous Jewish community in order to mobilize them for the project of nation-building.<sup>13</sup> One interesting aspect of the

tension between these two aspects of Zionism is that Mizrahi identity has developed, on the one hand, as both a powerful subjective experience and as a tangible political force; on the other hand, there has been little legitimacy for public and explicit political displaying of this identity. Nonetheless, an implicit sentiment of solidarity has evolved, based both on the similar origin and culture of Mizrahim and their shared social and economic marginality in Israel.<sup>14</sup>

The most serious attempt to develop an assertive Mizrahi ethnic (as opposed to religious) political consciousness was made by the Black Panther movement of the early 1970s, which spearheaded neighborhood-based ethnic protests in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Yet not using the Zionist rhetoric, the Black Panthers placed themselves outside of the popular consensus and were easily delegitimized. Within a relatively short period of time, the movement was essentially co-opted by mainstream political parties. Following this, Mizrahi political protest became channeled to the ballot box, where the right-wing Likud party emerged as the biggest winner.<sup>15</sup> Although the Likud never defined itself as a Mizrahi movement and its candidates for prime minister were always Ashkenazim, it followed a strategy of promoting young Mizrahi leaders from the development towns within its ranks. (The most successful among them was David Levy, formerly a construction worker from Beit Shean, who eventually rose to second place on the party list.) In the 1981 elections, the Likud garnered 48.9 percent of the development town vote, compared with 37.1 percent nationwide.<sup>16</sup> Studies of voting preference from the early 1980s revealed that an individual's continent of origin was a valid predictor for voting Likud even when education, age, occupational status, socioeconomic status, and level of religiosity were controlled for.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note, however, that whereas voting for Likud has long been a form of cultural and social protest, it has not been an expression of national ideology or explicit Mizrahi political activism.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, the striking exception to the non-political character of Mizrahi activism is Shas, a haredi (ultra-Orthodox) religious Mizrahi party established in 1984. Since 1992, Shas has garnered between 8–14 percent of the vote in parliamentary elections, with much of its support coming from lower-class Mizrahi voters (many of them traditional in their religious orientation, but not strictly observant). Nonetheless, the manifestly religious nature of the party makes it a less attractive option for many Mizrahi voters who have a more secular worldview.<sup>19</sup>

### Mizrahim and Soccer

With the exception of Shas, Mizrahi solidarity within politics has been manifested either implicitly (for instance, via collective protest voting, though not for parties with a Mizrahi agenda) or in marginal ways (for instance, the explicit Mizrahi agenda promoted by small groups with limited power). This solidarity, however, has been much more “legitimate” in non-political spheres, with various aspects of popular Israeli culture being far more accessible and receptive to the expression of *mizrahiyut*. Music is a prime example. According to Motti Regev, by virtue of its “well maintained image of having a mass appeal and of being grass-roots music of oriental Jews,” such

music became, by the 1990s, “the cultural form most unequivocally associated with *mizrakhiut*.”<sup>20</sup> Soccer may well be the second most popular site of Mizrahi identification—less popular than music only because women are mostly uninvolved.<sup>21</sup>

During the first years of the state’s existence, most Israeli soccer players were Ashkenazim, since they constituted the vast majority of the pre-state Jewish population.<sup>22</sup> This situation changed with the mass immigration from Muslim and Arab countries. By the end of the 1960s, about half of the players were Mizrahim,<sup>23</sup> although they did not yet account for a majority of players either in the top league or on the Israeli national team.

Over time, soccer stadiums in Jewish localities became spaces dominated by the Mizrahi working class. The class and ethnic character of contemporary Israeli soccer is evident in municipal authorities’ support for local teams.<sup>24</sup> In an analysis carried out in 1998, I found a positive and statistically significant correlation (0.58) between financial support for soccer teams and the relative share of the town or city’s population whose continent of origin was Asia or Africa. Similarly, there was a negative and statistically significant correlation (–0.65) between municipal support for soccer clubs and the relative share of inhabitants whose continent of origin was Europe or America. Soccer, it would appear, is most avidly followed in predominantly Mizrahi towns.

The overrepresentation of economically and politically marginalized ethnic groups in hegemonic sports is a very common phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> Beyond offering a seemingly easy path to economic mobility, success in these sports can play an important role in boosting collective self-esteem and ethnic pride. It is noteworthy that Moshe Karif, one of the founders of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow (*Hakeshet hademokratit hamizrahit*),<sup>26</sup> chose to begin his book about the movement with a story concerning the surprising victory of Maccabi Jaffa (whose fans are mostly Jews of Sephardic Bulgarian origin), over the “rich” team of Maccabi Tel Aviv in the 1976–1977 season. As the winning goal was kicked, he writes, he was filled with a sense of mission, a feeling that it was now “possible to make it without a home stadium, without resources, in the face of frowning countenances and endless arrogance. I saw from up close that it was possible to beat the system. Here was the proof: Albert Levy [the player who scored the goal].”<sup>27</sup>

The 1970s, a decade of turbulent Mizrahi activism, was also an era of up-and-coming Israeli soccer teams with a largely Mizrahi fan base. Mizrahi youths from working-class backgrounds gradually became the dominant group among the players. Many of them viewed soccer as an “educational detour,” an alternative channel for mobility, though a systematic examination of this assertion has proven that this hope was mostly illusory.<sup>28</sup> As early as 1968, Bnei Yehudah, the team representing the poor (and mainly Mizrahi) Hatikvah neighborhood in southern Tel Aviv, became the first “Mizrahi” team to win the Israel state cup. Two additional landmarks were the championships won by Hapo’el Beersheba in 1975 and 1976.

Hapo’el Beersheba, whose original players were mostly immigrants from Eastern Europe, underwent a gradual transformation during the 1950s and 1960s and became almost entirely Mizrahi in composition. With the change in players came a change in image, well illustrated when the team defeated Hapo’el Ramle 9–0 in the 1962–1963 season. Fans of the latter team considered the outcome an act of ethnic betrayal;

years later, an article in *Maariv* noted that even the fans of Beersheba were convinced that, in previous years, games between “the two sisters” had reflected a mentality of “scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” among players who had grown up together in North Africa.<sup>29</sup>

The Mizrahi “flagship” among soccer teams was Betar Jerusalem—a fact that is not so surprising, considering the intimate relationship between Israeli sports and politics. Even before the establishment of the state, Israeli sports were organized along political lines. Maccabi teams were part of the non-socialist wing of Zionism. Hapo’el teams were part of the Histadrut (General Federation of Labor Unions), controlled by the socialist Mapai (later the Labor) party, which led the country until 1977. Betar was the outgrowth of the revisionist Zionist youth movement founded in 1923 by Zeev Jabotinsky, later linked to the Herut (and afterwards, the Likud) party. Betar Jerusalem was founded by the Jerusalem branch of Betar in 1936. In the 1940s, most of the teams’ players were members of either the Irgun or the Lehi, which resulted in the British authorities’ expelling some of them from Palestine. Whereas Hapo’el Jerusalem was the team of the establishment, Betar attracted all the outsiders, the oppressed, and the victimized. The Betar circle of fans developed into a kind of political opposition, and it is no coincidence that their main slogan in those decades, “evel bahistadrut” (“mourning in the Histadrut”) referred not to the team but to the political identity of Betar’s main adversaries.

Betar’s transformation from a locally based club to a team with a national following is related to the close link between the team and Likud leaders, as well as the co-appearance of Betar’s first major achievements (winning the state cup tournament in 1976 and 1979) with the political upheaval that brought Likud into power in 1977. In fact, the demographic coalition enabling Likud’s victory was reflected in the growing circle of Betar fans.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the 1980s, the triangle relationship of Likud-Mizrahim-Betar was crystallized. Betar became very popular among Likud voters, to the extent that the Labor party’s opening television campaign of the 1984 elections featured famous actors in the role of Mizrahi Betar fans who declared that choosing Likud the last time around had been a mistake. The message was that one could be a Mizrahi fan of Betar and nonetheless vote for Labor.

Betar’s successes over the course of the 1980s and 1990s (three championships and three state cups) made the team popular among wider circles of fans, including many Ashkenazim and even Arab citizens. However, it remained especially popular in what was once termed “the second Israel,” namely, among Mizrahim, especially in the development towns. In a survey ordered by the Israel Football Association (IFA) in 1997, 46 percent of development town residents declared themselves to be fans of Betar.<sup>31</sup> Almog Hazan, the young player whose goal almost deprived Betar of the championship, told the media that, upon scoring, he felt sorry for Betar but was also afraid of the thousands of Betar fans who tried to swarm onto the playing field. To which Arel Segal of *Iton Tel Aviv* responded:

It’s a lie, I was there [...] the masses stormed the field only after [Betar’s] goal. What Mr. Hazan did not tell the press was that he was afraid as well of the reaction of his Beit Shean neighbors in the commercial center on Sunday morning. Nobody in the development town would have forgiven him had he buried Betar’s championship.<sup>32</sup>

In the past, most of these development town fans had not been required to choose between their loyalty to their local team and their love of Betar, since teams from the periphery rarely made it to the top league. Every so often, however, a peripheral team achieved temporary success and became the darling of the media (which, of course, is always attracted to rags-to-riches success stories). Hapo'el Yahud, for instance, played in the top league from 1976 to 1984, and even won the state cup in 1982. Between 1982 and 1987, the town of Yavneh was represented in the top league by Maccabi Yavneh. In 1994, it was the turn of Beit Shean.<sup>33</sup>

Hapo'el Beit Shean, representing the smallest and poorest town among those in the top league, turned out to be a scrappy survivor. It retained its position in the top league (often just barely) during the next four seasons, and it became even more popular after its members starred in what became a classic Israeli sports movie, a documentary called "Underdogs: A War Movie" (1996), directed by Doron Tsabari and Rino Tzror. This movie, which followed the team's progress in the course of the 1994–1995 season, turned out to be a perfect drama: in the last round, played in the Kiryat Eliezer stadium, Beit Shean had to defeat the wealthy national champion, Maccabi Haifa, in order to remain in the league. Initially trailing 0–2, Beit Shean achieved the unbelievable and wound up winning the game 3–2. Following this season, Beit Shean became the second-favorite team of many Israeli soccer fans. But two years later, in the very same stadium, team members chose to prioritize ethnic allegiance over a fundamental element of sporting ethics. As a result, their popularity plummeted.

### **Ethnic Solidarity in Sports**

In both popular and academic discourse, modern sports constitutes a powerful representation of modernity. Functionalist scholars view sports as a modern substitute for traditional foci of solidarity such as religion, family, and guilds.<sup>34</sup> From a Weberian perspective, Allan Guttman regards sports as a reflection of both the modern-industrial reality and the scientific world.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, C.E. Ashworth claims that sports provides a quasi-scientific test in which all differences between competitors, except athletic talent, are suspended, such that "real" ability is exposed.<sup>36</sup> Christian Bromberger, referring specifically to soccer, argues that the game provides a dramatization of modern society's basic values. In its emphasis on talent, performance, and competition among equals, soccer embodies in most dramatic fashion the concept of "achieved status" (as opposed to "ascribed status") that is one of modernity's outstanding features.<sup>37</sup>

It follows that whenever an individual or a team defies this "scientific" spirit by choosing to lose a game out of a sense of affinity with the opponent, such behavior will be widely denounced as "non-sportive"—a very serious accusation. Games in which ethnic sympathy prevailed over competition are both remembered and condemned. An example is the 1982 World Cup soccer tournament in which West Germany played against Austria in the last match of the first round. Both sides knew that only a 1–0 West German win would allow the two German-speaking teams to qualify for the next round (while sending the Algerian team back home). West Germany scored after 10 minutes; after that, both teams sat back for the next 80 minutes. The game

was dubbed the “Anschluss Game” by bitter fans, and it is still considered one of the most scandalous games in World Cup history.

In similar vein, a *Maariv* sports commentator, Eyal Levy, summarized the Beit Shean-Betar match as “a sad day for soccer, and nobody should say that this is sports, because it is not.”<sup>38</sup> Another senior commentator, Sagi Cohen, charged that soccer as played in Israel was a game “in which there is no real respect for the notion of competition, which is driven by a distorted understanding of achievement, and which is a disgrace to everything sports is supposed to symbolize.” More specifically, he noted the right of fans to wonder what the Beit Shean players saw when they looked into the mirror on the morning after the game. “One thing is certain,” he wrote of the players, “they did not see sportsmen.”<sup>39</sup>

Cohen was not the only one who identified a “cultural problem,” implying that soccer, as played in Israel (and more implicitly, Israeli society as a whole), was backward. Amir Efrat, a sportswriter at *Yedioth Ahronoth*, recalled games played in the English league in which both teams fought like lions even though the outcome of the game was not at all significant. “If the stories from England teach us something,” he wrote, “it is that, among sportsmen, the fact that your place is secure is not what counts. The Beit Shean players did not behave as sportsmen yesterday, and for this they need to be called to account.”<sup>40</sup> Another commentator in that day’s *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Aviad Fohorlis, wrote: “Yesterday was a disaster for me. As far as I’m concerned, Israeli soccer is finished. I buried it a dog’s burial, and I consider it completely dead.”<sup>41</sup>

Fohorlis and Efrat are both Ashkenazim and fans of the rival Hapo’el Tel Aviv, the team that paid the price for the alliance between development town Mizrahim and Betar. Not surprisingly, the “shoelaces” game evoked furious reactions among Hapo’el Tel Aviv fans, who cast Hapo’el Beit Shean as public enemy number one, singling out Eitan Tayeb for special opprobrium. Some of these fans continue to remember May 2, 1998 as a day of infamy. A CD that was produced and distributed by Hapo’el Tel Aviv fans in 2000 features songs with extremely violent lyrics, including explicit threats to murder Tayeb. Asked for his reaction to these threats, Tayeb revealed that his hatred for Hapo’el Tel Aviv had a long history:

I want to make something clear. Hapo’el Tel Aviv is a club I hated long before that incident. I have hated them ever since I can remember. . . . Any survey taken in this country will prove that I am right, that this is the most hated team around. It is politically identified with the Left—since the day it was founded, Hapo’el Tel Aviv was named “the flagship of the Histadrut and the Labor party.”<sup>42</sup>

Tayeb, who was born and grew up in Beit Shean, was expressing a bitterness shared by many development town residents. As noted, many Mizrahim blame Labor party policies for much of the current ethnic stratification of Israeli society. In the realm of soccer, such resentment has made Hapo’el Tel Aviv a very unpopular team, particularly in the development towns but also among Mizrahim in general.

In one instance, a fan of another predominantly Mizrahi team (Bnei Yehudah) was interviewed in *Iton Tel Aviv* following violent clashes between Bnei Yehudah fans and those of Hapo’el Tel Aviv. He characterized the latter as follows:

Hapo’el fans are unbearable. They’ve always been the elites, dandies, real “Europeans.” They have this patronizing attitude. They tell you to your face that theirs is the right

way...that white is the nice color. They're left-wing and we're right-wing; they're rich and we're poor; they're successful and we're losers; they're beautiful and we're ugly.<sup>43</sup>

As if to emphasize the ethnic basis of the animosity to the “dandies,” when the same fan was asked if he would have thrown stones at Betar Jerusalem’s fans, he responded incredulously: “Are you out of your mind? Betar is our big sister—you don’t hit family members.” Even though the last statement was later proven to be wrong, as harsh conflicts did break out between the “two sisters,” the rhetoric is significant. Hapo’el Tel Aviv has no chance of being regarded as a “sister” of Bnei Yehudah or Betar Jerusalem. In the “shoelaces game,” these ethno-political preferences gained priority over the sports ethic and put a question mark on the legitimacy of both Tayeb in particular and the Beit Shean team as a whole.

There is another dimension, however, to the anger toward Beit Shean. The same modernist discourse that provides the philosophical underpinnings for modern sports also deals with the emergence of the nation-state and modern national communities. In this context, sub-national ethnic identities are considered to be remnants of the pre-modern past that will gradually dissolve in the course of the modernization process.<sup>44</sup> In Israel, the hegemonic discourse considers Mizrahi identity to be “ethnic.” In a study conducted in the late 1980s by Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Stephen Sharot, for instance, Israeli Ashkenazim were shown to have a tendency to define Mizrahim in ethnic terms and to take it for granted that their own culture was *the* Israeli culture. In addition, they tended to expect Middle Eastern “ethnics” to “modernize” by adopting what they perceived to be their own “non-ethnic” culture.<sup>45</sup> Put somewhat differently, the “modernity” of the nation-state is what delegitimizes political expressions of ethnic identity.

In line with this perception, sports is often regarded as a vehicle to transcend ethnic differences and crystallize a homogeneous national community. Hapo’el Beit Shean’s action, however, not only defied the sports ethic but also demonstrated the latent power of ethnic divisions within Israeli society. Such a reminder was highly unwelcome, since it both contradicted Zionist ideology and was perceived to be a threat to the “modern” Israeli self-image.

It is no coincidence that those commentators who interpreted the “shoelaces” game as an expression of ethnic solidarity were themselves identified with an explicit Mizrahi political identity. Yehudah Nuriel, who made the distinction between “black” and Ashkenazi teams, is one of them. Similarly, Moshe Karif, one of the founders of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow, made mention of the “non-latent sympathy for Betar Jerusalem among those in Beit Shean.”<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, three years after the match, Tayeb admitted that he and other Beit Shean players had in fact stopped investing their efforts in the game after the score had been tied. He blamed the club director, Avi Levy, for instructing the players to hold back, but made no mention of what might have motivated this action.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion and Epilogue

Although Mizrahi ethnic identification has had major implications for Israeli politics, it has rarely translated into explicit and large-scale political activity. Instead, sentiments of Mizrahi solidarity have either remained implicit in the political sphere

or else have gained importance in the realm of popular culture, with soccer being one of the most significant venues. In theory, ethnic solidarity is incompatible with both Zionist ideology and the basic philosophical infrastructure of modern sports. So long as expressions of Mizrahi ethnic identity were confined to fans' support for teams such as Betar Jerusalem, they were widely tolerated among the general public. However, when such sympathy proved to be stronger than the spirit of competition, which is a fundamental element in the sports ethos, it was considered a serious offense.

Following the "shoelaces" game, Hapo'el Beit Shean was not formally penalized—but was nonetheless severely punished. In the following season, the team suffered a series of humiliating defeats. Once known as the second-favorite team of many soccer fans, Beit Shean was now portrayed in the media as the worst example of a group displaying "non-sporting" behavior, even though Israeli soccer had witnessed other cases of serious corruption. Financial donations for the team stopped coming in, and the team could not survive in the top division. Uri Suissa, who was an equipment manager for the team, told a *Haaretz* reporter four years after the game:

We lost our soul. It dismantled the team from inside. All of our team spirit, the real power behind Hapo'el Beit Shean's motivation—it was all over. You feel hated, burned-out, throughout the country. . . . At one time, following an out-of-town game, we needed to choose between competing dinner invitations. But since that game, we've been rejected.<sup>48</sup>

Prior to its fateful game, Hapo'el Beit Shean had retained its place in the top league for four consecutive seasons. Eight years after the game, it had deteriorated to the fifth league, the second-lowest in the hierarchy. In August 2006, in the face of accumulated heavy debts, the Beit Shean municipality—the only remaining financial backer of the team—decided to dissolve it. The possibility of such an outcome was probably not in the minds of Beit Shean's fans when they started to cheer for Betar in the 60th minute of the fateful game of May 2, 1998.

### Notes

1. Udi Trelo, "Pathuh raglayim," *Yedioth Ahronoth* sports section (3 May 1998), 2.
2. Kobi Shem Tov, "Shevitat haneshek beHaifah hitilah badakah ha-63," *Maariv* sports section (6 May 1998), 14.
3. Arel Segal, "Alifut," *Iton Tel Aviv* (8 May 1998), online at [www.tam.co.il/8\\_5\\_98/sport3.html](http://www.tam.co.il/8_5_98/sport3.html).
4. Yisrael Antebi in *Maariv* sports section (5 May 1998), 2.
5. Eyal Levy in *Maariv* sports section (3 May 1998), 9.
6. See Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, "Citizenship and Stratification in an Ethnic Democracy," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (1998), 408–427.
7. Yinon Cohen and Yitzchak Haberfeld, "Second-Generation Jewish Immigrants in Israel: Have the Ethnic Gaps in Schooling and Earnings Declined?," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (1998), 507–528.
8. Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, *Being Israeli: The Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship* (Cambridge: 2002), 82.
9. Ya'akov Nahon, "Ma'amad ta'asukati," in *'Edot beyisrael unikuman hahevratit*, ed. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, Moshe Lissak, and Ya'akov Nahon (Jerusalem: 1993), 50–75; cf. Sergio

DellaPergola, “‘Sephardic and Oriental’ Jews in Israel and Western Countries: Migration, Social Change, and Identification,” in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 22, *Sephardic Jewry and Mizrahi Jews*, ed. Peter Y. Medding (New York: 2007), 17–21.

10. Efraim Ben-Zadok, “Oriental Jews in Development Towns: Ethnicity, Economic Development, Budgets and Politics,” in *Local Communities and the Israeli Polity: Conflict of Values and Interests*, ed. Efraim Ben-Zadok (Albany: 1993), 91–122; Oren Yiftachel, “Social Control, Urban Planning and Ethno-class Relations: Mizrahi Jews in Israel’s Development Towns,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24, no. 2 (2000), 418–438.

11. Yiftachel, “Social Control, Urban Planning and Ethno-class Relations”; report of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Construction and Housing, *Socio-economic Ranking of Local Governments in Israel* (Jerusalem: 1996), quoted in *ibid.*, 429.

12. Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Hamaavak hamizrahi beyisrael: 1948–2003* (Tel Aviv: 2004), 307–320.

13. Yehouda Shenhav, *Hayehudim ha’aravim: leumiyut, dat, veetniyut* (Tel Aviv: 2003), 17.

14. For a different view taking issue, to some extent, with the notion of similar origins and culture among Mizrahim, see Chen Bram and Harvey E. Goldberg, “Sephardic/Mizrahi/ Arab-Jews: Reflections on Critical Sociology and the Study of Middle Eastern Jewries within the Context of Israeli Society,” in Medding (ed.), *Sephardic Jewry and Mizrahi Jews*, 227–256.

15. Chetrit, *Hamaavak hamizrahi beyisrael*, 175. The central factor in the Likud’s 1977 victory was the Mizrahi support for the party. See Yonathan Shapiro, *The Road to Power: Herut Party in Israel* (Albany: 1991), 164.

16. Ben-Zadok, “Oriental Jews in Development Towns,” 112.

17. See Ya’akov Nahon, “‘Ovdim ‘azmayim,” in Eisenstadt, Lissak, and Nahon (eds.), *’Edot beyisrael umikuman hahevratit*, 76–89; Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Stephen Sharot, *Ethnicity, Religion and Class in Israeli Society* (Cambridge: 1991), 179–185.

18. Chetrit, *Hamaavak hamizrahi beyisrael*, 314.

19. *Ibid.*, 309. For further discussion of Shas, see Kimmy Caplan, “Studying Haredi Mizrahim in Israel: Trends, Achievements, and Challenges,” in Medding (ed.), *Sephardic Jewry and Mizrahi Jews*, 173–177.

20. Motti Regev, “To Have a Culture of Our Own: On Israeliness and Its Variants,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23 (2000), 238.

21. Tamir Sorek, “Threatened Masculinities and Women’s Exclusion in Israeli Soccer,” *The Scholar & Feminist On-Line* (2006), 4.

22. Amir Ben-Porat, *Mimishak lesehorah: hakaduregel hayisreeli 1948–1999* (Sdeh Boker: 2002), 201.

23. Gadi Yatziv and Ya’akov Nahon, *Mehkar hevratit ’al hakaduregel beyisrael* (Jerusalem: 1969) (publication of the Israel Ministry of Education and Culture).

24. Although there are several privately owned professional teams, mainly in the two upper leagues, most Israeli soccer teams rely on municipal budgets for the bulk of their funding, supplemented by allocations from the Sports Gambling Council, private donations, and corporate sponsorships.

25. Andrei Markovits and Steven Hellerman define “hegemonic sports cultures” as those that “dominate a country’s emotional attachments,” being “what people breathe, read, discuss, analyze, and historicize.” See their book, *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism in Sport* (Princeton: 2001), 10.

26. The Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow is an extra-parliamentary movement established in 1996, most of whose members are second-generation Mizrahim. The movement strives to improve the political, social, and economic status of Mizrahim in Israel.

27. Moshe Karif, *Hamizrahit: sipurah shel hakeshet hademokratit hamizrahit vehamaavak hahevratit beyisrael, 1995–2005* (Tel Aviv: 2005), vii.

28. Moshe Semyonov, “Occupational Mobility through Sport: The Case of Israeli Soccer,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 21 (1986), 23–33.

29. R. Aryeh, “Mihaluzei 1949 ’ad alufei 1975,” *Maariv* (18 May 1975), 34.

30. Shlomo Resnik, "Agudat hasport Betar: sport ufolitakah behevrah mefuleget," in *Tarbut haguf beyisrael bameah ha'esrim*, ed. Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (Jerusalem: 2002), 179.
31. *Ibid.*, 178.
32. Arel Segal, "Alifut."
33. Since 1996, Arab towns have also promoted successful soccer teams. Three of them have played in the top league, and in 2004, Ittihad Abnaa Sakhnin (Bnei Sakhnin) won the state cup. See Tamir Sorek, *Arab Soccer in a Jewish State* (Cambridge: 2007).
34. James Curtis, John Loy, and Wally Karnilowicz, "A Comparison of Suicide-Dip Effects of Major Sport Events and Civil Holidays," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 3 (1986), 1–14; Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport* (Homewood, IL: 1973).
35. Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: 1978).
36. C.E. Ashworth, "Sport as Symbolic Dialog," in *The Sociology of Sport*, ed. Eric Dunning (London: 1970), 40–46.
37. Christian Bromberger, "Football as World-View and as Ritual," *French Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (1995), 293–311.
38. Eyal Levy in *Maariv* sports section (3 May 1998), 9.
39. Sagi Cohen, *ibid.*, 2–3.
40. Amir Efrat, "Ibdu et hakavod ha'azmi," *Yedioth Ahronoth* sports section (3 May 1998), 2.
41. Aviad Fohorlis in *Yedioth Ahronoth* sports section (3 May 1998).
42. Tal Berman interview with Eitan Tayeb, appearing on the website of Maccabi Tel Aviv's fans, [http://www.ultras.co.il/one\\_news.asp?IDNews=843](http://www.ultras.co.il/one_news.asp?IDNews=843) (22 April 2003).
43. Sarah Angel, "Bayom sheyisgeru lanu et haiztadyon, nisrof et Bloomfield," *Iton Tel Aviv* (25 Oct. 2002).
44. Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery—Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago: 1975).
45. Ben-Rafael and Sharot, *Ethnicity, Religion and Class in Israeli Society*.
46. Moshe Karif, "Bahayim, kemo besport," *Haaretz* (10 May 1998), B-2.
47. Doron Bergfroind, "Hapo'el Tel Aviv mezapah shehahitahdut lekaduregel takhriz 'alehah kaalufah shel 'onat 1997/8," *Haaretz* (6 July 2001).
48. Horesh Nitzan, "Moshik Teomim mevakesh lehazkir," *Haaretz* sports section (14 April 2002).