

# Sport and British Jewish identity

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**Jon Dart** 

Leeds Beckett University, UK

## Abstract

This article examines the relationship between sport and Jewish identity. The experiences of Jewish people have rarely been considered in previous sport-related research which has typically focused on 'Black' and South Asian individuals, sports clubs, and organisations. Drawing on data generated from interviews ( $n = 20$ ) and focus groups ( $n = 2$ ) with individuals based in one British city, this article explores how their Jewish identity was informed, and shaped by, different sports activities and spaces. This study's participants were quick to correct the idea that sport was alien to Jewish culture and did not accept the stereotype that 'Jews don't play sport'. The limited historical research on sport and Jewish people and the ongoing debates around Jewish identity are noted before exploring the role of religion and the suggestion that Jewish participation in sport is affected by the Shabbat (sabbath). Participants discussed how sports clubs acted as spaces for the expression and re/affirmation of their Jewish identity, before they reflected on the threats posed to the wider Jewish community by secularism, assimilation, and antisemitism. The article concludes by discussing how the sporting experiences of the study's British Jewish participants compare with the experiences of individuals from other ethnic minority communities.

## Keywords

antisemitism, ethnic minorities, identity, Jews, racism, religion, sports clubs

## Introduction

This study explores the role of sport in the construction of Jewish identities for a group of British Jews. There is a popular stereotype that 'Jews don't play sport', however, like many simple caricatures, this is incorrect. Drawing on data generated from interviews and focus groups with Jewish individuals, this study explores the idea that sport is alien to Jewish culture. Participation in sport by ethnic minorities has been the subject of extensive academic interest. Studies have repeatedly shown that, despite some variation, all ethnic minority groups have experienced negative stereotyping and exclusion (be this

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### Corresponding author:

Jon Dart, Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, 221 Cavendish Hall, Headingley Campus, Leeds LS6 3QS, UK.

Email: [j.j.dart@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:j.j.dart@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)

overt or obscured) from all sports, at all levels. The overriding focus of previous research has been on the experiences of 'Black' and/or South Asian communities, while the experiences of those in the Jewish community have rarely been considered.

The purpose of this paper is to address this lacuna by focusing on the role of sport in the construction of individuals who identify as Jewish in a city in Northern England. The intention is to examine lived connections between sport and Jewish identity at the start of the twenty-first century. In the initial recruitment the study sought to include those engaged in different forms of sport, be this as players, ex-players, fans, facilitators, officials, or administrators. The article begins with a brief discussion of the issues which underpin this study, namely the ongoing redefinition of Jewish identity, the limited historical research on sport and the Jews, and the role of sports clubs acting as spaces for this ethnic minority community to re/affirm its identity. Using the data generated, the article discusses the role of religion and the suggestion that sports participation is affected by the Shabbat (the sabbath, which begins on Friday evening and runs through to Saturday evening; see Helman, 2008). The threats posed to the Jewish community by increasing secularism, of antisemitism are considered,<sup>1</sup> plus how sports clubs might act as sanctuaries for different ethnic minority populations, and how the sporting experiences of those in the Jewish community compare with other ethnic minority communities.

## Jewish identity

'Who is a Jew' and 'What does it mean to be Jewish' are questions that continue to generate extensive debate. These discussions draw upon contested ideas of genetic inheritance, ethnicity, faith and religion, nationality, culture, and heritage (Diemling and Ray, 2016; Glenn and Sokoloff, 2010; Hirt et al., 2015; Kosmin and Andras, 2003). There has always been diversity in terms of ethnic and religious identities among the 13 million people who identify as Jewish, most of whom live in Israel and the United States of America, with approximately 300,000 living in Britain. Despite extensive discussion, there is little consensus, even among Jews, about what it means to be Jewish. That said, it is generally agreed that contemporary Jewish identity is shaped by four events: Jewish migration; the destruction of European Jewry (Holocaust/Shoah); the creation of the State of Israel; and increasing secularisation (Pew Forum, 2016).

For Jewish people, identity can be adopted, inherited, or imposed, with religion often at the heart of the issue. The word 'Jew' primarily signifies religion (be this Reform, Conservative, Orthodox or Reconstructionist denominations), rather than one's ethnicity or racial group. Here the term 'identity' is understood as intersectional and a dynamic set of social relations, with increasing numbers of Jews regarding themselves as secular rather than religious, with Jewish religious identity being replaced by Jewish cultural identity (Graham, 2004). Most Jews do not observe Jewish laws (*halakh*) with a growing section of British Jewry seeing themselves as 'cultural' or 'secular' Jews (Graham, 2004), leading Kahn-Harris (2014) to suggest that, 'If one is intellectually honest, there is simply nothing left on which to base a secular Jewish identity'. Increasing secularisation has led to a 'cafeteria religion' where individuals pick and choose 'only those morsels of Judaism that seem personally appealing' (Wertheimer, 2018; see also Sand, 2010).

Many Jews see themselves, and are seen by others, as a racial group with a shared descent and history. Racialism and the oxymoron ‘race science’ advance the idea that Jews are biologically ‘different’, with some (e.g. Pinker, 2006), claiming that Ashkenazi Jews<sup>2</sup> possess a superior intellect. The suggestion that ‘Jews are different’ has seen them described as the ‘derogated other’ and has been central to the history of antisemitism, with Jews viewed as ‘strangers’, accused of being responsible for the death of Christ, through the Spanish Inquisition, the Russian pogroms, the Holocaust and the enduring claim that an all-powerful conspiratorial group of Jews control the world.

Jews have always been ‘othered’ with antisemites viewing Jews as non-White. In the United Kingdom (UK) the nomenclature ‘Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic’, although an increasingly contested term, is generally used to describe people of non-White descent; when applied to Britain’s Jewish community it becomes much more complex. Jews are legally protected under the UK’s Race Relations Act 1976 as an ethnic and religious minority, with ‘Jewish’ often listed as a religious category but not always as an option for ethnicity (in monitoring diversity). In the 2011 British Census only a few thousand identified themselves, under the ‘Other’ category, as ‘ethnic Jew’.<sup>3</sup> Research by Brodtkin (1999) has shown how some Jewish people can be both ‘White’ and ‘other’ at the same time, with Goldstein’s (2016) research exploring how Jews who emigrated from Europe to the USA, and who had a skin tone that could allow them to ‘pass as White’, were able to position themselves as ‘not Black’ and access political and status advantages. Kahn-Harris (2019: 90), using data in the 2011 Census, states that Jews in England and Wales appeared to be more privileged than other minority groups. However, the recent upturn in antisemitism in the US and across Europe is changing the way Jews are thinking about their identity, with ‘racial identity’ an important part of social identity and self-image (Kaplan, 2003; Patai and Patai, 1989; Sand, 2010).

## **Jews and sport**

There has been some research on Jewish sports history in North America and continental Europe (Klein, 2000, 2007; Kugelmass, 2007; Levine, 1992; Mendelsohn, 2008; Riess, 1998). This shows that the relationship between Jews and sport in modernity is complex. Essential to understanding this relationship is the emergence of the idea of the ‘Muscular Jew’. Presner’s (2007) study of ‘Muscular Judaism’ identifies how, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Max Nordau (one of the founders of what is now the World Zionist Organization), called for Zionism to develop a new type of Jew to replace the image of the persecuted, anxious and physically weak Jew. Nordau first proposed his idea of Muscular Judaism during the Second Zionist World Congress in 1898 (Kaufman and Galily, 2009), with the intention of changing the perception of Judaism and to create ‘a new Jew’ as an antithesis to the negative stereotype of Jews in the Diaspora (Kaufman and Galily, 2009; Presner, 2007). The idea of a strong and fit ‘Zionist body’ was used to inspire those seeking to build a Jewish homeland.

Although Jews have been seen by many as ‘victims’, Breines (1990) cites examples of ‘tough Jews’ throughout history – from the defence of Masada, those who fought against the anti-Jewish pogroms that swept across Poland, Russia and the Ukraine, through to the resistance fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto. Breines (1990) suggests it was

not until the establishment of Israel that Jews in the diaspora had the opportunity to channel their new collective muscular identity in a concentrated political way, embodied in 'the Sabra' (any Jew born in Israel). Breines (1990) proposes that the Israeli victory in the Six-Day War of 1967 saw a complete transformation in how American Jews viewed Israel, the Holocaust, and their own bodies (see also [Bregman's, 2014] 'cursed victory' for a more nuanced assessment of the legacy of this war).

Much of the existing commentary on Jews and sport is based on the experience of those living in Israel or the USA. The role of sport in social and cultural assimilation is a well-established process for ethnic groups in the USA, including American Jews (Kugelmass, 2007; Levine, 1992). Many Jews in North America engage in sport beyond local venues, fusing their identity to American culture, which can lead to separation from traditional forms of identity (Eisen, 1998; Riess, 1998). Throughout the twentieth century parts of the Jewish community in the USA have seen a dilution of the religious dimension of their Jewish identity in favour of their secularisation, becoming more ethnically Jewish at the expense of religiously Jewish. Jewish identified sports clubs might thus be viewed as a bastion against assimilation, encouraging participants to retain their Jewish identity.

In their edited collection on Jews and Sports in Europe, Brenner and Reuveni (Collins, 2006) examined the origins and influence of Muscular Judaism and how competitive sport offered Jews (individually and communally) opportunities for both 'inclusion' and 'exclusion'. Collins' (2006) chapter in this important collection noted that Jewish sports history in Britain has been a 'frustrating omission' due, in part, to the strength of the Christian (mostly) negative stereotype of a bookish, un-muscular, nebbish (Yiddish), Jew who shies away from sport. However, there have since been important contributions by Clavane (2013) and Dee (2013) which look at the historical relationship between Britain's Jews and sport. The mass migration of Jews from eastern Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, to join the long-standing small community of Jews in Britain, led to a huge increase in the number of schools, youth clubs Jewish working men's clubs and institutes, and sporting organisations catering for the immigrant population (Collins, 2006; Dee 2013). Clavane (2013) described how sport was initially seen as a way of integrating into English society, and for individuals and their children, to think of themselves as English, as well as Jewish. The acculturation of the newly arrived migrants was achieved through the teaching of values and cultural norms that emphasised the Britishness of British Jewry, not its Jewishness (Collins, 2006).

Collins (2006) commented on how the lack of quantitative material meant it was not possible to comment on the numbers and the extent to which Jews played or watched sport. However, he did question the suggestion that keeping the Jewish sabbath, was the main reason for the lack of Jewish participation in soccer, rugby and cricket. Collins (2006) contends that much of the Jewish population was not particularly observant in religious matters, citing evidence that Jews not only regularly watched, but also played, sport on Saturday afternoons. In the city of Leeds, which has traditionally had a large Jewish population, Collins (2006) suggested that more Jews attended Headingley Stadium on Saturday afternoons to watch rugby league and cricket than attended the city's synagogues in the morning.

Collins (2006) has pointed out that antisemitism was evident in middle-class sports such as golf and tennis, 'where exclusion of Jews from clubs was commonplace as early

as the 1900s'. With Jewish athletes blocked from entry and progressing to higher levels of sport, coupled with practical problems faced by urban Jewish school and youth clubs in obtaining spaces to play sport outdoors, indoor sports were easier to organise and to access for Jewish youngsters. Collins (2006) concludes that this created a tradition of success in sports such as boxing, chess and table tennis. Collins (2006:153) identified a shift in Jewish sport in Britain throughout the twentieth century and explained how: 'sport gradually ceased to be seen as a vehicle for integrating Jews into British society, in large part either because Jews increasingly saw themselves as broadly accepted in British society, albeit with having to put up with greater or lesser levels of informal anti-semitism, or because they placed less importance on their Jewishness'.

Manifestations of Nordeau's Muscular Judaism included the establishment of Jewish sports federations, clubs, and organisations in the early twentieth century, and the Maccabiah Games (Galily, 2009; Kaufman, 2007). The Maccabiah Games, first held in 1932, have become a prideful demonstration of 'muscular Judaism' (Kaplan, 2015). They have grown significantly alongside the State of Israel (Galily, 2009) and are now the third-largest sporting event in the world after the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup (Galily, 2009; Kaplan, 2015). The 2017 Maccabiah Games hosted 10,000 athletes from 85 countries, competing in 45 different sports. The Games, organised by the Maccabi World Union, are important in developing links between the Jewish Diaspora and the State of Israel, and in enhancing the Jewish consciousness of those attending (Kaplan, 2015). The Games have taken on greater import with the rise of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement and the country's deteriorating image (Barghouti, 2011; Dart, 2017). As part of the Maccabi World Union, and the European Maccabi Confederation, MaccabiGB is the sports arm of the Maccabi Jewish Community Charity that works across the British Jewish community to offer a range of sport, health and wellbeing activities. Its aim is to support the long-term future of British Jewry, to promote Jewish identity, and to encourage links with the State of Israel. Its website claims that 'as a result of being engaged with Maccabi GB and our affiliates people are more likely to stay within the Jewish community' ([www.maccabigb.org/about-us/](http://www.maccabigb.org/about-us/)).

As has been noted by Burdsey (2007), Campbell (2016) and Carrington, (1998, 1999), sports clubs have played important sociocultural roles for ethnic minority communities. Each of these studies have shown how sports clubs acted as significant cultural resources for certain ethnic minority communities by allowing for the positive construction and expression of specific ethnic, cultural, neighbourhood and community identities. As Bradbury (2011: 35) noted in a study conducted in Leicester, a city that has a significant ethnic minority population, ethnic minority sports clubs 'had become positioned as a highly visible cultural resource and symbolic marker for the construction and expression of specific ethnic and religious identities'. As Campbell (2016) found in his study of African-Caribbean engagement in football, this study aims to identify comparable cultural norms, expectations and hegemonic practices within Jewish sports clubs and spaces in the city. It recognises the ethnic diversity within Britain's Jewish community which is often simplistically homogenised, and that diversity is not purely ethno-religious. With some manifestations of Jewish identity in decline, such as the closure or merger of synagogues and the closure of two Jewish newspapers (Waterson, 2020), sports clubs potentially take on a more significant role in the maintenance of individual and community Jewish identity.

## Method

The fieldwork began by using personal contacts to identify potential participants. Individuals were approached on the basis that they were involved in sports-related activity and thus could meaningfully respond to the research questions. The research took place in a northern city in England where the participants either lived or worked. One initial weakness of using the referred-respondent approach was that it generated a narrow sample in terms of gender and social class. The response to this weakness was to pro-actively seek out female participants and those from a more 'working class' background/profession. The final sample comprised six women and 14 men who self-identified as practising or secular Jews. In response to suggestions from individual interviewees two focus groups were conducted. One group comprised three generations within one family, with a second group of four friends who had known each other for many years. The majority of those interviewed were aged between 25 and 50, although some were younger or older.

Semi-structured interviews were used because they allowed participants to discuss their Jewish identity in a range of sports-related activities and settings in a systematic and comprehensive manner (David and Sutton, 2010). The interviews were conducted by three researchers (including the author) who were familiar with the city in which the research took place. Researcher subjectivity was minimised by using a piloted interview schedule that allowed participants to discuss any issue they felt relevant to the study; this approach created a degree of flexibility for participants to contextualise their comments. Once ethical approval had been gained from the University's Research Ethics Committee, each participant was given an information sheet, after which they gave their voluntary, informed consent. Although some participants wanted to use their own name, to ensure that the approved ethics protocols were followed, participants were invited to choose their own pseudonyms or, in some cases, were given one. The interviews took place over a three-month period in early 2019 and, on average, lasted around 60 minutes. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with the first stage of analysis involving a close reading of all the transcripts. Continued analysis of the transcripts allowed for key categories to emerge with subsequent manipulation of these categories and use of manual memos allowing for the accommodation and modification of the *a priori* themes (Veal and Darcy, 2014). Subsequent re-reading of the transcripts allowed for the clustering of data around key analysis headings and sub-themes, with the data analysis package, QSR/ NVivo, then used to formally code all the themes. This process allowed for the initial interview transcript wordage to be reduced while maintaining the essence of the data. This study recognises that the following discussion is not representative of the entire British Jewish community but offers an exploratory account and one that is transparent and qualified in terms of its method. The main findings of this empirical study are presented, beginning with the impact of the Shabbat on participation in sport, then the role of Jewish sports clubs on participants' self-identity is examined, before concluding how the Jewish experiences presented might relate to other ethnic minority groups' sporting experiences.

### *Sport and the Shabbat*

The word 'Jew' primarily signifies religion although, as was noted earlier, most who identify as Jewish view this in terms of culture rather than religion, and do not always



observe Jewish religious laws. Similar to the world's other major religions, the Jewish faith has several religious holidays and a weekly holy day, with different levels of observance, although most Jews mark the Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). In the UK Saturday has traditionally been the day for sport. For Serena:

Friday, Shabbat, was the cornerstone of my Jewish identity growing up, and for how we bring our kids up. For our family, Friday night dinner is the start of the Sabbath, and we sacrifice it only very, very, very occasionally. So, it's not 100% attendance, but it's very rare that we choose something else over it.

Lee who had recently been to watch a football game on a Friday night, explained that he 'got a bit of a roasting for it' (that is, severe disapproval):

. . . from my missus. She was saying, traditionally, we sit around for a family meal, we eat and we light candles, we don't pray, it's not a religious thing, it's a tradition. But we don't go out on a Friday night. That's always been our tradition. But I think most people nowadays are not that bothered. If you asked 90% of the (Jewish) community, they will probably say it's not an issue.

Serena pointed out that although her family were 'all sports fans' they did not follow rugby because 'there's no point, because the match is often on a Friday night'. Suzi thought that individuals (and their families) go into sport knowing that playing sport might cause conflict on Saturday/Shabbat. Mark was the only Jew on his youth football team because, as a non-observant Jew, he chose to play on Saturday, but recognised that many of his Jewish friends chose not to. Lee explained how he had some friends who played on a Saturday for a non-Jewish team, and then played for a Jewish team on Sunday. John grew up in a family he described as 'traditional' and although 'the rules' were slightly relaxed from a watching perspective, he was never allowed to play on a Saturday, despite reaching a semi-professional standard. By contrast, Alex explained that 'a lot of the time, I was the only Jew in the team, but it was a Saturday when I used to play. But no-one said to me, "you're Jewish, shouldn't you be at Shul or synagogue?"'. Samantha, who was religious, explained that:

We as a family keep the Shabbat, so we don't do those things. My youngest son, who's at (a city sports development centre), have matches on a Saturday and sometimes I have to say to him 'I'm really sorry but you can't play'. Tournaments also often happen on a Saturday and so I have to say 'I'm sorry you can't go because it would involve driving to the tournament' . . . so they do miss out.

However, Samantha went on to explain that although there were some things they could not do, they tried to work around problems when they arose:

My son is going to Holland on Friday because he has a competition on Saturday. We're going early on Friday, so we don't have to travel on the Sabbath, and we've booked a hotel that's a 5-minute walk away from the venue. He can literally wake up on Saturday, get his kit on and walk to the venue. He doesn't need to buy anything because everything's been bought in advance.

By contrast, Sharona allowed her children to play sport on a Saturday morning and that she found that ‘aspect of Judaism a little bit antiquated. Although we’re not orthodox, the only time it might interfere were if it was a High Holiday’. Similarly, Daisy, who described herself as ‘not very religious’, did not see it as a problem to participate on a Saturday, but would not participate if the sports events took place on an important Jewish holiday, such as the Jewish New Year or the Day of Atonement.

Many of our participants acknowledged there had been a change over time, between one generation and the next, with Lee suggesting that ‘it’s become more diluted, and as a community we are not as religious as we were’. The variation in Jewish attitudes towards the sabbath was explained by David who suggested that, ‘It’s very difficult to explain . . . the individual family boundaries that happen in Judaism, and family rationalisation that happens with religion, I tell you . . . you can study it for 20 years and you won’t be any wiser’.

### *Sports clubs and Jewish identity*

As was noted earlier, Jewish sports clubs had originally been established for a variety of reasons (including assimilation and as a response to antisemitism). The research team were keen to explore the current role of sports clubs and whether they acted as sites for the expression of Jewish community identity and pride, and/or as havens against antisemitism. Sports such as football, golf, tennis and cricket were all identified by those interviewed as having a strong following in the Jewish community. Many of the study participants mentioned the city’s golf club that had been established as a Jewish club in 1923 when antisemitism was prevalent; Richard and Mark each recalled how their parents and grandparents had not been able to play golf at non-Jewish golf clubs. Lee explained how he thought the ‘original reason why there was a Jewish golf club and a Jewish cricket club was because of . . . the togetherness . . . the security, and that a long time ago non-Jewish people were not very welcoming’. Mark explained how when Jews came to the city, Jewish organisations such as the Jewish Institute were used to integrate immigrant Jews into British society. Sports clubs, such as the Judean Club, were established for young Jewish people to play sport, with Mark recalling the different functions the club performed, ‘I remember my Mom saying she used to go there for the dances, and to play table tennis - they did a lot of sport there. It was a Jewish-only youth organisation, but we had to listen to talks by the Elders of the Jewish community’.

Determining the size of a country’s Jewish population has proved challenging. The Pew Research Center found this was difficult where there were small populations and the complexity of measuring Jewish identity which can be defined by ethnicity or religion (Lipka, 2015). The 1980s and 1990s saw a sharp decline in the Jewish population in some English northern cities, including the city where this research took place. Between 2001 and 2011 the size of the UK’s Jewish population stabilised. However, this stability disguised significant geographical change. Using data from the 2011 UK Census, the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (Graham, 2013), identified that in some cities and regions there was a growing or ‘thickening’ of the Jewish community, while in other places this was ‘thinning out’. Again, the city in which the current study’s research took place was in the ‘top 10’ cities which had experienced the sharpest decline. It is important to note that while the



birth-rate within the mainstream Jewish community is 1.98 children per woman, slightly higher than the national average, women in the ultra-Orthodox community were, on average, having seven children. When combined, the total Jewish birth-rate in Britain was 2.6 per woman (Casale Mashiah, 2018). The size of the Jewish population also varies because of migration, conversion, secularisation, or assimilation. Few of those who marry 'outside the faith' observe Jewish traditions (Graham, 2016). For some, the term 'assimilation' is seen as a misnomer, with those identified as 'assimilating' better described as 'reluctant castaways' who might have remained within the community had there been more acceptance of their choice of partner (Sanai, 1998).

Participants went on to explain that the 'Jewish essence' of these clubs was in decline. For Lee 'there just isn't enough to maintain it. It's all about numbers'. Richard explained that although some clubs still had a significant Jewish membership, the dwindling Jewish population in the city had reduced the number of Jewish members to around a third of the overall club membership. Speaking about the local cricket club, Danny lamented how 'it used to be a Jewish cricket club but unfortunately it fell apart. It's still the cricket club now but the actual Jewish side of it is less than it was before'. Asked whether he felt the club could still be called a 'Jewish club' Charles responded:

Well it is, [. . .] it's still funded a lot by Jewish people . . . who put money into it on the assumption that one day it will become more Jewish. It's not fun anymore. More non-Jewish go there. It's still got all the Jewish identities that go with it and all the holidays and everything, but . . . you know . . . it's now wide open to anybody.

It was acknowledged that Jewish golfers and cricketers were now able to play in non-Jewish clubs, with Richard explaining how 'it's become a lot easier now. There are Jewish members at clubs that 10 years ago wouldn't have entertained a Jewish member. There's still hints of it [antisemitism] . . . there's still one or two clubs who wouldn't want too many Jewish players'. Leigh explained how with most members not being Jewish, the club had elected its second non-Jewish president, something Leigh found that 'in view of the club's history, that doesn't seem right'. Asked if these changes had made his time in the clubhouse a different experience, Leigh replied:

It does. The old characters aren't there anymore. When I used to go there, there would always be people around that I knew and it would be, 'Hello, Leigh', 'How are you doing, Leigh'. Now when I go, like this afternoon, I might not see anyone that I know.

It was also noted that the decline in the 'Jewishness' of the club was due not only to a declining overall population, but also because Jewish youngsters were seen as less interested in playing cricket, preferring instead to play football.

The study participants spoke positively about the Maccabi organisation and its impact on Jewish identity. Leigh was one of those who spoke positively about the Maccabi organisation:

Playing for Maccabi was a lot more sociable. A lot of the team were my friends . . . I'd gone to school and grown up with them. Playing for Maccabi felt more comfortable; it was like family.

I was passionate about my football. Come Friday night I'd already be thinking ahead to the game on Sunday.

The L'Chaim centre (pseudonym), which is linked with the Maccabi GB organisation, was consistently mentioned in the interviews as an important site for the maintenance of Jewish identity and a space for community bonding. Drawing on the traditions and ideals that originally informed the creation of the city's Jewish club in the 1920s, the L'Chaim centre is run by volunteers and funded through donations. With a focus on young people, but catering for the whole Jewish community, the L'Chaim centre offered a café, an afterschool club, and a diverse range of activities including cookery, art, music, science, and sport. Charles explained how the club was important in helping to arrest the declining Jewish population outside the Orthodox faith and the threat posed by assimilation (and 'marrying out'). Acting as an anchor for the city's Jewish community, The L'Chaim centre:

Gives the kids an identity. A lot of the school kids who go to (the local non-Jewish school) haven't got an identity. They have a Jewish assembly once a week, but . . . you know . . . after school, who do they mix with?

Offering a contrasting perspective, and illustrating the diversity within the city's Jewish community, was Serena who explained:

This group I'm describing, they go to the Jewish primary and the Jewish high school. They will participate in Maccabiah, their kids will go to [L'Chaim centre] after school, they'll do Jewish cubs or Jewish scouts or Jewish guides, so they're mixing with the same cohort of 20 or 30 kids for 90% of their lives, whereas our family . . . we don't fit really, because we're passionate reform Jews, who do not participate in local Jewish stuff.

Richard recalled a time when the Jewish community could field several teams and leagues across the M62 corridor.<sup>4</sup> The Manchester Jewish soccer league, which played on Sundays, includes teams from northern cities and towns such as Liverpool, Southport, and Leeds. The standard of the sport within the Maccabi football leagues was mentioned by several participants. Although speaking positively about playing for a Jewish side, John also commented on what he saw as the poor calibre of competition within his chosen sport:

Growing up, I had a circle of friends that were very good at football, and although we started in a Jewish league, it soon became evident that the standard wasn't good. We were far too good for that standard. So, as a team, playing under a Jewish banner, we moved into a non-Jewish football league. If you talk about stereotypes, we're not renowned for being the best . . . and that's reflected at grassroots level (laughs).

Another participant, Samantha, also commented on the poor standard but recognised its important role in supporting community identity. Suggesting that the local Maccabi teams would 'take anyone' in order to foster inclusion in the Jewish community, she went on to explain how her son wanted to play for a non-Jewish team where the standard of

sport was higher. However, this decision did leave her with a feeling that she, and her son, were being disloyal to the Jewish community.

The study participants also spoke about the Maccabiah Games which they referred to as the ‘Jewish Olympics’. One of the participants, Alex, spoke about how participation in the Maccabiah Games informed his Jewish identity:

There’s such a great sense of community. So, the opening ceremony . . . you’re walking out into the Teddy Stadium in Jerusalem, filled with 38,000 people and there’s such a sense of community and continuity and belongingness.

However, not everyone saw participation in Jewish sports clubs as central to their Jewish identity. Ava explained how, when asked to play for the Jewish Maccabiah team, said ‘whilst I’d associate myself as Jewish, I’m not massively like . . . I don’t feel I need to fly the flag for the religion, if that makes sense’. Similarly, Sam explained how, despite describing himself as ‘very sporty’ did not play for any Jewish teams, but recognised that ‘for many, there is a feeling of staying tight in the community by being involved in those organisations. I think it gives people a home . . . you can see that in the Asian community. They have their own cricket leagues and their own football teams and they play each other, and it’s very similar in the Jewish community’. Sharona echoed this sentiment when explaining her lack of participation in the city’s Jewish sports organisations:

We shouldn’t have to segregate ourselves. I don’t like it. I don’t like it when any race does it. I’ve always thought that the Jews are really good at integrating with everybody . . . apart from the ultraorthodox. The secular Jews are quite happy to live anywhere in the world . . . so long as you leave them alone when it comes to their religion.

The declining size of the Jewish community was an issue mentioned by almost all of the study participants. In the discussion about the Maccabi football leagues, Lee explained that the city had one Jewish team at each age group and that ‘we’re only just about clinging on!’. Lamenting how the community was smaller than it used to be, he explained how:

Over the years it’s reduced in numbers from when I was playing. 30 years ago, where there might have been two divisions, with maybe 20 to 30 teams, now there’s only 6 teams. The junior teams are not exclusively Jewish anymore because we work in conjunction with the (Jewish) school, which has an ‘open door’ policy – so if a kid is going to the school and socialising with other kids who are playing for Maccabi, we feel we need to be open and let them play.

Lee went on to explain that:

The problem with the senior team is that it plays in the Jewish League and so therefore have to follow their rules, which are not our rules, about Jewish players. It can be a Jewish parent or grandparent, so they have, kind of, loosened the rules a bit.

The involvement of non-Jews in the sports teams is a response to the inclusion of non-Jewish students attending the Jewish school. It is also a recognition and acceptance that

in order for the club to continue its role in connecting the Jewish community through sport, a dilution of criteria for membership (i.e. 'being Jewish') was required.

There is concern within some sections of the Jewish community about the declining size of the Jewish population, due to increasing secularisation and assimilation which some see as presenting an existential threat. What the L'Chaim centre and the wider Maccabi organisation seek to offer is a bulwark against this decline with participation in sport connecting Jews, heightening their sense of individual Jewish consciousness and identity, and thus strengthening the Jewish community. What is also evident is how the L'Chaim centre and the Maccabi sporting structures perform similar roles to that found by others (Bradbury, 2011; Burdsey, 2007; Campbell, 2016; Carrington, 1998, 1999) in their research on other ethnic minority populations.

### *On being visibly 'Jewish'*

This study's research sought to assess how the experiences of Jewish people might compare with the discrimination experienced by other Black, Asian and Minority ethnic communities. Whereas most 'Black' people cannot conceal their 'Blackness', many of the study participants were not readily identifiable as being 'visibly Jewish'; as a consequence, they were far less likely to be subject to the same issues faced by those who were visibly 'Black' and more readily othered.<sup>5</sup> Understanding how participants were 'marked' as Jewish was a particular interest of this study. One of the ideas that informs the social construction of 'race' is that racial groups can be classed by appearance and phenotypical markers. In terms of 'looking Jewish' the study participants noted how non-Jews did make assumptions on whether a person was Jewish based on phenotypical markers such as facial features, skin tone and hair type. Ava identified how:

The majority of people would probably assume, oh, I've got a certain look, in terms of nose, quite curly, dark hair, skin tone and things like that. Sometimes people are like 'Oh, I wouldn't have known you were Jewish'. I think unless you look Muslim or Hindu, with Judaism, nobody really notices because you just sort of see a white person, you just don't really think about religion.

Sam, who described himself as 'not particularly Semitic looking', noted that he had heard other people make antisemitic comments without knowing he was Jewish, with Daisy having a similar experience with her manager, who had made various negative stereotypical comments about Jewish people:

I plucked up the courage to tell him and he was horrified! He said, 'do you have a British passport?' He thought Jews had these curly things on the side of their heads. I was just gobsmacked that he actually thought that. That was more ignorance, but now there's a nasty side to it.

Daisy explained that she no longer wore any 'Magan David' (Star of David) jewellery outside her home because of the undercurrent of antisemitism that she felt existed in wider society. Britain is experiencing an increasingly racist climate, with a similar rise in right-wing populism seen across Western Europe and North America (Henley, 2019;

JPR, 2019; Sherwood, 2020). Within sport there is an increased focus on the different forms this racism takes, including antisemitism (Curtis, 2019; Stratton, 2015; Verhoven, 2015). Much of the research on antisemitism in Britain is focused on football/soccer (Mann and Cohen, 2008; Poulton, 2020), the significance of which is part of a wider and ongoing research study being undertaken by the author. Like Daisy, Sharona rarely wore her Star of David because she was ‘too scared’ and suggested this was a result of the actions of the Israeli state rather than being Jewish. Without the visible markers of jewellery or a ‘Jewish sounding surname’ (as mentioned by Suzi), Ava described how it was ‘very difficult to tell . . . who’s Jewish and who’s not Jewish, because obviously I think it would be different if Jews looked Jewish’. Of course, it is possible to identify religious Jews who wear a yarmulke head covering and Orthodox Jews who are identifiable by their clothing.

Following Ava’s suggestion that that ‘unless you look Muslim or Hindu, with Judaism, nobody really notices, because you just sort of see a white person’, Steve added that a Jewish person would only be ‘noticed’ if they played for an identifiably Jewish team, for example, by name or club badge. Similarly Daisy suggested that ‘no-one is going to know what religion you are when you’re playing, unless you’re running around with a turban, or kippah’. Players who participated in the Maccabi leagues felt they were identifiable but explained that they did not encounter antisemitism within the league. By contrast, Jewish teams who played in non-Jewish leagues would often play with insignia such as the ‘Star of David’ on their kit and/or use something identifiably Jewish in the team’s name (such as Maccabi). Charles explained how less visible ‘markers’ were used to identify and exclude Jews:

Look . . . it’s unwritten. A good friend of mine moved to [city] and wanted to join a golf club. He was told by good friends of his, ‘You can put your name on the list, but you’ll never get called’. So he put his name down and he waited a month, two months, three months, and it went to about three years and he rang up and said, ‘What’s going on?’ He was told ‘We’re full at the moment.’ I said, ‘Do a test case,’ so we found somebody, who was not Jewish, and he joined within weeks of signing up.

Interviewer: How did they know your friend was Jewish?

Charles: They knew. Everybody knows everybody. They all do a background check on you. It could be by the name or they’ll say, ‘Who do you know?’ Because let’s face it, when you join a golf club, they’ll do a check to see who you are, who are you friendly with?

Mark felt he could ‘pass as a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant’ but suggested that if he were ‘Muslim, Asian or Black, this might be less possible’, with David noting that he was not “‘identifiably Jewish” but that everyone could immediately see that his friend was ‘Black’; Sam summarised the widely held view that ‘If you’re Black, you’re easily singled out – whereas it’s not so obvious for Jewish people. The difference is that I don’t look particularly different yet we’re not immune from racism’. Lee thought the abuse Jewish people received was comparable to the racist abuse directed at ‘Black’ and South Asian players but suggested that it was ‘not as prevalent’. Suzi expressed the views of many of those interviewed when she suggested that ‘things were worse for black people

because it's visible . . . [and] . . . every single one of them will probably be able to tell you about their experiences of racism – whereas it's not the same for us'. Lee did recall one incident when 'we had some antisemitism from a Black team. And that really made me more upset – because I thought "surely you would know what it's like"'.

The current study found that the extent to which Jewish people could share the privileges of Whiteness varied. There were examples of overt racism, but the study's discussions often orientated about other, more subtle forms and feelings of identity. On occasion study participants found themselves 'othered' by difference but it was acknowledged that 'equality and acceptance' was not as fragile as the inclusion extended to Black and Asian ethnic groupings, and that the sense of conditional inclusion that could be withdrawn at any time. As Long et al. (2014: 1793) observed in their research on 'white' Polish migrants, they had 'to work harder at the performativity of whiteness than [did] white British people'.

## **Conclusion**

What prompted this study was the absence of Jewish voices and experiences in sport-related research which hitherto has concentrated on 'Black' and South Asian individuals, sports clubs and organisations. Drawing on interview data the study found that sports teams and organisations were spaces for participants to express their Jewish identity. The participants were quick to disabuse the suggestion that sport was alien to Jewish culture and, drawing upon their personal biography (and family and community history), showed how the stereotype of 'Jews not playing sport' was wholly without foundation. Sport was described as a device to maintain what it meant to be Jewish (religious, and socially exclusive), in a period of increased secularism and rising antisemitism. However, it was evident that there was concern with the city's dwindling Jewish population. This decline was making a negative impact on keeping clubs that had originally been established as Jewish 'Jewish' – a situation some participants described with regret. Local sports venues promoted a sense of Jewishness, with participants explaining how sport functioned as a means of reinforcing their sense of Jewish identity and their membership of a Jewish community. The study found that for some of those interviewed, their Jewish identity was pertinent when sport took place on Saturdays, but it found that most participants were more 'relaxed' about (not) keeping Shabbat.

More research is needed on the role of the Maccabi sports arm of the Maccabi Jewish Community Charity in promoting Jewish identity, and a better understanding of their role in responding to the threats posed by assimilation ('marrying out'), increasing secularisation, and the inclusion of non-Jews in their sports teams. Similarly, more data are needed on the grassroot sporting experiences of Jewish communities in other countries to allow for similarities and differences to be identified among the Jewish diaspora. More research is also needed on Jewish religious communities, including the leisure lives of Orthodox Jews, in terms of behaviour and attitudes towards health and wellbeing.

Many Western European countries have seen a rise in all forms of racism, something the study participants acknowledged, but they explained how they had not personally experienced any recent incidents in either sport or non-sport settings. What was evident was how the L'Chaim centre and the Jewish sport teams and clubs performed similar functions to



that found in other ethnic minority sports settings. The sporting experiences of the study participants echoed the experiences of other ethnic minority communities, and although there were some historical examples cited of racism (specifically antisemitism), the participants thought those whose ethnic identity was more visible ‘had it worse’.

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### ORCID iD

Jon Dart  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6118-7118>

### Notes

1. In this paper the term ‘antisemitism’ is used, as opposed to ‘anti-Semitism’, on the grounds that there is no such thing as Semitism.
2. Ashkenazi refers to Jews who originated in Central and Eastern Europe.
3. This is similar to the USA where Jewish lineage is a protected ‘race’ under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibits discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin.
4. Named after the M62 motorway that runs east–west across the north of England from Liverpool to Hull and links the cities and towns in Merseyside, Warrington, Greater Manchester, West and East Yorkshire.
5. Orthodox Jews are more readily identified through their wearing of kippah/yarmulke/skull cap, by the different styles of ‘payot’ (sidelocks/burns) in various Orthodox communities, and through their clothing, for example, Haredi men who wear high-crowned black hats, ringlets and frock-coats.

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