

## Health as a Jewish National Ideal in Early Zionist Writings

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At the fin de siècle, when the Zionist movement emerged and immigration (*aliyah*) of European Jews to Ottoman Palestine began, physical health and well-being had become European national ideals that were associated with modernity and progress. This was also the case in Russia, where some of the early Zionist writers stemmed from: “European standards of sanitation, public health, cleanliness, and hygiene in the cities offered a tangible model for civic leaders in Russia to emulate”.<sup>1</sup> The term “revolution” has been used by scholars to describe the wide-ranging changes in public health from the middle of the 19th century onwards.<sup>2</sup> The creation and maintenance of public health and the prevention of illnesses became national endeavours, administered and controlled by local governments.<sup>3</sup>

A healthy environment pertained to living conditions including housing and hygiene, diet and exercise, progress in biomedical research and social care. Environmental factors such as the local climate and clean water supplies also played a role. Civic authorities and governments tried to ensure that such healthy conditions were met when approving architectural projects and providing sports facilities.<sup>4</sup> Brunton states that “[g]eneral levels of hygiene improved in the late

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<sup>1</sup>D.R. Brower, *The Russian City Between Tradition and Modernity, 1850-1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 3. See also M. Schaeffer Conroy, *In Health and in Sickness: Pharmacy, Pharmacists, and the Pharmaceutical Industry in Late Imperial, Early Soviet Russia* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1994); eadem, *The Soviet Pharmaceutical Business During Its First Two Decades (1917-1937)* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 11-14.

<sup>2</sup>L. Potvin and D.V. McQueen, “Modernity, Public Health, and Health Promotion”, in *Health and Modernity: The Role of Theory in Health Promotion*, edited by D. V. McQueen and I. Kickbusch (Berlin and New York: Springer, 2007), 17, with further references.

<sup>3</sup>T. Crook, *Governing Systems: Modernity and the Making of Public Health in England, 1830-1910* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), especially 23-62.

<sup>4</sup>The first public swimming pools were opened in Berlin at the end of the 19th century, see R. Klemig, *Jews in Germany under Prussian Rule* (Berlin: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, 1984). A historical source is a paper by F.A. Meyer and “architect” Robertsen [s.n.], “Über öffentliche Badeanstalten”, *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für öffentliche Gesundheitspflege* 12:2 (1880): 180-210. Ibid. 181 it is noted that considerable efforts were being made to establish public swimming pools in Germany at that time.

nineteenth century, when city governments made enormous investments in building new reservoirs” to provide clean water supplies to urban residents.<sup>5</sup> Sanitary reforms were accompanied by health reforms that were based on new medical discoveries. Municipalities increasingly considered it their duty to protect local populations from disease by, e.g., introducing vaccination programmes.<sup>6</sup>

In the Zionist imagination, the Diaspora was associated with ill-health in both a medical and spiritual sense, which allegedly resulted from the exilic condition itself. Jews who lived in the Diaspora allegedly suffered from an “abnormal” spiritual existence as a consequence of their banishment from their ancestral homeland and national patrimony. The spiritual abnormalities of exile were considered to be characterized by an excessive and “unhealthy” intellectual culture and a loss of natural ecological “rootedness”. According to the overarching slogan of the movement, Zionism was able to “negate exile” (*shelilat ha-golah*) by enabling Jewry’s return to a “normal” national life.<sup>7</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr uses the Hegelian term “sublation” (*Aufhebung*) to denote “a psychical and ideational transposition – of the perceptions of Jewish life borrowed from the anti-Semites, transforming them into a demand for the healing and liberation of the Jewish people from the scourge of *galut*”.<sup>8</sup> Also relevant here is the Nietzschean “transvaluation of values” (*Umwertung aller Werte*), which the early Zionists adapted by propagating the transformation of “parasitic” and “ghettoised” Diaspora Jews into “muscle Jews” who cultivated their own land.<sup>9</sup> By associating life in the Jewish homeland with mental and physical “health”

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<sup>5</sup>D. Brunton, *Health and Wellness in the 19th Century* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2014), 6.  
<sup>6</sup>Ibid. 190.

<sup>7</sup> This aspect of Zionism was first emphasized and examined by M. Selzer, *Negating the Diaspora: Aryanization of the Jewish State: A Polemic* (originally published in New York: Black Star, 1967; new enlarged edition: 2021).

<sup>8</sup> P. Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 214.

<sup>9</sup> J. Hanssen, “The Middle East”, in *The Fin-de-Siècle World*, edited by M. Saler (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 278.

and the Diaspora with “ill-health”, an originally religious disdain for Diaspora existence evident in ancient and medieval rabbinic texts was reiterated in a modernised and secularised form.

As part of this hoped-for return to the national homeland, early Zionist thinkers propagated physical exercise and expressed their hope that a new and healthy Jew might emerge as a consequence of Jewish national revival in the Jewish homeland. It was argued that a secure home and physical labour would enable the creation of a muscular male body, in contrast to (eastern) Europe, where Jews were believed to be prone to physical and mental disease as a consequence of their living conditions and Antisemitism. The contrast between health and illness served to underline the dichotomy between Europe and Israel, Diaspora and homeland, old and new, *yeshiva bokher* and New Jew, with the latter imagined as strong, healthy, sun-tanned, and involved in outdoor agricultural activities. As Almog has pointed out, “[e]ven brushing one’s teeth was a service to the nation, for it produced a ‘healthy and fit generation’ that could continue to shoulder the burden of the Zionist enterprise”.<sup>10</sup> “Health” became an overarching concept that encompassed both physical wellbeing and naturalisation in one’s “native” surroundings, as indicated by the Zionist thinkers discussed here.

### 1. Leon Pinsker: A National Home to Revive the Jewish Body

The Russian Zionist thinker Leon Pinsker (1821-91), who became a leader of the Hibbat Zion movement, was a renowned physician in Odessa.<sup>11</sup> In his pamphlet *Auto-Emancipation*, published in German in 1882, shortly after the 1881 pogroms against the Jewish population that followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, he used medical language to suggest “remedies” for the abysmal situation that Russian Jews found themselves in. Whereas they were a “healthy organism” once (probably referring to the time of the biblical monarchy), Pinsker argues that

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<sup>10</sup>O. Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 30.

<sup>11</sup>J. Adler, *Restoring the Jews to Their Homeland: Nineteen Centuries in the Quest for Zion* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 1997), 289.

“among the living nations of the earth, the Jews as a nation are long since dead”.<sup>12</sup> A nation needs independence in its own country to survive and flourish; without these factors it will “decay”. In Russia and Europe, Jews carried on “spiritually” only, in “the uncanny form of one of the dead walking among the living”, as a “ghost” or “living corpse”, that is, without physical manifestations of their existence. Such ghostly existence bred prejudice, culminating in the mental illness of “Judeophobia”, “a variety of demonopathy”, which inflicts harm on those who are feared. To remedy this situation, a “resurrection” of Jewish nationhood is necessary. While Pinsker thought that Jews as a nation would need a homeland to be healthy and thrive, for him that home was not necessarily the land of Israel or Ottoman Palestine of his day (he refers to “a small territory in North America, or a sovereign Pashalik in Asiatic Turkey“ as options). A “permanent, national land” should be found that would put an end to Jews’ “wanderings”.

The Christian anti-Semitic image of the homeless and eternally “wandering Jew” is turned to positive use here to justify the need for a permanent Jewish national homeland.<sup>13</sup> Imagery of the “wandering Jew” circulated in Central and Western Europe throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Idalovichi has already pointed to the significance of this myth for the creation of Israeli Sabra identity.<sup>15</sup> The negative image of the “wandering Jew” was always associated with the “rootless” Diaspora Jew.<sup>16</sup> According to Pinsker, the very rootlessness had caused this (imaginary) figure’s physical decline and called for a material resurrection through

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<sup>12</sup>For D.S. Blondheim’s 1919 translation into English see <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/quot-auto-emancipation-quot-leon-pinsker> (accessed 1 March 2021); An abbreviated translation is available in G. Troy, *The Zionist Ideas: Visions for the Jewish Homeland -- Then, Now, Tomorrow* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2018), 10.

<sup>13</sup>On this legend see M.D. Conway, *The Wandering Jew* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881); M. Woolf, “The Wandering Jew”, *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 30 (2018): 20-32, explores the history and anti-Semitic use of the myth, which has also been used to counter cosmopolitanism; R.I. Cohen, “The ‘Wandering Jew’ from Medieval Legend to Modern Metaphor”, in *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, edited by B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and J. Karp (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 147-75.

<sup>14</sup>Cohen, “Wandering Jew”, 155.

<sup>15</sup>I. Idalovichi, “Creating National Identity Through a Legend: The Case of the Wandering Jew”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 4 (2005): 1-24.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. 12.

implanting him/her on permanent soil so that he/she could blossom again. Furthermore, pogroms and the experience of other forms of anti-Semitic hatred contributed to feelings of rootlessness and “decay” as far as Jews in Russia and Europe were concerned. Pinsker had given up hope for the recreation of a “healthy” Jewish “organism” in these regions, contradicting assimilationists and cosmopolitan Jews who were eager to make themselves homely in cities such as Prague, Berlin, and Vienna at that time.

## 2. Hermann Kafka: A Healthy Assimilationist in Prague

Health also plays a prominent role in Franz Kafka’s *Letter to His Father* Hermann Kafka (1852-1931), written in 1919 but never delivered to the addressee. In this letter Franz Kafka describes himself as “a weakly, timid, hesitant, restless person”, in contrast to his father, “a true Kafka in strength, health, appetite, loudness of voice, eloquence, self-satisfaction, worldly dominance, endurance, presence of mind...”.<sup>17</sup> His sister Ottla allegedly resembles their father in “self-confidence, health, and ruthlessness”. Frank Kafka’s self-proclaimed weakness, ill-health, and uncertainty over his own body made him an alien or “disinherited son” in his own family:

“There was, for instance, the worry about my health; it began imperceptibly enough, with now and then a little anxiety about digestion, hair falling out, a spinal curvature, and so on; intensifying in innumerable gradations, it finally ended with a real illness. But since there was nothing at all I was certain of, since I needed to be provided at every instant with a new confirmation of my existence, since nothing was in my very own, undoubted, sole possession, determined unequivocally only by me—in sober truth a disinherited son—naturally I became unsure even to the thing nearest to me, my own body. I shot up, tall and lanky, without knowing what to do with my lankiness, the burden was too heavy, the back became bent; I scarcely dared to move, certainly not to exercise, I remained

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<sup>17</sup>F. Kafka, *Letter to the Father/Brief an den Vater*, bilingual edition, translated by E. Kaiser and E. Wilkins (New York: Schocken, 2015), 176, based on the 1966 translation. This contrast reappears elsewhere in the letter: “There was I, skinny, weakly, slight; you strong, tall, broad”.

weakly; I was amazed by everything I could still command as by a miracle, for instance, my good digestion; that sufficed to lose it, and now the way was open to every sort of hypochondria...”.<sup>18</sup>

This vivid description of the son’s alienation from his own body reads like a parabolic representation of the political, social, and cultural alienation experienced by some Central European Jews of the second generation after Jewish Emancipation.<sup>19</sup> To “prevent damage to health”, his father had suggested that he should marry and follow professionally in his own footsteps, that is, become a socio-economically ambitious, well-grounded businessman, husband and father, who socialised with fellow-Jews of his own social standing in a Reform Jewish communal environment.<sup>20</sup> Since he considered himself lacking in the qualities necessary for founding a family and becoming a well-socialised Jewish citizen of Prague -- “strength, and scorn of others, health...”, together with “industry, endurance, presence of mind, and fearlessness“, qualities his father allegedly excelled in -- Franz Kafka considered himself unable to live up to his father’s expectations. Instead, he was drawn to the Yiddish theatre actor Löwy, whom his father had compared to “vermin”.<sup>21</sup> Yitzhak Löwy, born into a Hassidic family and educated in a yeshiva, represented the more traditional and unconventional sectors of the Eastern European Jewish population.<sup>22</sup> They met in 1911, when Löwy’s Warsaw theatre group gave a

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<sup>18</sup>F. Kafka, “Letter to His Father”, translated by E. Kaiser and E. Wilkins in *The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization, vol. 8: Crisis and Creativity Between World Wars, 1918-1939*, edited by T.M. Endelman, Z. Gitelman, and D. Dash Moore (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 150.

<sup>19</sup>G. Shaked, *The Shadows Within: Essays on Modern Jewish Writers* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), considers Kafka’s fictional writing a reflection of the social and political circumstances Jews lived in.

<sup>20</sup>On Prague Jews and Reform Judaism see H.S. Decker, *Freud, Dora, and Vienna 1900* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 18: “Bohemian Jews gradually abandoned Orthodox beliefs and practices, either for Reform Judaism or no Judaism at all. Jewish families were proud to be ‘progressive’... By midcentury, Prague, an ancient center of Jewish learning, displayed little of its Jewish religious and cultural traditions...”.

<sup>21</sup>On assimilated Jews’ negative attitudes towards representatives of traditional “eastern” Judaism see P. Mendes-Flohr, “Fin de Siècle Orientalism, the Ostjuden, and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation”, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 1 (1984): 96-139, especially 101-2

<sup>22</sup>On Löwy and Franz Kafka’s relationship to him and other Yiddish actors see D. Miron, “The Speeches in the Zionist Congress Aroused in Him a Desire to Spit” [Hebrew], *Haaretz* 29

performance in Prague.<sup>23</sup> Rather than following in the footsteps of his father's "western" manners, Franz Kafka explored the "eastern" Jewish tradition that used the Yiddish language and consulted wonder rabbis.<sup>24</sup>

Attitudes toward the Yiddish language divided Prague Jews. As Spector has pointed out, "[Hugo] Bergmann and others were beginning to view the Yiddish world differently from those emancipated Jews [like Hermann Kafka] who shunned it as a bleak reminder of their own uncivilized past".<sup>25</sup> Franz Kafka and his friends considered the Eastern European Jewish community "an authentic, organic folk culture", since "East European Jews lived in a majority culture, among themselves, with a language of their own within definable territorial borders stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea".<sup>26</sup> They would therefore lack the "rootlessness" of emancipated assimilated Jews, a condition which Pinsker associated with a decline in Jewish health and of which Franz Kafka considered himself an example. Whereas "[t]he image of an organic, 'territorialized' Jewry held incredible power for intellectuals situated in the Prague context", for assimilationists of the first generation after Emancipation such as Hermann Kafka, eastern European Jewish culture was associated with the "unhealthy" political and socio-economic environment they left behind.<sup>27</sup> This "unhealthy" past included *Prager Deutsch*, the

September 2008, available at <https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1352049> (accessed 3 March 2021). I thank Edna Nahshon for this reference. On Kafka and the Yiddish theatre see I. Bruce, *Kafka and Cultural Zionism: Dates in Palestine* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 34-56; *ibid.* 39 on his relationship to Löwy. E. Torton Beck, *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater: A Study of the Impact of the Yiddish Theater on the Work of Franz Kafka* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

<sup>23</sup>R.T. Gray et al., *A Franz Kafka Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 234.

<sup>24</sup>From 1911 to 1912, he attended numerous performances of this Yiddish theatre group at the Cafe Savoy. In 1912 Kafka gave a lecture on the Yiddish language ("Rede über die jiddische Sprache") in the Prague city hall, see *ibid.* When he went to Marienbad in 1916, he met the rabbi of Belz, a major Hassidic figure at that time. His friend (Georg) Mordechai Langer was a convert to Hassidism and follower of this rabbi (see *ibid.* 186). In a letter to Max Brod written in July 2016, Kafka emphasized the "childlikeness" of the rabbi, a description he also uses for Löwy in the "Letter to His Father".

<sup>25</sup>S. Spector, *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka's Fin de Siècle* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 83.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>For the quote see *ibid.* 85.

Yiddish spoken in Prague before Jewish Emancipation. which some Jews considered “a deformed language, a freak that pathetically parodies healthy language”, in contrast to the Yiddish spoken by contemporary Eastern European Jews and considered “viable”. Spector points to the connection made between “linguistic health and territorial integrity” here.<sup>28</sup>

The hope held up by Hermann Kafka’s generation that hard work, prosperity, and socialising with the “right” people in the framework of the local Jewish community could lead to a solid and “healthy” rootedness in the territory in which they were born, could no longer be shared by their “disinherited” sons, who considered themselves uprooted from the Jewish identity of their ancestors. There were different ways of “mending” the experience of rootlessness, which was accompanied by feelings of weakness and ill-health. Whereas Franz Kafka was attracted to a form of Jewishness that was “alien” to and denigrated by “western” assimilated Jews like his father, he did not actually practice it himself and thus remained uprooted. Some of his contemporaries, for example, his friends Max Brod (1884-1968) and Hugo Bergmann (1883-1975) joined Zionist organisations such as Bar Kochba, the Zionist student union of Prague, to whose meetings he occasionally accompanied them.<sup>29</sup>

In these circles of young Zionists consisting of the second generation of European Jews after Emancipation, assimilation, “the noncritical acceptance of the norms and values of German middle class culture”, was considered a disease.<sup>30</sup> The assimilationists of their parents’ generation might look and feel “healthy”. They seemed able to occupy their well-earned position within bourgeois society, but their children knew that this healthiness and strength was only a surface phenomenon that could easily be broken. Hermann Kafka, for example, seems to have

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid. 85-86.

<sup>29</sup>See Bruce, *Kafka and Cultural Zionism*, 23-6. On the Bar Kochba society see K. Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005), 179: although its membership was rather small, “[i]t was, ..., mainly Bar Kochba members who contributed to the revival of Jewish national identity in Bohemia and to informing the Czech public about Zionism”. H.J. Kieval, *The Making of Czech Jewry: National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870-1919* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 93-123.

<sup>30</sup>Bruce, *Kafka and Cultural Zionism*, Ibid. 29.



directed his own stored-up aggression against his employees and mistrusted everyone, even his own family, as noted by Franz in his letter to him (“in the end it did you much more harm than it did them”). Since “no change could be expected from the outside environment”,<sup>31</sup> attempts to become a “healthy” and well-adjusted Jewish member of society seemed vain and ineffective.

### 3. Theodor Herzl’s *Altneuland*: A Healthy Modern Utopia

The propagation of “Zion”, that is, the biblical land of Israel and Ottoman and Mandate period Palestine as the healthiest place for Jews to live in is a recurring feature of early Zionist writings. The motif already appears in Theodor Herzl’s utopian novel *Altneuland* (*The Old New Land*), published in 1902. In this novel, David Littwak, “the Jewboy beggar”, that is, the son of a poor Galician family, whom the main protagonist Dr. Friedrich Löwenberg had met in Vienna, had become “a free, healthy, cultured man who gazed steadfastly upon the world and seemed to stand firmly in his shoes”, when he met him again in Haifa in 1923 (Book II.2).<sup>32</sup> In the utopian Old New Land, charities support everyone so that begging is not necessary. All sick people have access to hospitals, connected to the charities: “No one is turned away” (II.3). If one hospital is full, an ambulance takes the patient to another one that has a bed available. Not only Jewish but also Muslim children live “healthier” and more prosperous lives in rural villages (III.1), where they grow their own fruits and vegetables. The availability of railway travel contributes to “public health” (ibid.). Health is not limited to the physical state of the body but also concerns morality. On a “penal colony” in the form of a “model farm” labourers “are restored to physical and moral health” (IV.6). Settings such as the Jordan Valley are described as very beautiful. “One pleasant surprise after another revealed itself “to Friedrich; when they reached Jericho, “he had never imagined it to be so enchanting a health resort” (ibid.). In the new Jerusalem, “near the

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>The text of T. Herzl, *Old-New Land*, translated by Lotta Levensohn (New York: Bloch Publishing Co. and Herzl Press, 1941) is available at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/quot-altneuland-quot-theodor-herzl> (accessed 5 March 2021).

entrance was a large building marked ‘Health Department of the New Society’” (V.4). A staff member tells him that “we spend a great deal on the public health”, including the planting of trees in parks: We think nothing too costly for our parks, because they benefit the growing generation” (ibid.).

What is particularly interesting in this utopian vision is the combination of technological advances with health care and concern for a healthy environment that involves the planting of trees and care for nature. Sufian has pointed to the “medical imagery” used in this novel, “including images pertaining to malaria, such as mentions of swamps being drained and eucalyptus trees being planted to ‘cure’ the marshy soil...”.<sup>33</sup> While it is obvious that Herzl used aspects of modernity experienced in fin de siècle Vienna in his utopian vision, he also expressed a concern for health and the environment that went beyond the dread of city life at the time of industrialisation.<sup>34</sup> Taking up the concerns and anxieties of European city-dwelling Jews by, at the same time, acknowledging modern technology’s progress, in *Altneuland* Herzl created the vision of a “promised land” that his contemporaries could dream of living in.

#### 4. Rav Kook: Connecting National, Spiritual, and Physical Health

Zionist writers of the first decades of the twentieth century repeatedly refer to the unhealthy living conditions and lifestyles of European Jews and contrast them with the health providing properties of a return to the Jewish homeland. Although he never joined the Zionist movement, Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), who was born in Latvia and became the first Ashkenasic Chief Rabbi of Mandate-period Palestine, argues in his work *Orot (Lights)*, that spiritual and national health were interlinked: “spiritual vitality” can be achieved only “when their general roots, their national soul, is in a state of health; and conversely, when the national dimension of

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<sup>33</sup>S.M. Sufian, *Healing the Land and the Nation: Malaria and the Zionist Project in Palestine, 1920-1947* (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 44.

<sup>34</sup>On Herzl’s use of modernist elements in *Altneuland* see U.E. Bach, *Tropics of Vienna: Colonial Utopias of the Habsburg Empire* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Nooks, 2016), 95.

their being is defective, they too become inwardly damaged”.<sup>35</sup> Rav Kook refers to the biblical period from the time of settlement until the end of the Israelite monarchy and destruction of the first Temple as a time when “[t]he Jewish national psyche was in a state of health” and religious creativity was at its highest level. In the subsequent period, “alien influences” such as “idolatry”, weakened “the nation’s psyche”: “In such an epoch of weakness arose Christianity”.<sup>36</sup>

From a modern scholarly perspective, which views the late antique competition between Jews and Christians as beneficial at least as far as synagogues and the emergence of local religious communities are concerned, Rav Kook’s all-encompassing negative view of the entire post-biblical period seems wrong.<sup>37</sup> The rabbinic period after the destruction of the second Temple does not seem to receive its due acknowledgement as a time of heightened creativity. The reason for this seeming oversight was Rav Kook’s conflation of the rabbinic period with the yeshiva-based Torah scholarship he was familiar with from Central Europe. He writes that “the concentration on a diet of study alone weakens the power of the nation unduly”.<sup>38</sup> Rabbis of his own time “are sunk in a deep sleep... because of a weakness of soul, which for days and years and even epochs has not tasted nourishing food”.<sup>39</sup> Nation and religion, body and soul, spiritual and physical health cannot be separated but form a union: “A healthy soul in a healthy body must necessarily bring about the greatest happiness...”.<sup>40</sup>

Central to Rav Kook’s thinking is the notion that Jews are not only a religion but also a “nation” and that full religious and cultural life is possible only in a state of national independence and self-government in the national homeland. Only in the Jewish homeland can

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<sup>35</sup>A.I. Kook, *The Lights of Penitence, Lights of Holiness, The Moral Principles, Essays, Letters, and Poems*. Translation and Introduction by B.-Z. Bokser (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 294.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid. 296.

<sup>37</sup>On the possibly beneficial aspects of competition between Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity see S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 177-289, and especially 240-74 on “Judaization”.

<sup>38</sup>Kook, *Lights of Penitence*, 296.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid. 349.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid. 53.

“the full gamut of life and creativity which was neglected during exile -- a return to nature, creativity, the cultivation of values of heroism and beauty, and the renewal of public and private vitality” be realized.<sup>41</sup> Life in the Diaspora is seen as an unnatural and unhealthy state that has to end to bring about a revitalisation of the Jewish body and soul. In his biographical study of Rav Kook’s life and thought in the context of the revolutionary period he lived in, Mirsky points to his experience of “the throes of Rabbinic Judaism in the last decades of the Russian Empire” and early Eastern European Jewish immigration waves and settlements in Palestine.<sup>42</sup> Obviously, the development of and changes within European nationalist movements before and after World War I, with their increasing emphasis on the links between “nation”, culture, and territory, had a significant impact on him. According to Mirsky, Rab Kook’s “celebration of romantic nationalism” meant that he was “playing with fire”.<sup>43</sup> His emphasis on the connection between physical and spiritual health has found resonance amongst contemporary health-conscious Orthodox writers, though.<sup>44</sup>

##### 5. Solomon Schechter and Mordecai Kaplan: Health as an (American) Jewish Value

Not only Central European but also American Jewish leaders considered assimilation detrimental to Jewish health and advocated an understanding of health that comprised both body and spirit, culture and religious life. An early propagator of this view was Solomon Schechter (1847-1915), who came from Romania to America in 1902. He became a leading figure in the Conservative

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<sup>41</sup>C.S. Liebman and E. Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State* (Berkeley, CA, and London: University of California Press, 1983), 196.

<sup>42</sup>Y. Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid. 5.

<sup>44</sup>See, for example, the talk by Rabbi Netanel Javasky on “Health, Exercise, and Rav Kook” at <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/755424/rabbi-netanel-javasky/health-exercise-and-rav-kook/> (accessed 8 March 2021); Manya Ronay’s blog, “Returning to Our Roots: Reclaiming Health as a Jewish Value”, turns Rav Kook into a champion for “healthy living”, see <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/returning-to-our-roots-reclaiming-health-as-a-jewish-virtue/> (accessed 8 March 2021).

movement and President of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. In “Zionism: A Statement” (1906) he differentiates between assimilation and Americanisation. Whereas the latter concerns adoption of the English language and fulfilment of the duties of American citizenship, assimilation is viewed negatively, as a “loss of identity” and “process of disintegration” that involves “disloyalty to Israel’s history and its mission”.<sup>45</sup> He praises Zionism for its emphasis on the preservation of Jewish life in its totality: “Zionism declares boldly to the world that Judaism means to preserve its life by not losing its life. It shall be a true and healthy life, with a policy of its own, a religion wholly its own, invigorated by sacred memories and sacred environments, and proving a tower of strength and of unity...”.<sup>46</sup> For Schechter, “[t]he rebirth of Israel’s national consciousness, and the revival of Israel’s religion, or, to use a shorter term, the revival of Judaism, are inseparable”.<sup>47</sup> Like other religious Zionists such as Rav Kook, Schechter thought that Jewish “health” and survival, threatened by assimilation in both Europe and the U.S., depended on national independence in a revived Israel. He was able to reconcile this view with his own decision to remain in America and help rebuild Jewish identity there, although his own and “the Seminary’s health” were “deteriorating” at that time.<sup>48</sup>

Another scion of the Conservative Movement who viewed Jewish health in a holistic way was Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983). In his major work, *Judaism as a Civilization*, written in 1934, Kaplan praises Hadassa, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America founded by Henrietta Szold in 1912, “for its effective health work in Palestine”, which resulted in the

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<sup>45</sup>S. Schechter, “Zionism: A Statement”, *The American Hebrew* 80 (1906): 193-194. Quoted from Troy, *Zionist Ideas*, 127.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid. 128.

<sup>48</sup>M.R. Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 44-5. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards eventually developed health care guidelines for Conservative communities in America entitled, *Jewish Medical Directives for Health Care* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1994), which can be found here: <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/publications/medical%20directives.pdf> (accessed 9 March 2021).

establishment of two hospital campuses in Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup> Kaplan's understanding of Judaism as not only a religion but a civilization enabled him to emphasize practice-related aspects such as "health, goodness, order, reason, beauty" as values that Jews have always been striving for.<sup>50</sup>

Like Rav Kook and Solomon Schechter, Kaplan emphasizes the close connection between spiritual and physical health and argues that each of them cannot be achieved without the other. Therefore, he suggests that Jews should be guided in their leisure activities. Urban lifestyles and crowded living conditions "are jeopardizing the spiritual, no less than the physical, health of their inhabitants".<sup>51</sup> Communal leaders should encourage "physical recreation and spiritual self-renewal", whether in Jerusalem or New York.<sup>52</sup> Focussing on the (American) Diaspora in which he himself lived, Kaplan stressed the need for Jewish recreation. In fact, the very "survival of Judaism in the Diaspora as a civilization" depended on the degree to which Jews were able to exercise their bodies and minds: "... the conditions of modern living have made man dependent upon leisure for the maintenance not only of his health, but even of his sanity. The Jew must learn to utilize his leisure in such a way that it shall enhance his life physically, mentally and morally".<sup>53</sup> Both the association of Jewish Diaspora life with physical weakness and spiritual decay, already seen in the writings of Leon Pinsker, and the American emphasis on sports activities are evident here.<sup>54</sup>

6. Aaron David Gordon and Ze'ev Jabotinsky: Seeking "the Fresh Milk of a Healthy People's Culture" in Palestine

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<sup>49</sup>M.M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. With a New Introduction by M. Scult (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 66.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid. 330.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid. 428.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid. 429.

<sup>54</sup>On the relation between religion and sports in American culture see J. Scholes and R. Sassower, *Religion and Sports in American Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014). On American Jews and Sport see A.F. Sclar (ed.), *Beyond Stereotypes: American Jews and Sports* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2014).

Some early twentieth century Zionist writers had given up on the Diaspora altogether and thought that a healthy Jewish collectivity could be restored in Palestine only. Foremost amongst them were Aaron David Gordon (1856-1922), a Labour Zionist leader and founder of Hapoel Hazair, and Ze'ev Jabotinsky (1880-1940), who had a major impact on Menahem Begin and the politics of the Likud party. Both were born in Russia and eventually moved to Palestine, Gordon in 1904 and Jabotinsky during the British Mandate period, when he participated in underground military activities. Whereas Gordon stemmed from an Orthodox family, Jabotinsky's parents were assimilated Jews who lived in Odessa.<sup>55</sup> While their backgrounds and political convictions were rather diverse, they shared the belief that a healthy Jewish nation could be established in Palestine only.

In his essay "People and Labor" (1911), Gordon writes:

"What are we seeking in Palestine? Is it not that which we can never find elsewhere -- the fresh milk of a healthy people's culture? What we are come to create at present is not the culture of the academy ... but a culture of life... We seek to create a vital culture out of which the cream of a higher culture can easily be evolved ... What we seek to create here is life -- our own life -- in our own spirit and in our own way".<sup>56</sup>

For Gordon, the establishment of the physical and material basis of Jewish life in Palestine had to precede cultural and educational developments. Whereas the cultural (and religious) aspects of Jewish life were also present in the Diaspora, the physical and material ones were not. Gordon's view is reminiscent of Pinsker, who also denied the possibility of a vibrant and "healthy" Jewish life under the conditions Diaspora Jews found themselves in. Unlike Pinsker, he considered Palestine the only suitable place in which Jewish life and culture could be revitalised. For

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<sup>55</sup>On Aaron David Gordon see Y. Turner, *Quest for Life: A Study in Aharon David Gordon's Philosophy of Man in Nature* (Rookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2020); On Ze'ev Jabotinsky see B.J. Horowitz, *Vladimir Jabotinsky's Russian Years, 1900-1925* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020); H. Halkin, *Jabotinsky: A Life* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>56</sup>Quoted from Troy, *Zionist Ideas*, 52.

Gordon, a “healthy” Jewish community in both the physical and intellectual sense was possible in Palestine as the Jewish homeland only.

After having founded the Betar Revisionist Zionist youth movement in Riga in 1923, Jabotinsky formulated “The Fundamentals of the Betarian World Outlook” (1934), stating the need for the creation of a new “normal” and “healthy” Jew:

“The duty and aim of Betar is very simple though difficult: to create that type of Jew which the nation needs in order to better and quicker build a Jewish state. In other words, to create a ‘normal’, ‘healthy’ citizen for the Jewish nation. The greatest difficulty is encountered because, as a nation, the Jews today are neither ‘normal’ nor ‘healthy’ and life in Diaspora affects the intelligent upbringing of normal and healthy citizens...”<sup>57</sup>.

Jabotinsky contrasts his assessment of the condition of Jews in the Diaspora with his hope for a “normal” and “healthy” Jewish nation in Palestine here. Jewish health is directly linked to the political context. Citizen rights, granted to Jews through Emancipation, are not sufficient. Being a citizen in a “foreign” state that was set up by a non-Jewish nation is deemed abnormal. In connection with the Zionist leader Max Nordau, Sander Gilman refers to “the older German tradition which saw an inherent relationship between the healthy political mind and the healthy body. It was not merely *mens sana in corpore sano*, but the sign that the true citizen had a healthy body which provided his ability to be a full-scale citizen, itself a sign of mental health”.<sup>58</sup>

Zionist writers such as Gordon and Jabotinsky used the terms “health” and “healthy” in a broader sense, to denote the “health” of the Jewish collectivity or nation. Yet they also had physical connotations related to Jews’ bodies. The “vital culture” that Gordon contrasts with the “academy” involved a lifestyle of physical exercise, a sunny climate, and nutritious food. The “normal” and “healthy” Jew envisioned by Jabotinsky was muscular and tanned, engaging in outdoor activities.

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<sup>57</sup>Quoted from *ibid.* 69.

<sup>58</sup>S. Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 53.



## 7. Max Nordau: From European “Degeneration” to the Creation of “Muscle Jews”

Max Nordau (1849-1923), who was born in Budapest and a close friend of Theodor Herzl, wrote an article on the so-called *Muskeljudentum* (Muscle Jewry) in 1903, in which he contrasts the killing and decay of Jewish bodies in the European Diaspora with the “educational purpose” of “gymnastics” that will enable the emergence of muscle-Jews:<sup>59</sup>

“For too long, all too long, have we been engaged in the mortification of our own flesh. Or rather, to put it more precisely -- others did the killing of our flesh for us... In the narrow Jewish street our poor limbs soon forgot their gay movements; in the dimness of sunless houses our eyes began to blink shyly; the fear of constant persecution turned our powerful voices into frightened whispers ... But now, all coercion has become a memory of the past, and at least we are allowed space enough for our bodies to live again ... For no other people will gymnastics fulfil a more educational purpose than for us Jews. It shall straighten us in body and in character ... Our new muscle-Jews have not yet regained the heroism of our forefathers who in large numbers eagerly entered the sports arenas ... May the gymnastic club flourish and thrive and become an example to be imitated in all the centres of Jewish life!”<sup>60</sup>

The *Jüdische Turnzeitung*, in the second issue of which Nordau’s article was published, was the official newspaper of the Jewish gymnasts’ association Bar Kochba in Berlin. It propagated the benefits of various sports activities for Jews, such as mountaineering, gymnastics, and ball

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<sup>59</sup>On Max Nordau see M. Berkowitz, *Max Nordau and the Early Zionist Movement, 1896-1905* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1983).

<sup>60</sup>Quoted from Troy, *Zionist Ideas*, 21-22. The article was originally published in German in the *Jüdische Turnzeitung* 1:2 (1900): 10-11. The text also appears in P. Mendes-Flohr (ed.), *The Jew in the Modern World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 435.

games.<sup>61</sup> Such physical exercise and the development of bodily strength were linked to related issues of discipline and the ability to fight (back).<sup>62</sup>

Being a physician himself, in his book *Entartung (Degeneration)*, published in German in 1892, Nordau treats his contemporary European society and culture in the way a doctor treats his patients.<sup>63</sup> In Book 1, dealing with the fin de siècle, one chapter is entitled, “The Symptoms”, the next one “Diagnosis”, and the last one “Etiology”. Nordau distinguishes between the so-called “master-race” and Jews as “slaves”. Based on Nietzsche, he argues that in antiquity, “the Jewish race” initiating a “slave revolt in morality” against the “master-race which had long oppressed the Jews” (ibid. 423).<sup>64</sup> In regard to his own time, fin de siècle life is considered bad for everyone’s health (cf. ibid. 41: “Many observers assert that the present generation ages much more rapidly than the preceding one”) and especially for Jews. The book was widely distributed in Europe and America, where it was hugely successful but also heavily criticized.<sup>65</sup> Although its thematic scope is wide-ranging, Murphy has stated that “*Degeneration*’s prominence is evidence of the turn of the century’s popularity of the discourse on sickness”, which included “public health measures, better diet, a higher standard of living generally”.<sup>66</sup>

Nordau expands the discussion of health and disease from the body itself to the circumstances one lives in. The term “healthy” appears 78 times in *Degeneration*, indicating the significance of “health” in Nordau’s argumentation. In fact, *Degeneration* can be read as a book

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<sup>61</sup>The (German) contents of this newspaper can be seen at <https://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/cm/periodical/pageview/4921097> (accessed 16 March 2021).

<sup>62</sup>See, e.g., the articles by R. Blum on “Disziplin” and “Zum Kampfe” in *Jüdische Turnzeitung* 1 (1900) 14-5, 67.

<sup>63</sup>For the English translation see M. Nordau, *Degeneration*. Translated from the second edition of the German work (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895).

<sup>64</sup>M.A. Murphy, *Max Nordau's Fin-de-Siècle Romance of Race*, Studies in German Jewish History 4 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), has examined this issue in relation to his fictional works. Ibid. 22 she refers to Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), with which Nordau would have been familiar: “In Nietzsche’s scheme, the traits that the humble slaves, that is, the Jews in subjugation, must cultivate to survive become elevated to the highest virtues”. These traits include charity and pity rather than splendor and strength.

<sup>65</sup>W.M. Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel: 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid. 6.

on the definition and meaning of health -- the health of the individual and the health of society and culture as a whole. Health concerns the mind as well as the body (ibid. 56, 58, 63, 69, 86, 88; 244 with reference to psychoanalysis) and impacts all areas of life, including social action and morality (cf. 435). If “degeneration” sets in, the “healthy, normal type of the species” (cf. Jabotinsky above) will not be perpetuated but eventually become extinct (16). Health and disease should not be considered distinctive, essential categories and states but are always related to the entire organism and the wider political, social, and cultural circumstances one experiences:

“As a matter of fact there exists no activity and no state of the living organism which can in itself be designated as ‘health’ or ‘disease’. But they become these in respect of the circumstances and purposes of the organism. According to the time of its appearance, one and the same state may very well be at one time disease and at another health” (ibid. 555).

Applied to culture and society, this means that certain practices may appear as appropriate and “healthy” at one time but as inappropriate and “diseased” at another.

Obviously, the way in which Nordau assesses art and culture is very subjective, labelling artists and cultural tendencies he dislikes as “degenerate” or “diseased” and those he likes as “healthy”.<sup>67</sup> In the Nazi period, Nazi officials adopted the terms “degeneration” and “degenerate” from Weimar culture and applied them to cultural phenomena (modern art) and social groups (Jews) they hated. According to Friedländer, “[r]edemptive anti-Semitism was born from the fear of racial degeneration and the religious belief in redemption: The main cause of degeneration was the penetration of the Jews into the German body politic, into German society, and into the German bloodstream”.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>The subjectivity and positivism evident in this work were already criticised by his contemporaries, see Greenslade, *Degeneration*, 127.

<sup>68</sup>S. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution: 1933-1939* (London: Hachette, 2014), 85. See also W.I. Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe Before the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 143.

For Nordau and his fellow Zionist thinkers, it was not Jews who were “degenerate” but the society they lived in. The notion of fin de siècle “degeneration” called for the “regeneration” of a healthy Jewish body, culture, and society. The image of the “muscle Jew” served as an ideal and counterforce against the image of the weak, pale, and persecuted Jew of central Europe. In Nordau’s speech at the Zionist Congress in Basel in 1898 and in his above-cited article of 1903 he propagates sports activities as a means to not only build muscle and cultivate physical strength but also “character”, that is, a new attitude and stance within society.<sup>69</sup> As Presner has pointed out, “[a]lthough Nordau did not start exploring the political implications of his initial call for a ‘muscular Judaism’ until a couple of years later, he did, in his early speech, clearly allude to the necessity of creating a new type of Jew...”.<sup>70</sup>

The image of the New Jew was modelled on physical and cultural ideals of the time that were shared by German youth movements, such as the so-called Wandervögel, founded in 1896.<sup>71</sup> They involved outdoor activities, physical exercise, and the cultivation of fitness. The ideal body propagated by the Soviets was similar: Soviet posters of the early twentieth century exhibit male and female bodies of workers who are tanned and muscular as the result of their physical work in agriculture and factories.<sup>72</sup> Water sports and sunbathing are presented as healthy activities and forms of relaxation from labour.<sup>73</sup>

In these frameworks, work and leisure lead to a tanned, muscular ideal that primarily applied to males: “In their homosocial world men participated in exercise to tone their bodies

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<sup>69</sup>On Nordau and his vision of a muscular Judaism see also R. Jütte, *Leib und Leben im Judentum* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 2016), 93.

<sup>70</sup>T.S. Presner, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.

<sup>71</sup>On the German youth movements see R.-J. Adriaansen, *The Rhythm of Eternity: The German Youth Movement and the Experience of the Past, 1900-1933* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015). Daniel Wildmann, *Der veränderbare Körper. Jüdische Turner, Männlichkeit und das Wiedergewinnen von Geschichte in Deutschland um 1900* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), examines the connection between “national Jewish” gymnasts associations and (German) Jewish identity at the turn of the century.

<sup>72</sup>T. Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.* 193.

and improve their minds”.<sup>74</sup> Nordau’s vision of the muscle Jew had only male Jews in mind.<sup>75</sup> Male physical exercise was often linked to and associated with military training. Starks’ remark on Soviet sports activities applies to the European and early Zionist youth movements as well: “In a society resonating with martial metaphors, the homosocial environment may have prompted viewers to link physical fitness with military experience”.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Shiffman has emphasized that “[t]he Zionist movement was, from its outset, a masculine one; from Herzl, Nordau, and onwards, the Zionist utopia was formulated as a project intended to return to the Jewish man his lost masculinity”.<sup>77</sup> Although some European Jewish gymnasts’ clubs had female members and women contributed to agricultural settlements and military organisations after immigration to Palestine, their roles as pioneers are emphasized only in the later literature from the 1970s onwards.<sup>78</sup>

## 8. Conclusions

The improvement of public health was an important aspect of European nationalist movements of the late nineteenth century and “health” in its physical and mental dimensions became a national value. Whereas assimilationist Jews like Hermann Kafka attempted to lead a “healthy” Jewish life by adopting “western”, middle-class standards that included hard work, emphasis on the family, and socialising with one’s social equals, members of their sons’ generation found themselves unable to follow suit. Like Franz Kafka, they looked through the shining surface that their fathers’ generation had built and saw the stress and anger that the continued discrimination of Jews in Europe brought about. They felt weak, sick, and left without the Jewish heritage of

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>Wildmann, *Der veränderbare Körper*, 229, who thinks that Nordau’s vision was based on the contemporary concept of “muscular Christianity” that also linked physical strength to masculinity.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>S. Shiffman, “Forging the Image of Pioneering Women”, in *Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel: Life History, Politics, and Culture*, edited by R. Kark, M. Shilo, and G. Hasan-Rokem (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 131.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid. 132-3.

their ancestors that their fathers had abandoned. Unable to find new ground, they lived an “uprooted” existence that, in the case of Franz Kafka, found expression in literature and art.

Early Zionist writers used the terminology of health versus disease and degeneration to propagate a national regeneration and revival of Jews and Judaism in a Jewish homeland. They expanded the notion of health to encompass all aspects of Jewish existence. Health concerns body and mind, society and culture, political self-determination and a sovereign nation state. To improve Jewish health, the building of physical strength is necessary, which can be achieved by engaging in sports and joining Jewish gymnasts’ associations. While such associations were founded in Europe already, they were considered merely preparatory for a new life in a national Jewish homeland which Herzl, Gordon, and Jabotinsky hoped to establish in Palestine. Herzl’s novel *Altneuland* evokes the vision of a Jewish paradise in which the ideal of health has great significance. The assumption is that physical and mental health can only be achieved in an environment that enables life close to nature while also making use of modern technological and bio-medical advances to develop a state-of-the-art health system. In this and other early Zionist writings discussed here, health is a holistic concept that captures the state of Jewish existence. Freedom from persecution and oppression, physical labour and exercise, and the preservation of nature were all considered to contribute to the realisation of such a state.

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