CHAPTER 34

PLAY AND GAMES

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1. Introduction

Leisure-time activities are of cultural importance in every society. Every society has its own pastimes, and Jewish society is not exceptional in this regard (Schwartz 2003: 132–141; Schwartz 2004b: 128–140). Play and games are among the most important leisure-time activities (Avedon/Sutton-Smith 1971). Participation in them is one of the most significant characteristics of a society, both in terms of the relationship between an individual and society and from a national, ethnic standpoint. Some scholars maintain that play is so significant sociologically that a culture or society can be examined on its basis. Games always have a greater significance than mere diversion and entertainment. They can be seen as microcosms of entire social systems (Huizinga 1955; Caillois 1962).

There are many views as to why people play. Some scholars examine children's games (e.g. Schwartzman 1976; Chanan/Francis 1984), others those of both adults and children (Ellis 1973; Avedon/Sutton-Smith 1971). Some scholars think that one of the purposes of playing games is to burn up excessive energy and to divert destructive tendencies into harmless pursuits. Others stress the pure enjoyment of play, or present it as a means of learning in the process of passing through society's 'evolutionary stages'. Besides sociological, psychoanalytical, and developmental theories of play one can find ecological approaches which examine the influence of the environment on play and game behaviour (Ellis 1973).

Play is a universal pastime: it can be found amongst people of different cultures, religions, and ethnicities, and amongst different age groups. Although play may be conducted as a solitary pursuit, it is usually practised together with others, in groups based on social ties. The composition of the circle of players depends upon a variety of factors. Play enables social contact and proximity outside of the ordinary course of social relations. Play, especially that of children, may be sensitive to external (e.g. political) messages directed at the players during their play time, messages which may be based on current events.

Just like everyone else, Jews of all time periods and ages engaged in play and games. One can distinguish between certain games and aspects of play which seem to have been universal, that is, which can be found in all societies, and others which were particular to Jewish society. It is therefore impossible to divorce the study of play and games in ancient Jewish society from the larger context of ancient leisure-time activities, and from the sociological and anthropological study of play. Interestingly, many modern games are just variant versions of ancient games common in many societies.

In the following we shall examine the games and toys of Jews in Roman Palestine within the historical framework of play, games, and toys within Graeco-Roman society. Sports and athletics, particularly those undertaken in some sort of 'official' capacity, will not be discussed in this chapter (see the chapter on 'Theatres, Hippodromes, Amphitheatres, and Performances' in this volume). While the 'official' games conducted in amphitheatres are outside of the purview of our discussion, we shall deal with 'informal' games involving athletic activity.

2. Early Studies of Games in Ancient Jewish Society

Since play and games are universal activities, one would assume that there would be a good deal of discussion on these activities in Jewish society throughout the ages. One has to be aware of the fact, however, that most ancient and medieval Jewish literary works were composed by rabbis. While rabbis are not opposed to these pastimes and occasionally even foster and appreciate them, their literature cannot be considered 'popular' literature, and does not reflect popular culture. Rabbis did not consider play and games an issue requiring much discussion unless related to certain halakhic or moral issues. In rabbinic sources the extent of the discussion of the topic is therefore very limited, in contrast to Roman literary sources. Roman writers were enthusiastic about certain leisure pastimes, such as gambling and ball play, and therefore produced a copious literature on these matters, such as *De parvae pilae exercitio* ('On Exercise with a Small Ball') by the second-century CE physician Galen (Kühn 1821). However, while most of the ancient Graeco-Roman 'books' on these pastimes have apparently not survived, references to these activities, as well as to other play pastimes are found in many extant works, and particularly in the *Onomasticon* of the second-century CE rhetorician Iulius Pollux (Becker 1846; Väterlein 1976; Ziegler 2004). Rabbis, on the other hand, saw popular leisure-time activities as a necessary evil, distracting from Torah study. This rabbinic view seems to have been dominant in Jewish society for a long time.

Most of the early scholarly interest in these matters is found in works on 'Talmudic Archaeology' and ancient Jewish daily life (Löw 1875: 279–317; Krauss 1912: 102–119). While these studies serve as the basis for any modern study of Jewish play and games in antiquity, they are limited in scope, dealing with the topic in one chapter only within the context of works of a much larger scope. These early scholars basically collected relevant rabbinic sources from tannaitic and amoraic, Palestinian and Babylonian documents, 'analysed' them in accordance with the limited methodological tools of their times, and sometimes compared them with similar phenomena in the ancient world. While still a good starting point for any study, they remain just that.

3. Rabbinic Literature and Archaeology

The most serious methodological problem in the study of play and games also concerns other areas of research into the material culture of Jews in Roman Palestine, namely, the use of rabbinic literary sources (Schwartz 2006: 431–433). As already mentioned in a number of other chapters in this volume, rabbinic traditions appear in an edited form in the extant documents. The editors integrated them into larger thematic contexts. Therefore the exact date and place of origin of individual traditions cannot be determined any more.

Furthermore, there is only sparse evidence concerning play and games, so that traditions from different time periods and locations may have to be investigated together. This leads to the following methodological questions: are traditions from the tannaitic period still relevant in amoraic times? Are traditions transmitted in the Babylonian Talmud applicable to Palestine and vice versa? One might argue that the universal nature of many aspects of play, games, and toys, and the fact that they change very slowly over time, make it possible to cross chronological and/or geographical boundaries, a procedure which is not considered legitimate for other areas of ancient Jewish history (Schwartz 1995b; 1998c).

There are instances, however, in which local and chronological differences can be determined. For example, the literature of the Palestinian sages often reflects a more guarded attitude toward play and games. Perhaps Palestinian rabbis were more familiar with the games of the surrounding Graeco-Roman world and with the 'dangers' inherent in some of them, while the Babylonian Talmud seems to reflect a more open attitude (Schwartz 1998b). These differences make it necessary to use caution in trying to use Babylonian literature for the study of play in Roman Palestine. One also has to keep in mind that the relatively little amount of rabbinic evidence on play and games is not a reliable indicator of the actual amount of play activity in Palestinian Jewish society.

It is also difficult to determine whether, and to what extent, rabbinic literature reflects practices in Jewish society at large. As mentioned above, there is no ancient Jewish literature resembling the lost Graeco-Roman treatises on play or the extant works and references mentioned above. It is hard to imagine a body of literature more inappropriate for the investigation of games, play, and toys than rabbinic literature. Although rabbis were not opposed to these matters, they hardly considered them important components of ancient Jewish religion and life. Rabbis were an intellectual elite and treated all subjects from their particular perspective. Despite these limitations, rabbinic literature remains our major literary source for the study of ancient Jewish popular culture, including the topic under discussion here.

The second major type of evidence consists of archaeological remains. Difficulties arise with regard to identifying particular items as toys and game pieces. Is a small item just an implement, or is it a miniature which might have been used as a toy? Even items that look like toys and have the right size for toys might, in the end, be classified as votive offerings or cult objects, archaeologists' catch phrases for objects whose purpose is unclear. One also has to be aware of the possibility that any object, even one not intended as a play object, might be used as a toy. People of different ages and genders may relate to objects in different ways vis-à-vis their potential as toys. Therefore determining when and whether a specific object was used as a toy is a very difficult and sometimes impossible task faced by the ancient historian (Lillehammer 1989; Wilkie 2000; Baxter 2005; Wileman 2005).

4. General Scholarship on Play

Because of the universal nature of play and the fact that games often change very little over time, any study of play and games focusing on a particular period and location has to be aware of the state of general research on the topic (Murray 1952; Opie/Opie 1969; Bell 1979; Laser 1987; Dawson 1994). In addition, there are works dealing with toys and games in the ancient world, including the Near East (Becq de Fouquieres 1869; Falkener 1892; White 1971; Fitta 1998; Finkel 2007), and those which deal with Graeco-Roman society specifically (Marquardt/Mommsen 1882; Richter 1891; Wentworth Thompson 1933; Austin 1934, 1935, and 1940; Väterlein 1976; Schmidt 1977; Toner 1995; Purcell 1995). Much relevant material can be found in studies of children and childhood in antiquity (Aries 1962; Rawson 2003). Since certain types of plays and games occupied adults as well, books on Roman leisure culture may provide important information (Balsdon 1969; Toner 1995). Studies of play in medieval times may also be helpful (Orme 2002). Although most of these works rarely make reference to Jewish society, they can provide background material or even missing links to understand the respective Jewish literary traditions.

5. Ancient Jews at Play

As already mentioned above, the first studies of play, games, and toys in Jewish society were written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as parts of larger works on various aspects of daily life (Löw 1875: 279–317; Krauss 1912: 102–119). They were based on the methodology and state of research on rabbinic literature and archaeology at that time. Since then a number of more specialized works have appeared.

The unpublished doctoral dissertation of R. D. Crabtree entitled 'Leisure in Ancient Israel (before 70 A. D.)' (Crabtree 1982) focuses on leisure and recreation, but also deals with play and games to some extent. This work contains little analysis of the relevant Jewish literary sources, and shows methodological deficiencies. Despite these shortcomings, it provides an important theoretical background to the study of leisure and recreation in Jewish society in general and to play and games in particular. The same is true for the 1976 study of Y. Sorek on *Physical Culture in the Land of Israel in the Mishnah and Talmud Period* (Sorek 1976), which does contain rabbinic references to play and games, but mostly from the perspective of physical education. It is weak, however, in its analysis of the relevant source material and its social historical significance.

In 1992 Ulrich Hübner's monograph *Spiele und Spielzeug im antiken Palästina* was published (Hübner 1992). Like Crabtree, Hübner's work mainly deals with the biblical period and the Second Temple period. His study is mainly based on archaeological material with less attention paid to literary sources. The work has a catalogue-like nature and there is very little analysis of either the archaeological or literary sources. Hübner has continued to publish on this topic (Hübner 2000). In addition to these studies, Meir Bar-Ilan lectured at the World Congress of Jewish Studies on 'Children's Games in Antiquity', with an emphasis on family and childhood as reflected in rabbinic sources (Bar-Ilan 1994).

In the past, scholars have shown little interest in the study of play and games in Jewish society, with the exception of the study of gambling (see below). Jews seem to have had a certain affinity to this pastime, a phenomenon which created many halakhic problems. Most of the discussion revolved around the understanding of M. R.H. 1:8 and M. Sanh. 3:3 which state that the testimony of someone who plays with dice (*ha-mesaheq be-kubiya*) is not acceptable. According to a statement attributed to Rabbi Yehudah, this rule applies only in the case of a professional gambler, whereas the testimony of the occasional gambler is not disqualified.

Rabbinic traditions seem to equate gambling with dicing and related board games (M. R.H. 1:8; M. Sanh. 3:3; T. Sanh. 5:2: *ha-mesaheq be-kubiya*, 'he who plays with *psephasim*'), and sometimes also with pigeon flying (M. Ed. 2:7; T. Ed. 1:10–11; M. R.H. 1:8; M. Sanh. 3:3; M. Shebu. *7*: 1). The rabbis never pronounced a clear-cut prohibition against gambling, however, and we may assume that many Jews took advantage of this situation in terms of their own leisure-time activities. It is not surprising then that most of the studies dealing with gambling in rabbinic literature are critical of the practice (Bamberger 1917; Rifkind 1926; 1934; 1935; 1946; Bazak 1960; 1961). Leo Landman's articles constitute the most detailed study of the halahkic history of gambling and were considered the most definitive statement on this issue for a long time (Landman 1966–1967; 1967–1968). A few years later the halakhah of gambling was reexamined by Wahrhaftig (1972). While these studies were more interested in the development of halakhah or Jewish law than in social history of any kind, and while some of them extend chronologically far beyond the Roman period, through the Middle Ages and even up to modern times, they are invaluable for the understanding of the Jewish attitude to gambling. Moreover, since in general the basic structure or format of games remains the same throughout the ages, a later reference might help understand the earlier workings of a game. Clearly though, none of these studies analysed Jewish gambling within the particular framework of the Roman period. They also made little reference to the relevant archaeological remains, whether Jewish or Graeco-Roman.

Schwartz has recently re-analysed the relevant literary sources on gambling, and evaluated them together with archaeological findings. He has also tried to locate the phenomenon of gambling within the social realties of the Graeco-Roman world (Schwartz 1998a), which was often quite attracted to, and occupied with, gambling activities. The most popular forms of gambling activities were those related to dice, astragals and board games. These games required little equipment and were relatively easy to play. Many such dice and/or board games of the Graeco-Roman world, for example, *petteia*, referring to games played with *pessoi* or 'pieces', *poleis* or 'cities', *latrunculi (ludus latrunculorum), ludus duodecim scriptorium*, *alea* or *tabula,* are mentioned in Graeco-Roman literature. While they could be played alone, they were usually played at social gatherings and were most popular in taverns or brothels. Because of their connection to these institutions, negative social behaviour was associated with them. While one could win large sums of money in these games, the opposite was true as well. Needless to say, such practices would have been problematic for halakhically observant Jews (Schwartz 1998a; Rieche 2007; Purcell 2007; Bell 2007).

Schwartz' analysis of Jewish literary and archaeological sources suggests that Jews were not very much involved in gambling, whether in Hellenistic and Roman Palestine or in the Graeco-Roman world at large. This would explain rabbis' somewhat lenient attitude towards the 'casual' gambler (see above). There is no material evidence for Jewish women's or children's participation in gambling activities. Rabbis were concerned about children being tempted by games which could be turned into gambling. They forbade the eating of nuts at the table on the eve of the Rosh Hashanah holiday because nut games, popular with children, would often be turned into gambling games in Roman society (Schwartz 1997c).

While it is hard to determine the reasons for the relative lack of Jewish participation in gambling, one may assume that the middle and/or lower strata of Jewish society simply lacked the necessary money to engage in this activity. Perhaps rabbinic prohibition and people's adherence to Jewish 'family values' made this pastime less attractive to Jews. In the Middle Ages, however, Jewish society would become infected with gambling, just like the surrounding non-Jewish culture (Schwartz 1998a).

A number of studies on individual aspects of play, games, and toys in Jewish society during the Roman period were published during the last couple of years. Schwartz 1993 and 1998c sought to determine the nature of the 'child's cart' mentioned in M. Betsa 2:10 in relation to the laws of the Sabbath. This toy was studied in the context of the different types of children's carts in Graeco-Roman antiquity. The study showed that rabbinic literature actually provides much relevant information on this toy which was used in both Jewish and non-Jewish society.

Similar case studies examined ball games in ancient Jewish society, particularly during the Roman period (Schwartz 1994; 1995b; 1997b). Ball games can be considered to be amongst the most common games played in many different societies from ancient to modern times. Boys and girls, adults and children participate(d) in this activity (Mendner 1956; cf. Herzog 2002), as did Jews during the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods. While various aspects of Jewish ball games have been studied in the past (Krauss 1912: 109–11; Mendner 1956: 47; Simri 1969; Hübner 1992: 38–42), no thorough treatment of the topic and detailed analyses of the relevant rabbinic passages existed.

In Schwartz' studies, mentioned above, Jewish traditions relating to ball games were examined within the framework of play in Graeco-Roman society. On the basis of Jewish and non-Jewish sources it was possible to determine some physical characteristics and properties of the balls used for play in Jewish society, and to identify various ball games prevalent in that society. As in Graeco-Roman society, the little round ball and the activities surrounding it encapsulated an entire world of values and norms far beyond the limited parameters of casual tossing and catching, much as is the case today regarding many formal and informal ball games. Jewish society was clearly influenced by the play and game traditions of the surrounding culture, as becomes evident, especially in the case of ball games.

There was, however, not a small amount of cultural 'baggage' attached to many of these games in the ancient world. In the Graeco-Roman world, simple ball games were often considered cultural and ethnic signifiers. Ball playing was widespread throughout all social strata, and it is related that even Zeus played with a ball (Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 3.135–139; Gardiner 1930: 231). Roman army commanders, kings and emperors excelled in ball playing and were proud of their skills. The second-century CE physician Galen dedicated an entire work to the health benefits of exercising with a small ball (*De parvae pilae exercitio*; cf. Robinson 1981: 185–190).

Jewish society was not inimical to adopting the games with their 'baggage', unless they trespassed upon Jewish national, religious, or moral values, such as in the tradition of the destruction of Tur Shimon during the Bar Kokhba period (y. Taanit 5:4, 69a). This tradition relates that the settlement of Tur Shimon was destroyed because of licentiousness and because of ball playing. While ball play would, under normal circumstances, have been considered innocent, during the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome a game considered so Roman would have been deemed unacceptable by Jewish leaders. Moreover, while rabbis might normally have ignored the potential dangers of 'mixed' ball games—a popular way for a young girl to snare a boy, according to the Roman poet Ovid (*Ars Amatoria* 3.361–368)—they could hardly have sanctioned such practice during a war against Rome.

Obviously, the development of play and games in ancient Jewish society was based on a combination of Jewish versions of 'universal' games and play, unique Jewish game tradition, such as playing 'rabbi' (y. Meg. 1:11, 71d; Gen. R. 1:11; cf. b. Shab. 104a), and the adaptation of practices common in the surrounding Graeco-Roman culture. In a few exceptional cases this adaptation could be problematic, if the attached cultural signifiers stood at variance with Jewish cultural norms (Schwartz 1995a; 2003; 2004b). For example, rabbinic traditions which present Ishmael as playing games involving or possibly leading to idolatry, sex, and murder (T. Sot. 6:6) mark him as an outsider, since these games were considered non-Jewish by rabbis. Ishmael was guilty of play-acting in a non-Jewish manner. His play was seen as an expression of his alleged preference for non-Jewish society. Accordingly, rabbis considered Sarah right in demanding that he be sent away. Abraham, however, was not free of guilt in this matter (Ex. R. 1:1). Play was intrinsically connected to education and family. Letting a child play with the wrong toys or allowing his play to get out of hand without sufficient parental discipline or supervision could have disastrous consequences. Needless to say, rabbis often considered play a waste of time (Num. R. 2:15), or even as a malicious and vicious act directed against the authority of adults (Midr. Ps. 34:1).

Nevertheless, rabbis considered it normal, and indeed even acceptable, for youngsters to be playing indoors or outside in the residential courtyard, street, market, or fields. Nuts (Cant. R. 6:7), dates (M. Maas. 4:2; b. Betsa 34b), pottery pieces (M. Kel. 24:1), toy carts and wagons were commonly used as toys in ancient Jewish society. Children could also play with animals, especially on farms. A rabbinic tradition suggests that Jewish children, like their non-Jewish counterparts, also played with locusts (M. Shab. 9:7). Some children seem to have kept dogs and cats as pets (Schwartz 2000; 2001; 2004a). Jewish boys engaged in war games similar to those that were common in the non-Jewish world: they may have worn 'toy helmets' or played with small 'toy' shields (Schwartz 2004b: 135–136. cf. Grossman 1994). Rabbinic literature also recognized the importance of parents playing with their children, and it was not inappropriate for a father to be involved in such games, even if he was a famous sage (Mid. Ps. 92:13; b. Shab. 154b). Obviously, for rabbis the best type of play was play-acting in imitation of sages (y. Meg. 1:11, 71d).

6. Suggestions for Further Study

In spite of the fact that play and games are such an important aspect of the daily life of just about everyone, not only Jews, it is surprising that so little work has been devoted to such an important topic. As already mentioned, there are many difficulties facing the student of play with regard to identifying relevant sources and applying an appropriate methodology. A proper study of the topic requires interdisciplinary cooperation and expertise in many fields, including the social sciences, Graeco-Roman culture, rabbinic literature, and archaeology. It is possible to devote article-length studies to almost each and every game and toy mentioned in rabbinic sources, especially since the number of relevant finds discovered in archaeological excavations is constantly increasing. There is hardly any archaeological excavation of importance in Israel which does not produce game pieces of some kind, even if they are not always recognized as such by the archaeologists and do not always appear in the official publications (Schwartz 1998a: 158–162).

Future research should focus on studying additional types of games and toys. Samuel Krauss' pioneering study of games comprised fewer than twenty pages (Krauss 1912: 102–121), only three of them being devoted to children's games (ibid. 107–110). In most of the general studies on play and games in Jewish society, individual games, toys and pastimes were not examined in detail. More recently, Schwartz' work has shown that it is possible to devote full-length studies and articles to individual games and toys. The relatively few rabbinic literary sources referring to Jewish play and games have proven to be quite revealing when examined and analysed in detail.

The challenge for the scholar of Jewish daily life in Hellenistic and Roman-Byzantine Palestine is the timelessness of ancient games (and of the rabbinic sources which refer to them). It is hardly possible to make chronological distinctions and to trace the development of games in ancient Judaism. While the comparative study of Jewish and Graeco-Roman literary sources and the evaluation of the relevant archaeological material is important, toys and games have proven to be long-lasting—that is, a Roman-period Jewish game may be identified on the basis of earlier or later material—and universal. Therefore, even amongst some of the games played by children and adults today, we may detect certain similarities with the games played by Jews in Roman Palestine.

It is necessary to continue detailed studies of individual games and toys, in their particular setting of ancient Palestine, but also in the more general context of universal play activity transcending chronological and geographical boundaries. The eventual goal of such individual studies should be a comprehensive book-length synthesis of the topic in the context of the social history and material culture of the Jews of Roman Palestine. The more comprehensive works on games published to date (e.g. Hübner 1992) resemble Krauss 'catalogue' model rather than dealing with the complex issues outlined above. As the saying goes, 'You are what you play'. The games and toys that occupied a child or adult in antiquity can serve as a mirror of or window into that society. Play is serious and deserves serious study.

Suggested Reading

The best general introduction to play is still that of Huizinga (1955). On the Roman world, and particularly the play world of children, Väterlein (1976) remains a classic. Hübner (1992) is the best general introduction and catalogue of ancient Jewish play and games and Schwartz (1997b and 1998c) serve as good examples of 'topical' studies on toys and games in Jewish society of the Roman period.

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