

Boxing

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This time of the year when there is a tendency to glorify the Hasmoneans as Jewish tough guys, it is appropriate that two Jewish boxers have just hit the news. Both are Russian Jews and both are newly religious under the influence of Lubavitch. [Yuri Foreman](#) of Brooklyn, but of Israeli citizenship, surprisingly [defeated champion Puerto Rican Daniel Santos in Las Vegas](#) to win the World Boxing Association 154-pound title. On the other hand, the previously unbeaten Jewish boxer, [Dmitriy Salita](#), was less surprisingly knocked out by Muslim fighter Amir Khan from Britain in just 76 seconds. Should we be proud, sad, or what?

Thousands of years of subservience in exile have given us Jews a reputation for being weaklings and softies. It is not altogether fair. There have been [great Jewish boxers](#) such as [Daniel Mendoza](#), England's sixteenth Heavyweight Champion from 1792 to 1795. American [Maximilian Adelbert "Madcap Maxie" Baer](#) was briefly Heavyweight Champion of the world. In fact, the [Boxing Hall of Fame](#) lists over sixty Jewish boxers. Jewish mercenaries were known to be amongst the best in the Roman Empire (I wonder if they took breaks over Shabbat?) And of course we have in our lifetime had Israeli war heroes, and now everyone accuses us of being brutal tough guys.

Still, it is true we have tended to prefer the book to the sword and Nobel Prizes to boxing belts (though I'm not sure that some Nobel Prizes, particularly those outside the objective realms of science, haven't completely lost their luster).

But I hate boxing. It is a brutal sport in which you simply try to smash your opponent into submission, doing as much physical damage as you possibly can. The nadir of boxing was the ghastly specter of [Mike Tyson biting the ear of Evander Holyfield](#). If you have seen the film [Tyson](#), you have seen a world champion decline from brute to pathetic. Nothing is sadder than seeing the [once arrogant Muhammad Ali](#) reduced to [invalidity](#).

It is usually the very poor or the disposed who venture into a sport that batters their bodies and minds into mush in the hope of making a lot of money before that happens. But more often than not crooked promoters filch most of it. The boxing world is an unsavory demimonde of crooks, charlatans, and punters, with a few dedicated trainers on the side. The audience at a boxing match is usually made of screaming frustrated women, neanderthal toughs spitting hatred and invective of the most racial kind, regardless of color, and so-called celebrities who have nothing better to do with their time. It recalls the Roman gladiatorial games and the crude bloodlust of primitive people. Yes, there have been noble fighters, but watching boxing brings out the worst in a person. Although I like seeing excellence in sport, it brings out the worst in me, too.

In other words, boxing is a sport in which you know you will be dealing with

the dregs of humanity. So it was surprising that, in explaining his defeat, [Salita told the \(London\) Jewish Chronicle](#), "It was over before it started. I was in great shape and well prepared but the anti-Semitic chanting left me completely overwhelmed. . .The experience of fighting away from home, and the crowd being so against me, left me shocked."

The article states, "Rabbi Dovid Lewis, of Newcastle United Hebrew Congregation, accompanied Salita, wearing his traditional Magen David-decorated shorts, from his dressing room to the ring. He said, 'We were shocked at the vitriolic abuse shouted at Dmitriy. It was anti-Semitic swearing and spitting with a lot of pushing and pulling.'"

Now initially one might react by saying that this is just symptomatic of the reaction to anything Israeli in European life. On any BBC current affairs or discussion program a person expressing any pro-Israeli sentiment will be booed, heckled, and harassed by the audience. At demonstrations there is no rational engagement, only hatred and abuse.

But in the case of boxing, what else does one expect? Amir Khan himself, writing in his autobiography, describes the constant abuse and hatred directed at him for being a Muslim. The sort of person who shrieks hatred at others usually shrieks it his own family after he has exhausted himself on an enemy. That's why fanatics don't care who they kill. Absolutism, be it Fascist or Marxist, has no room for moderation or exchange.

That this is true of the intellectual world comes as a disappointment, but that it is true of boxing is no surprise at all. So for Salita to express shock is to criticize his handlers and trainers for not preparing him. And for him to use it as an excuse is lame. As Tyson said in his film, it was precisely the bullying and the hatred he was subjected to that made him the fighter he was. Perhaps Salita is just too nice a Jewish boy and would not have made it onto Judah Maccabee's elite fighting corps!