

Soccer Hooliganism

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal highlighted the sad fact that the supporters of London soccer club, Tottenham Hotspur, attract the violent attention of fascist thugs wherever they travel abroad. Soccer is a battleground in Europe and too often an outlet for racism and Judeophobia.

In Britain football clubs were proxies for religious wars. In cities like Liverpool, Manchester, and Glasgow, the major clubs were traditionally and until recently either Protestant or Catholic. I once experienced a Glasgow Rangers versus Celtic derby sitting between a Catholic priest and a minister of the Church of Scotland. When the Protestants stood to sing the National Anthem, "God save the Queen", the Catholic half of the stadium booed and cursed. And when the Catholics sang their anthem, "You'll never walk alone", the Protestants erupted in vitriol, hurling abuse at the pope. I was kissed on my right cheek when Rangers scored and on my left when Celtic did. Mercifully, the game ended in a one-one draw.

For some reason, London avoided the religious divide. Most Jews in working-class London tended to support Arsenal, whereas the more genteel middle classes went for Tottenham. Tottenham Chutspa, as we called them, but mostly known as "The Spurs", was my father's team. He took me to watch them play several times. I remember fondly, in those days of standing terraces rather than seats, the crowds delighted in shouting out running commentaries and abuse, sarcastic comments that mercilessly lambasted unfortunate errors and made fun of any player off his game. "Hey, Jimmy! Yer shorts are too long. Are you playing for the other side?" It was done in a spirit of good humor that made it an art form that was every bit as entertaining as the match itself, and my father used those same skills to humiliate our school team every time he watched us play! It spurred us on to try harder.

As British society began to fracture and change during the sixties, hooliganism became the norm at soccer matches. Thugs went to fight as much as watch the game. Pitched battles were the norm. Families no longer dared to go. Chants became crude hate-filled rants. Black players were taunted unceasingly. But then a series of tragedies slowly forced the authorities to think deeply about the way the game was going and how to separate warring gangs of rival toughs.

Television poured in huge sums of money. Stars who had earned working-class wages now joined the league of millionaires. Young, barely literate thugs suddenly strutted the social scene, flaunting their wealth in the demimonde world of nightclubs, crooks, and hookers. And of course they fuelled the pathetic cult of celebrity. For the first time, successful Jewish businessmen entered the fray. Soon both Spurs and Arsenal had Jewish owners, and even Chelsea, once regarded as the most anti-Semitic of clubs, found a vaguely Jewish Russian oligarch to pour millions into it.

Nevertheless, Tottenham Hotspur seemed to have more of a Jewish presence than the rest and, slowly, working-class fascist thugs around the country started to chant anti-Semitic invective against Spurs supporters. The Spurs fought back. Even the non-Jewish supporters reveled in calling themselves the "Yiddos", and they actually adopted the name as a badge of honor. The taunting didn't work.

In Britain, anti-Semitism was always there amongst the thuggish elements (as well as the elites), but it wasn't the biggest problem. Racism became the toughest hatred to dislodge. One might have expected the arrival of the large black and Muslim population to lead to violence between them and Jews at soccer matches. This didn't happen significantly in the UK. The immigrants, both black and Muslim, stayed away in significant numbers (the rising cost of entry tickets didn't help). They concentrated on sports the British Empire taught them, such as cricket where skill alone enabled the former colonials to regularly humiliate their old Imperial masters.

Just as Spurs was the Jewish club in London, so in Holland was Ajax. Ajax Amsterdam had, in fact, been founded by Jews and was known as a Jewish club long after most Jews had left. Its supporters took to waving Israeli flags and of course this inspired reactions. Similarly in Ireland, Protestant soccer clubs adopted a pro-Israel stance in reaction to Catholic anti-Semitism. Any whiff of an Israeli player or team in Ireland produces a hate fest of anti-Semitism such as, "Send him to the gas chambers!" Somehow, away from Britain anti-Semitism felt freer to flaunt itself. And things have been getting increasingly evil.

There was a time when it was British supporters travelling abroad who instigated the violence. But as Britain toughened up on its own game, the notorious football riots of twenty years year past have receded. Violence, racism, and indeed anti-Israelism still erupt at English soccer matches every now and again, but at least the players and the authorities are responding. Still, soccer players in Britain are not the most cultured or educated example of homo sapiens or even of soccer players. That's why England rarely wins anything. Whereas Germany, more cerebral as well as tough, do so much better. Perhaps it is because German players tend not to have tattoos, neither do Ronaldo or Messi. Beckham, on the other hand, is covered in them, and he covers his bases by having a cross as well as two Hebrew phrases.

In Europe after the war, it was unfashionable to be anti-Semitic and indeed anti-Israel; this has now changed. We are seeing an increase in attacks on any sign of Jewish or Israeli presence. That is why so many Tottenham supporters travelling abroad in Europe are being attacked and injured.

Just as it is pretty widespread now in the world of classical music to disrupt concerts featuring Israeli performers, so the violence directed at Jews and Israelis in Europe is a sign of a broken moral compass. You can't blame the game or the music. But you can blame people. Unless the authorities act quickly and forcefully to stop abuse of any sort, the disease will spread.

PS – I was born in Manchester, so I support United!