

Gender Prescriptions and the “Jewish Body”: Sports Programming for Girls and Women in the
Early Years of the Y.M.H.A.

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Abstract

This research endeavour examines programs that were organized and offered by the Toronto Y.M.H.A. in the 1930s. Emphasis is placed on girls' sports programming. A question is posed: in the early years of the Y.M.H.A., what was available for girls in the realm of athletics? In order to answer this question, Y.M.H.A. bulletins and newsletters were consulted. It was discovered that the programs offered by the Y.M.H.A. benefited Jewish youth of both genders, who were considered to be in danger of assimilating. They also benefited the Y.M.H.A. itself, as the money donated went towards programming, and also towards renovation and building costs. Examples from the Bible were brought to justify this fundraising. The result of this research was the discovery that a variety of multi-faceted programs was offered to girls and women, and aside from a brief period of time in the 1920s, sports programming for girls only increased in quality and quantity. However, boys and men were still afforded more opportunities.

Pre-amble – Relation to the Current Body of Work

This year, I spent some time volunteering at the Ontario Jewish Archives, located in the Lipa Green Building on Sherman Campus. I listened to, and transcribed, oral histories. One of the oral histories that I transcribed was that of Judge Joseph Addison, and he spoke in his oral history about programs that the Y.M.H.A offered at the time of its inception. Because Judge Addison was speaking about a Jewish organization, I erroneously made the assumption that at least some of the programs would relate to Judaism in some way. However, this was not the case; Judge Addison spent almost the entire interview talking about handball. Participating in a handball league, cleaning the handball courts, and organizing handball games was how Judge Addison spent his time at the Y.M.H.A – and he took these duties very seriouslyⁱ. This led me to wonder: what kind of programs did the Y.M.H.A offer? More specifically, in what kind of programs did Y.M.H.A. members actually partake and value?

Researching the programs that were offered in the Toronto Y.M.H.A. sounds like a very specific topic; however, it is important on a global level. In the 1930s, The Y.M.H.A. members – both male and female – were struggling to find the balance between partaking in secular society, and remaining a separate entity. Jews in Toronto were trying to meld their religious beliefs and their personal beliefs with the modern beliefs that were bombarding them from all sides. The struggle that Y.M.H.A. members were going through was not unique to Toronto – it was a universal struggle for inclusion and distinction, taking place in cities all over the world. Jews everywhere tried to maintain a semblance of normalcy, while the threat of the Nazi regime hung overhead. This research endeavour adds an extra layer of depth to the conversation of World War II Jewry, and the ways in which Jews responded to, and occasionally internalized, the stereotypes that were propagated about them.

The Y.M.H.A: A Brief History

The Y.M.H.A was started at the turn of the twentieth centuryⁱⁱ. There were many Jewish immigrant youth, and they needed a recreational outlet. The *Young Mens' Hebrew Athletic Club Ltd*, established in 1901, filled this need with informal sports programming. The *Jewish Boys' Club*, the *Hebrew Literary and Athletic Club*, also provided athletic opportunities to Jewish boys in Toronto, while the *Jewish Girls' Club* provided mostly social opportunities. However, what Toronto lacked was a central location for athletics, catered specifically to Jews. Because of this, many Jewish youth were patronizing non-Jewish organizations, such as the YMCA. In 1919, the different athletic associations came together to form the *Hebrew Association of Young Men's and Young Women's Clubs*. This later became known as the Young Mens' and Young Women's Hebrew Association (Y.M./Y.W.H.A)ⁱⁱⁱ, but was often referred to simply as the Y.M.H.A. Finding out which programs were offered specifically to women proved to be difficult, because the word "men" was sometimes used to refer to men, while other times, it was used as a catch-all phrase that referred to both men and women. The Y.M/W.H.A held programs in various building in Toronto, and in 1953, a new centralized community centre was dedicated at the corner of Bloor St. and Spadina Ave^{iv}.

My Research Endeavour

The Prosserman Jewish Community Centre, located in the Bathurst and Sheppard area, offers a wide variety of programs and services. Basketball lessons, recreational swimming, Jewish learning opportunities, an early-years program, and a summer camp are only a fraction of the resources that are available to Toronto Jews. When looking at the Prosserman JCC's expansive, 27 acre property, it is hard to believe that this community centre got its start in a different location, with barely any funds. The year 1919 brought about the inception of the

Hebrew Association of Young Men's and Young Women's Clubs. On the *Ontario Jewish Archives* website, an informational paragraph discusses a shift that took place in Y.M.H.A. programming:

“This association grew substantially throughout the 1920s, but by the late 1920s, programming became more geared towards young boys. As a result, ‘Young Women’ was dropped from the name and it became known as the Young Men’s Hebrew Association (Y.M.H.A)”^v.

According to this quotation, programming – both social and athletic – for girls was once prevalent, but was then reduced. This inspired my research to become much more specific. I conducted research on the topic of girls’ sporting opportunities in the Toronto Y.M.H.A. in the 1920s and 1930s. I hypothesized that the type, quantity, and reasons for girls’ sports programming will give insight to the ways in which girls were conceived in Toronto society in the 1920s and 1930s. Through critical engagement with archived editions of *YMHA Bulletin* and “*Y*” *Time* (the Y.M.H.A.’s newsletters), I discovered that programming at the Y.M.H.A. developed as the years went on, and that programming was influenced by three related factors: gender prescriptions, secular society, and the Torah. These three factors seem to have been used in conjunction for a common purpose – to raise money needed to renovate the Y.M.H.A. building. Girls’ programming, and girls’ sports programming specifically, was also influenced by these three factors.

“YMHA Bulletin”: 1933

The earliest piece of relevant writing put out by the Y.M.H.A. was the *YMHA Bulletin* from December 1933. Rabbi Samuel Sachs wrote an article called “YMHA and the Community”, in which he appealed the community for funding, on the basis that sports are important part of Jewish life, as evidenced by the Torah – and they might even protect Jews from assimilation. Rabbi Sachs exegeted that “many references in the Bible to feats of strength and

bodily skill shows that the ancient Israelites indulged in games intended to strengthen the body”^{vi}. For example, the article continues, Jacob lifted a huge stone off of a well, all by himself. He also wrestled with an angel and won. Samson, a judge and spiritual leader to the Jewish people, is the prototypical example of a physically strong Biblical man. Saul, king of Israel, was a head taller than the average person, and his son, Jonathan, was strong and fleeting^{vii}. In my opinion, none of the aforementioned activities qualify as a “game”; however, all of these significant historical men were certainly very strong. The article goes on to claim that “the Rabbis admonished fathers to teach their sons horseback riding, swimming, and shooting^{viii}”. It is a positive commandment in the Talmud for a father to teach his son to swim. The other ones are perhaps more recent, as I have never heard of them, nor was I able to find any sources for them. In any case, Rabbi Sachs is using the Jewish tradition to validate sporting activities.

Rabbi Sachs claimed that in their machine-driven society, “it is the duty of the Jewish community to provide the channels of recreation”^{ix}. Otherwise, he posited, Jews would begin looking outside of the community, and would encounter antisemitism as well as assimilation. It is interesting to note the correlation of Biblical personalities with the available sporting activities, based on gender. Discussions of Jacob, Saul, and Jonathan are immediately followed by an appeal for money – money that ended up being used for building renovations, and sports programming that focused primarily on boys. However, it would have just as easy to include women in these examples. Deborah was a prophet who led a Jewish army into battle. Yael used a tent peg to kill an enemy commander. Rachav single-handedly lowered two spies out of her window in Jericho, so that they could abscond into the night without being caught. Perhaps if female Biblical personalities had been brought as examples, it would have normalized the concept of girls partaking in athletic activities.

“YMHA Bulletin”: 1935

The February 1934 edition of the *YMHA Bulletin* appealed for funds again, this time taking a different approach – by warning the community of the ills that could befall them if they study too much Torah. “Every hour of every day finds someone falling suddenly by the wayside because of his failure to indulge in a bit of pleasant and highly profitable sport^x”, stated Rabbi Maurice N. Eisendrath. Rabbi Eisendrath wrote that being Jewish is difficult, and full of pressure and tension. Playing handball for an hour could do wonders to help a Jew momentarily forget about Hitler^{xi}. Rabbi Eisendrath vehemently posited that too much Torah study is bad for one’s health^{xii}. For evidence, he reminisces about his visit to Eastern Europe, during which he “gaze[d] upon the sallow faces and stunted forms of those who in musty, sordid, sometimes even dirty hovels study from dawn to dusk^{xiii}”. Instead of spending most of one’s time learning, boys and men should turn to sports – preferably under the auspices of the Y.M.H.A., of course.

Jewish Bodies: Locally and Globally

Rabbi Eisendrath’s description of “sallow faces” and “stunted forms” shows that he was concerned with the appearance of Jewish bodies. In fact, 1934 was exactly the time period in which the Nazis were disseminating propaganda, and proclaiming Jewish bodies to be weak and disease-ridden. The Toronto Y.M.H.A. was far away from Germany, geographically, but it is clear from Rabbi Eisendrath’s article that World War II was on everyone’s mind. It is possible that non-Jews and Jews alike internalized stereotypes about the “Jewish body” – including Jews in Toronto.

In the book *Boundaries of Jewish Identity*, Susan A. Glenn investigates the phenomenon of “looking Jewish”. In chapter four, entitled *Funny, You Don’t Look Jewish: Visual Stereotypes and the Making of Modern Identity*, Glenn focuses on post-World War II America, and strives to uncover the ways in which appearance – either actual or perceived – impacts identity. “Concepts of physical difference – in the case of Jews’ facial features and ‘bodily practices’ such as gesture – have not only shaped the history of racial and ethnic persecution, but have also helped Jews define what is ‘Jewish’ and what is not^{xiv}”. Stereotypes abounded regarding what it meant to “look Jewish”, and in cities where Jews were a minority group, non-Jews often used these stereotypes to search out Jews and harass them on the street. Interestingly, however, Jews also made use of these stereotypes, to locate fellow members of the “tribe”. “For American Jews... the idea of ‘Jewish looks’ has been one of the many sources of collective self-definition^{xv}”. Many American Jews defined themselves by their supposedly “Jewish looks”, but at the same time, tried to appear as secular as possible when they were amongst general society. This is the point at which members of the Y.M.H.A. found themselves in the 1930s: wanting to be a part of modern, secular society, but not wanting to lose their Jewish identity. They were internalizing the idea that their bodies should look like those of their non-Jewish neighbours, but also internalizing the idea that this was not possible. This struggle was occurring, not only in Toronto, but in communities all over the world.

If Jewish bodies were receiving a lot of attention and criticism in the 1930s, the bodies of Jewish women must have been a big part of the conversation, as well. In a Jewish community centre, the intersection of religion and gender might have influenced the ways in which women’s bodies and physical strengths were perceived. Deborah A. Prentice and Erica Carranza expound upon the concept of gender prescription in their article *What Women and Men Should Be*,

Shouldn't Be, are Allowed to Be, and Don't Have to Be: The Contents of Prescriptive Gender Stereotypes. "Gender stereotypes are highly prescriptive^{xvi}". This means that the stereotype begets a certain type of behaviour and characteristics in the people being stereotyped. "For example, the stereotypic belief that women are warm and caring is matched by a societal prescription that they should be warm and caring^{xvii}". Carranza and Prentice explain that gender stereotypes justify and perpetuate the status quo, and maintain power inequalities. The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) is a list of stereotypical feminine and masculine qualities. The BSRI was compiled by research participants in the 1970s. Feminine characteristics included "childlike... compassionate... gentle, gullible... shy, soft spoken, sympathetic, tender... and yielding^{xviii}". Masculine characteristics included "aggressive, ambitious... assertive, athletic, competitive... dominant, [and] forceful^{xix}". Both women and men were expected to play the roles to which they were assigned. Not only did society expect that each gender would exhibit these aforementioned characteristics, but women and men expected this of themselves.

"Y" Time: 1936

In the October 1936 edition of the "Y", an untitled article advertises water-polo, the "barbell boys", boxing classes, and a basketball House-league. The article continues, "Those who have not signed up yet are urged to hurry so as to get in on what promises to be the keenest, snappiest, up-snortingest house-league in "Y" history... so come on, fellows, and put your name down on the list"^{xx}. Based on the reference to "fellows", it is clear that these aforementioned programs were geared towards boys only. Just in case this was not explicit, the article continues, "boys get into harness and practice up"^{xxi}. Not only were boys taking advantage of sporting opportunities, their skills were improving, as well. "There has been an infusion of young blood

into the Young Men's section. From the form these boys are showing the old-timers had better look to their laurels"^{xxii}.

"Y" Time: 1937

The BSRI was created in the 1974. In the 1930s, gender roles were even more firmly entrenched. This information helps to put the Y.M.H.A.'s actions into context. Women all over Toronto, and globally as well, were being viewed in a certain way, and were encouraged to view themselves in a certain way. "Compassionate", "tender", and "yielding" individuals do not lift weights or play water polo; "aggressive", "dominant", and "forceful" individuals do. If males were afforded more sporting opportunities than females, this does not mean that Judaism discriminates against women. The Y.M.H.A. is simply one example of a phenomenon that was occurring everywhere. When dealing with intersectionality, the issue is always more complex than it seems.

Even though girls and women were thus far not mentioned in conjunction with these sports programs, perhaps they had programs of their own that simply did not receive as much attention. I endeavoured to find these programs, but came up short in the 1936 newsletter. A new year, however, brought an event that included both girls and boys – a dance. "The YM and YWHA lads and lassies are surveying dress suits and evening gowns in anticipation of the 'Y' dance", writes an editorial column in the January 1937 edition of the *"Y" Time*. "We look forward to an evening of the kind of rhythm that makes you want to swing into a fox-trot"^{xxiii}. Girls and boys were both included in this evening of fun. A dance of this sort should have been social, and athletic as well, depending on how much one planned on dancing.

January 1937 was evidently a year for more female inclusion, as the following personal ad demonstrates: "Sam Gardner, official ping-pong instructor to the young women, is doing

splendidly with his pupils. Interest in the game has developed to the point where a tournament is being planned for them”^{xxiv}. Another dance took place in January 1937, warmly welcoming boys and girls. An article titled, “Members! A Good Time Ahead Sun. Jan 31” advertised an event for “all YM and YWHA member” that includes entertainment, dance, and “a humorous play by our dramatics group – a club in which girls were also members”^{xxv}. The Y.M.H.A. tried to go above and beyond in the realm of sports programming, and strived to create well-rounded individuals. An article entitled “Senior and Young Men’s Club Notes”, in the January 1937 edition reports a man by the name of Mannie Ross going to an executive meeting and sharing his criticism and suggestions. “The net result [of this meeting] was a determination among the officers to bring new life into the club activities and act upon a number of suggestions brought forward at the meeting”^{xxvi}.

The “Senior and Young Men’s Club Notes” went on to discuss the Chess and Checkers club. [The club] “is beginning to show excellent results in developing top-notch players”^{xxvii}. In the March 1937 edition of the “*Y*” *Time*, an article titled “No spectators at Barbell and Boxing Classes” makes it seem as though interest in these classes is flagging... until one reads the body of the article, and discovers that spectators are not allowed, because the classes are so popular that there is simply no room! These classes were extremely successful, but were only open to boys and men. A men’s Debating Club is also mentioned, and, in passing, a women’s debating club. “The suggestion that the Senior and Young Men’s Club challenge the YWHA to a debate was met with doubtful enthusiasm on the part of some who were afraid ‘we might lose’^{xxviii}”. Not only was a women’s debating club in existence, but they were, apparently, quite good. There was no mention later on as to whether this debate actually took place, but this is a positive indication of more inclusive times ahead.

The September 1937 edition of the “*Y*” *Time* displays a photograph of the newly elected Board of Toronto Y.M.H.A and Y.W.H.A directors. This photograph shows 17 men and two women. However, on the same page, there is a list of newly elected Y.W.H.A officers – all women. Women were forming their own committees, and were also slowly becoming a part of the general Y.M.H.A committees. The committees planned to form “the most comprehensive educational program in the history of the Young Men’s Hebrew Association”, that would include “dramatics, art, dance, music, vocational general languages, public speaking, current forums, Canadian elements, courses to be given during the year”^{xxix}. These programs were intended to be offered to women, as well as men. It is interesting to note, however, that none of these are sports programs.

After studying all of the 1937 monthly editions of the “*Y*” *Time*, I came across the “*Y*” *Time Annual Edition*. This body of work looks back on 1937, and shares hope for the future. The opening article is called “Looking Forward”. This article discusses how it has been 25 years since the establishment of the Y.M.H.A, and “we are energetically continuously gathering strength”^{xxx}. The Y.M.H.A is proud of their advances; they have increased the scope of their programming, grown in size, and become more liberal in their ideologies. “We have outgrown our track dogmas of social-tea-and-gym activities. We have ceased to be, what we have been, a shower-tank-basket-ball meeting place”^{xxxi}. The cover of the 1937 “*Y*” *Time Annual Edition* reflects their effort to become more cultured, and more multi-faceted. Two men walk side by side, each one with excellent posture. The man on the left is wearing shorts, an exercising t-shirt, and running shoes. The man on the right is wearing formal trousers, a collared shirt, and dress shoes. “Y.M.H.A” is written in large letters, and based on the cover, there is no

acknowledgement of a female presence. By the 1938 Annual Edition of the “*Y*” *Times*, however, this changes.

“*Y*” *Time*: 1938

The 1938 “*Y*” *Time Annual Edition* – edited by Anne Rosen, a woman – shows a man playing basketball on the cover, with the letters Y.M.H.A./Y.W.H.A displayed prominently. This theme of female involvement is carried on through this annual newsletter, with three full pages about women-centred activities. Anne Rosen states proudly in her *Year in Review* that “although only in its second year, the YWHA has established a value for itself. It is valuable to its individual members, valuable to the YMHA, and an asset to the community”^{xxxii}. Rosen thanks the vice president, secretary, social committee, executive advisory committee, and many other members of the Y.W.H.A. The amount of activities that these women organized in only one year is quite impressive; a literary program, and Sick Committee (to visit and help the sick), a Splash Party, and a Valentine’s Party are only some of the programs mentioned.

Despite the Y.W.H.A.’s hard work and careful planning, their continued existence was not a given. “The last year has proved that this YWHA is here to stay. We have passed the experimental stage and are already building on the foundation we have so painstakingly selected and laid”^{xxxiii}. The demand for programming was there, but the women had to campaign for acceptance, and for time to use the already-existing facilities. Rather than immediately chalking this up to a gender issue, however, Rosen states “much of the criticism which we must accept as our due share is a natural accompaniment to an experimental stage”^{xxxiv}. An article in the 1938 annual edition, called “YWHA In Athletics”, brings a comprehensive look at sporting opportunities for girls. Lil Steinman, the author of this article, clearly states that “the YWHA was not formed as an athletic organization”^{xxxv}. Steinman expressed that the Y.W.H.A would like to

provide girls in Toronto with a fully equipped gymnasium and swimming pool. Many “damsels” wished that Y.W.H.A girls were afforded the same opportunities as their Christian counterparts, the Y.W.C.A. But, explains Steinman, “this is impossible, and sad as it may seem, it is very much so^{xxxvi}. This is the first inkling of information to show that Christian community centres actually had more opportunities for their girls than did Jewish community centres. Even though the Y.W.H.A was not founded as an athletic organization, and even with this disparity, Steinman “[does] not think that we have failed to give our girls a splendid athletic program, limited as our facilities and time may be”^{xxxvii}.

A Sunday evening calisthenics class was the first sports program to be offered to women. Next, a five month volleyball tournament filled the need for women who were athletically inclined. The Y.W.H.A. made use of the Y.M.H.A.’s gymnasium, and gained access to field hockey, badminton, the parallel bars, the wooden horse, and tumbling equipment. They had to work around the men’s schedule, but they were resourceful. What began as one evening a week turned into more, as the Y.W.H.A. approached the Y.M.H.A., and the men were (usually) agreeable to allowing them more time and equipment. A swimming class was also popular, as well as an “interesting and demonstrative swimming exhibition”, and there was even a small water-polo team^{xxxviii}. Table tennis was competitive, with the first tournament taking place in 1937. Roller skating, ice skating, and bowling, and tennis were other activities in which Y.W.H.A. members eagerly participated. As well, “for the first time in the history of the YMHA and YWHA, tennis became a major sport during the past year, and tournaments were sponsored”^{xxxix}. There is even a picture of two YM/YWHA members, one man and one woman (wearing formal clothing, not gym clothing), holding trophies proclaiming them “Y Tennis Champions”.

“Y” Time: 1939

The 1939 edition of *“Y” Time Annual* continues in the same vein. This is the first cover to depict men and women doing sports; a cartoon man is playing basketball, and a cartoon woman is swimming. The words “YMHA” and “YWHA” are displayed prominently. The May and June edition of *“Y” Time* has an article called “Picnic Sunday, May 28”. Many girls participated in this large social event, which included a hike, games, and “an altogether enjoyable afternoon”^{xl}. The article continues that “The girls have arranged to meet at the end of the Yonge Street car line at 12 o’clock from whence they will explore ‘Ah Wilderness’”^{xli}. The same edition of *“Y” Time* talks about a boys’ hike that recently occurred. The article “Junior Boys go Hiking” describes “basketball, races, and hiking [followed] by a great campfire with the boys toasting marshmallows^{xlii}”. The boys also began to learn wilderness skills. When compared to the boys’ hike, the girls’ hike was more low-key – but even though this context is helpful, it is in no way intended to denigrate the women who organized the girls’ hike.

The October 1939 edition of *“Y” Time* has an article called “Club Notes”. This article shows, for the first time, a variety of programs specifically directed at teenaged girls! “Double Triangle Girls” was a new club for girls ages 16-18, and “Club Seventeen”, for girls around 17 years of age, advertised its third term with the Y. The “Y’ettes” had 17 girls and women between the ages of 18 and 20. Both of the aforementioned clubs were more social in nature. The “Teen Girls”, however, were a group of “hardy 18-year olds [that] held a hike in spite of the nippy weather and enjoyed it”^{xliii}. An article entitled “Sports Highlights” talks about a myriad of activities: basketball, boxing, wrestling, volleyball, weight-lifting, bar-bell, fencing, badminton, handball, swimming, basketball, calisthenics, tennis, and bowling. It is unclear from the article which of these activities included women, but there is a picture of women sitting on the floor, doing calisthenics. Calisthenics, as the article eloquently states, “are not the simple non-effective

gyrations about which many reposing scoffers judiciously comment”, but are a valid form of exercise^{xliv}. This is the first picture in any “Y” *Time* bulletin, newsletter, or article showing women – not a cartoon drawing but actual women – wearing gym clothes and engaged in physical activity. With this photograph, and with this annual edition, the 1930s were ended out, and the 1940s were ushered in, with the promise of even more sporting opportunities for girls and women on the horizon.

Conclusion

The sports programs that were available to Jewish girls and women in the Y.M/Y.W.C.A grew with each passing year in the 1930s, but there were certainly obstacles along the way. This process was sped up by advice from Rabbis, who saw sporting opportunities – for boys and girls – as the key to maintaining an insular community, and as a bulwark against antisemitism and assimilation. However, the Biblical examples that the Rabbis used to showcase the importance of sport in the Jewish tradition was one sided; the strong women in the Bible were not acknowledged, lowering the chances for the community to be inspired to create athletic opportunities for girls and women. There certainly was inequity between boys’ and girls’ sporting opportunities. It is important to remember, however, that this inequity was not unique to the Toronto Y.M.H.A.; neither was it unique to Jewish institutions. Gender prescriptions affected all facets of society, and affected males as well as females. The “Jewish body” was on display during the Nazi regime, even in Canada, and community leaders were well aware of this fact. Sports programming challenged stereotypes about Jewish bodies, while at the same time, perpetuated them. Despite this, however, there was a wide variety of programs offered by the Y.M/Y.W.C.A, among them many opportunities for women to socialize, raise money for charity, and play sports. Any sporting opportunities offered for girls and women in the various Jewish

community centres in Toronto are built in the footsteps of the 1920s and 1930s Y.M/Y.W.C.A members, who fought for gym equipment and longer swimming hours, and who felt that programming for girls was truly worthwhile.

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