

The Immortals: Jewish Fighters Ancient and Modern

Written by Springs Toledo
Sunday, 27 June 2010 15:00

[The Jew] has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and had done it with his hands tied behind him... All things are mortal but the Jew. All other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

~ Mark Twain

The Jewish War against Rome began in the desert surrounding Jerusalem in 66 CE. It reached its climax in the Temple, and ended at a place called Masada. The war was provoked by a mercurial party called the Zealots in answer to the superpower's affronts to their ancient beliefs. These rebels didn't wave a flag; they waved Torah scrolls.

To Rome, the Jews' stubborn adherence to the idea of one god was odd. Other subject nations recognized an assortment of gods anyway, so the introduction of a deified human emperor was met with a shrug of shoulders. More incense was simply added to the burning cauldrons. The Jews were different. They'd jump in the cauldron themselves before addressing a pagan emperor as "Lord. Those scrolls they waved left no room for compromise. "I am the Lord your God, thundered the first commandment, "you shall not have other gods before me.

The Jewish War bleeds with examples of defiance in the name of religious devotion. The odds against them meant nothing. The horrors awaiting them in Roman brutality and spectacle meant nothing. "There was no one, wrote a witness, "who was not amazed at their steadfastness and –call it what you will– the madness or the strength of mind of these victims.

The madness or the strength of mind.

When Titus sent his legions in to attack the Temple itself, he was aiming for the heart of the revolt. The entire population of Jerusalem rose up to defend it. Ordinary people fought in the forecourt while the rich fought in the inner courts. "The priests, a Roman historian recorded, "defended the Temple building itself even as it burned. "With an undiminished excess of strength and courage, they tried to repel [the legionaries] and, we are told, they "took no account of their own lives.

It was in vain. The Temple was defiled and destroyed and a great lamentation was sent to the sky. Rome razed Jerusalem itself and left it for the jackals. Remnants of the rebel fighters fled to the desert; where it all began.

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Like a sprout out of parched ground, Judaism itself began in the desert. Bound by a faith that was so radical it precipitated wars with thorny neighbors, the ancient Israelites could not bring themselves to forsake it. They could not bring themselves to forsake him. Their faith is not based on a set of ideas interchangeable with any others –it is based on friendship. It began with

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the command of a singular God to a simple man. The man was a nomadic herdsman named Abram who called on the Almighty by name. God and man visited one another and had conversations. Gifts were given. At times they'd argue. The fact that Abram's friend had made the world and was the source of all life was almost incidental –two persons reached out and made bonds of loyalty. God made a promise to Abram that his children would not only survive through the ages, they would be a holy people set apart from the rest.

They've been on the defensive ever since.

Yuri Foreman is a son of that nomad. He is a rabbinical student scrutinizing the memory of that promise and a boxer miming the mobility and steely resolve of a chosen people. He finds strength in the struggle, in synagogue, in the living past.

He's in good company; boxing has been carrying a menorah since the first bell of the modern era.

In 1920, the Walker Law legalized boxing in New York, and the modern era began. Tough urban Jews found a new home that was 20 feet square with ropes for walls and no roof to speak of. They trained at boxing's "Holy of Holies, Stillman's Gym on Eighth Avenue. The proprietor was Lou Stillman, born Louis Ingber. Promoter Tex Rickard took a lease out on Madison Square Garden and hosted the first main event under the new law. It pitted Joe Welling against Johnny Dundee; and this time, the Jew defeated the Roman.

In January of the next year, Rickard ushered boxing into high society by staging a benefit at the Garden that was headlined by none other than the World Lightweight Champion Benny Leonard. Boxing went big-time.

By the end of the decade, Jews filled the ranks of fighters, managers, trainers, and cut men, and were the dominant ethnic group in the sport. Scattered though they were in the rest of the world, they were, spiritually speaking, as tightly bound together as the braids of a challah. In August of 1929, sixty-seven Jews were killed and synagogues were ransacked in Hebron by an Arab mob. The boxing community soon staged a benefit at the Garden for the "Palestine Emergency Fund. Congressmen, judges, U.S. Attorneys, and Tammany politicians took their seats among 16,431 fellow fight fans. The five headliners were Maxie Rosenbloom, Al Singer, Kid Berg, Ruby Goldstein, and Yale Okun –all Jewish, all victorious.

It wasn't always so easy. Charley Phil Rosenberg fought during that era as well. "I was a bad boy when I was boxing, he told Peter Heller, "every town I went to I started trouble in. Just a month after he won the World Bantamweight Title at the Garden, he was in Ohio facing an undefeated prospect. Someone at ringside kept shouting "kill the Jew bastard! and Rosenberg finally had enough. He stood up from his stool, leaned over the ropes with a mouth full of blood and water and then, he recounted, "I spit it right in his face. It was the mayor of Toledo.

Ray Arcel was Rosenberg's trainer. He was with the group of fighters that first walked into Stillman's Gym and anointed it. He later trained Barney Ross –an orthodox Jew born Barnett David Rasofsky. Ross was the last of the great Jewish champions and is widely considered

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second only to Leonard. In 1937, Ross was getting ready to defend his welterweight title against Ceferino Garcia, a Filipino puncher with more knockouts than Manny Pacquiao has bouts. Two days before the event, Ross fractured his right thumb. He refused his manager's pleadings to postpone the fight. So they sent Arcel in to talk to the champion:

"I says, 'Barney, why sacrifice?'

"I don't sacrifice anything. I don't need the right hand.

Ross hurt his left hand in the second round and took a unanimous decision anyway. The master-boxer did it with not much more than a left jab "—and, Arcel added with a finger on a temple, "a brain.

Sometimes even that isn't enough. Yuri Foreman's theological practicum would buckle the knees of Ivy Leaguers, but he couldn't handle Miguel Cotto. Ross, for all his ring savvy, couldn't handle Henry Armstrong. He had always said that he would take only one beating in his career, and in 1938 he took it. Arcel was among the corner men trying to stop his title defense against the relentless Armstrong after the seventh and then again after the twelfth round. Like Foreman, Ross refused to let them despite the pain and the blood. Surrender was not an option

Ross lost his title that night. As he descended the four steps at ringside, his right eye closed and his face a mass of cuts and welts, Grantland Rice called out from press row,

"Why didn't you quit? Did you want to get killed?"

"Champs privilege, was the reply.

As he walked down the aisle, Ross noticed something strange: "I don't hear any shouting. I don't even hear talking. I saw faces, faces, faces and they were all looking at me, not up at the ring. Thirty-five thousand fans in the Madison Square Garden Bowl watched him go in silence—in reverence.

It was a tribute.

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In 73 CE, the Jewish-Roman War came to an end. Masada, looming then as it does now in the Judean desert, had become a refugee camp for rebels fleeing Jerusalem. The Tenth Legion soon arrived. Hopelessly outnumbered Jewish men, women, and children—Zealots and their families, resisted a siege conducted by 6000 Romans for months. Engineers built a rampart and ballistae hurled stones and catapult fire at the great fortress day and night. A great battering ram was constructed to force their way in and things got desperate. Soon, the walls were shaking amid Latin shouts and falling debris.

For those holed up inside, surrender was not an option.

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On the eve of Passover, the Jews buried their sacred possessions and set their living quarters ablaze. With chains and crucifixion awaiting them, they chose death before defilement. The details are unclear, but it appears that they drew lots and quietly killed each other by consent. The next morning, the Romans swarmed into Masada expecting fierce resistance. What they got instead was an unforgettable sight, a testament to the depth of the Jewish fist:

Nine hundred and sixty lay still; their blue and white prayer shawls flapping in the wind. Buried beneath the stones are parchment scrolls –prophecies, chronicles, and songs. “Have mercy on me, God, for I am treated harshly, reads one of them,

Attackers press me all the day.

...O Most High, when I am afraid,

in you I place my trust.

God, I praise your promise;

in you I trust, I do not fear.

What can mere flesh do to me?

Crows circle over the desert scene while the Roman rank and file wanders among the dead. They are not triumphant. They know that their enemy had prostrated themselves to a power greater than Rome, a power that inspires acts and endurance beyond the scope of human comprehension. One by one bronze helmets are removed. Battle-hardened soldiers stand in silence –in awe.

Time stops under a blazing sun; and then begins again.

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Josephus’s *The Jewish Wars*, Martin Hengel’s *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period From Herod I until 70 A.D.*, James P. Dawson’s account of the Palestine Fund Show in Madison Square Garden in *The New York Times*, and Douglas Century’s *Barney Ross* were useful as sources for this essay. Charley Phil Rosenberg’s story is found in Peter Heller’s *In This Corner*. Ray Arcel’s comments are in Ronald K. Fried’s *Corner Men: Great Boxing Trainers*. The “song is excerpted from Psalm 56.

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