

## **The Jews of Late Antique Palestine and the Roman Games: Rabbinic Dicta vs. Communal Practice**

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Games and spectacles were introduced into the cultural-social ethos of the Roman East in the time of Herod the Great. Not only were the physical appearance and monumental character of the buildings new features, but the various performances held in them were also a revolutionary innovation that altered the recreational habits of the local inhabitants. The Jewish community, constituting an important sector of the population in late antique Palestine, was aware of Herod's new entertainment buildings, which were in use, for the most part, in the first centuries CE. It is generally acknowledged that most Jews complied with the rabbinic condemnation of games and spectacles, and avoided them. However, it has become clear, from talmudic sources and other literary evidence, that the Jews indeed frequented such pastimes from the second century on, both as spectators and participants.

My paper will focus on the disparate attitudes toward games and spectacles in ancient Palestine, as articulated in rabbinic dicta and reflected in actual communal practice. A careful reading of the literary sources notes a shift in the rabbis' stance in the course of time. While the *tannaim* (first to second centuries CE) unreservedly prohibited Jewish participation in the games, the *amoraim* (third to early fifth centuries CE) refrained from harsh condemnation and tried to persuade their communities non-aggressively not to partake in these events. It will be argued that the shift in the strategy of the rabbis reflects the reality they faced in their own communities and consequently set the tone of their sermons and teachings.

The findings of our study indicate a gap between the preachings of the religious leadership, on the one hand, and the behavior of the population, on the other. Such a disparity characterized not only Jewish society at the time, but also the Christian community from the third to fifth centuries CE. After a brief review of the climate within the Christian realm, some parallels will be drawn between the two communities. Although the religious leadership of both presented games and spectacles as religiously and morally reprehensible, it will be demonstrated that not only individuals in both communities attended such activities, but that the church fathers, like the rabbis, referred to these forms of entertainment in their homilies.