

RAMAT GAN, ISRAEL, 15 SEPTEMBER 2004

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## 'Synagogue or Soccer,' a Parable for the Times

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" (Mark 2:23–24, NRSV)

At Erev **Rosh Hashanah**, evening of the Jewish New Year, one can imagine **UEFA** as a Pharisaic body, having posed the question to Jewish fans of **Maccabi Tel Aviv** whether one should pray or enjoy the secular delights of the first Champions League match on Israeli soil. As we type, the team from Tel Aviv plays the German giants Bayern Munich, after much maneuvering over whether the match could go forward on the eve of the two-day holiday to commemorate creation. Parties petitioned the **High Court of Justice** to stop the game on the grounds that it undermined Jewish values; the three-judge panel said it had no jurisdiction ("**High Court: Maccabi TA–Bayern Game outside Our Jurisdiction**," Reuters, 13 September). Matchtime was also in dispute, until the continental body and Maccabi officials agreed on the original 9:45 p.m. local start, in line with the rest of the pan-European fixture list and perhaps more convenient for those leaving the *challah* at their dining tables. "You can all arrive with a full stomach and enjoy a fantastic occasion," said Maccabi manager **Nir Klinger (Ofer Ronen-Abels)**, "**Mac TA Set to Make History**," *The Jerusalem Post*).

UEFA finds itself in an odd spot, having set the fixture date; yet, in its refusal to change the date, it also poses the Pharisaic question, asked by UEFA spokesman **William Gaillard**:

We cannot accept when everyone starts using national, religious, or political holidays as an argument for rescheduling matches. Every club which takes part in the competition of the Champions League knows the dates one year in advance. So now the people in Israel have to decide between synagogue and football. (Ronen-Abels, "**UEFA to Maccabi Tel Aviv: Either Synagogue or Soccer**," *The Jerusalem Post*, 2 September)

In the end, Maccabi Tel Aviv vice-president **Eli Driks** did not appear overly upset by the outcome, or at least by the implications for religious observance. While pointing out that Israeli teams regularly play on the sabbath, he nevertheless lamented the increased costs for security and stewards that a holiday match would entail. (Yet see reports of the side's supposed reliance on Rabbi **Shlomo Ifergan**, "the X-ray"; **Asher Goldberg**, "**When in Doubt, Ask Rabbi X-Ray**," *Ha'aretz*, 22 July.) For Bayern's part, CEO **Karl-Heinz Rummenigge** supported the move to an earlier date. "From what I was told," Rummenigge said, "the stadium will be sold out, but if we would have had to host a match on Christmas Eve, I am certain we wouldn't have been able to fill up our stadium." Bayern president **Franz Beckenbauer** suggested the side visit the **Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial**, although the trip was ruled out due to time constraints. The Germans could not remain untainted, however, as questions arose over the absence of striker **Vahid Hashemian** of Iran. *Ha'aretz* said Hashemian would not make the trip due to "a supposed injury" ("**Mac TA Confident as Injury and Politics Plague Bayern**," 14 September), implying that the real reason was the Iranian ban on citizens traveling to Israel. An Iranian judoka had refused to compete against an Israeli in the Athens Olympics.

As we consider the meanings of the sometimes inscrutable teacher from Galilee, to continue the thought above—"The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27)—perhaps the holiday's more savory dish involves Galilee's own Bnei Sakhnin (see [18 May gleanings](#) entry). The Sakhninites tomorrow continue their long-shot UEFA Cup bid with a third-round match against Newcastle United on Tyneside. In doing so, they are proving an object lesson in Arab-Israeli coexistence—the team is a multicultural blend of Jews and Arab citizens of Israel, with several from other nations—while also serving as a reminder of lamentable living conditions in some Arab communities. In order to get to the Sakhnin training ground, writes one correspondent, one moves "along a rutted dirt track, past a fetid sewage lake and an overflowing rubbish dump laden with the carcasses of dogs" (**Robert Tait**, "[From across the Divide, a United Team Offers Hope for the Middle East](#)," *The Independent* [U.K.]). The sobering assessment of **Jafar Farah** of the [Mossawa Center](#) in Haifa: "The reality is that there is no co-existence in this state."