The State of Israel is first and foremost, a state of rescue and cure of masses of Jews, the cure of the body and the balancing of the soul. It is primarily about the healthy Jew, the Jew who senses ... a meaning to his life, the Jew who is liberated from the fear of discontinue, the Jew who is not on the verge of extinction.

MK Haim Ben-Asher, 1952. ¹

In a nation in arms and an army of labor, the desired bodies are those of soldiers and workers. People unfit for such national services are bound to be deemed marginal. And that is exactly the case in Israel.

Meira Weiss, The Chosen Body, 2002.²

I. Introduction

In recent decades, Zionism has encountered numerous critiques based on broad and diverse minority perspectives. These critiques note that while Zionism aspired to liberate all Jews from oppression, persecution, and marginalization as Jews, it was less committed to the liberation of other disempowered groups. As a political project Zionism sought to transform the Jewish collective into a productive nation and to turn the Jews into constructive individuals.³ This political vision demanded a new Jew—one who was
masculine, strong, physically fit, and could perform the collective tasks of Zionism. Feminist, queer, Mizrahi, and post-colonial critiques revealed that Zionism has largely maintained traditional power structures professing a certain body politics that stigmatizes those who did not meet the ideal of the new Jew—i.e., a male-heterosexual-healthy-Ashkenazi-Jew. Within this discourse the disability critique has not fully come to light.

This article introduces disability as an important, yet largely neglected, perspective through which to examine Zionist ideology and practice. It analyzes the meaning of disability in Zionist thought and its ramifications on Israeli disability policy and public discourse. In the last two decades, disability has become a powerful category of analysis and an intriguing venue to examine social biases and unstated assumptions. The emergence of the disability rights movement and the rise of disability studies as a field of academic research has led to the realization that there is "another 'other'" to consider, another silenced voice to listen to, and an additional critical perspective through which to examine social, cultural, and political structures. Like all critical perspectives, it is an interdisciplinary field with analytical tools that are utilized in, and connected to, diverse fields of research including: the humanities, social sciences, health professions, law, and bioethics.

This paper shows that Zionism’s strong emphasis on health, fitness, and bodily strength makes disability extremely relevant to the study of Zionism. The disability critique views the Zionist understanding of disability as a concrete manifestation of bodily related ideologies that emerged in the nineteenth century and became dominant during the first half of the twenty-first century. It was both a product of global trends and a result of local forces. This perspective not only sheds light on arrangements and
practices related to disabled people. It also exposes deeper power structures that have affected all marginalized groups and have shaped Zionists’ understanding of general issues, such as productivity, citizenship, immigration, and social responsibility; these views continue to inform practices today.

Specifically, this article interrogates the relationships between two potent disability-related systems of power in Israeli-Zionist public imagery: The first is based on the meta-power hierarchy that exists between disabled and non-disabled people; and the second is grounded in the internal hierarchy among disabled people, specifically among disabled veterans, work-injured, and the general population of disabled people. I argue that the internal hierarchy does not contradict the meta-hierarchy, but rather participates in its formation. It contributes to the overall exclusion and marginalization of all disabled people, including those who seemingly benefit from their relatively privileged status.

In the first part of this article I focus on the meta-power hierarchy existing between disabled and non-disabled people in Zionism’s body politics. I argue that by attempting to “cure” Jews from being “ill” and “deformed,” Zionism essentially adopted and internalized these stereotypes, thereby reinforcing the ableist power structure on which they were based. To illustrate this argument I present studies of selective Zionist immigration policies during the pre-state era and in Israel’s first decade. In the second part, I study the origins and manifestations of the internal hierarchy among disabled people, arguing that two sets of values—labor and productivity, on the one hand, and defense and security on the other hand—played a crucial role in shaping and constituting the meaning of disability in Israel. I show a relationship between the prestige of these values and the relative privileged status of disabled veterans and work-related-injured
who enjoyed better benefits schemes than the general population of disabled people. Finally, I contend that the clear hierarchy among the various groups of disabled people has contributed to their overall subordination and exclusion from Zionist imagery and inhibited the creation of a shared collective consciousness among all disabled people.

II. Ableism and the Aesthetics of the Zionist Body

_The promised land [is] where we could have an ugly nose, a black or red beard, and a crippled leg without being laughed at. ... [W]here we could have dignity ... and live in peace with all nations._

_T.Z. Herzl[^9]

This quotation from the personal diary of Theodor (Binyamin) Ze’ev Herzl, widely known as the visionary of the Jewish state, is unfortunately a marginal and rare depiction of the Zionist project. It envisions a land where all Jews “can be themselves;”[^10] a vision of inclusion and egalitarianism that is based on difference rather than sameness, and most importantly—of acceptance and recognition of disability as an integral part of social and political life. It celebrates the Jews' weaknesses, their “crippled” state, and the negative stereotypes from which they suffered. While this vision could be viewed as an expression of disability pride[^11] it was eventually rejected, if ever suggested seriously. Herzl himself eventually became occupied with Jewish honor and pride and with “overcoming” those same anti-Semitic stereotypes; enamored with concepts of Jewish masculinity and heroism.[^12] The following analysis of the place of disability in Zionism's political vision provides a broader context for my interpretation of Herzl's neglected statement.

A. Zionism—A Collectivist Project
Zionism—a revolutionary 19th century movement—aspired to “normalize” the Jewish people by transforming it into a nation with a territory and a homeland of its own. As a product of its era, it was shaped by various, sometimes conflicting, influences. According to Yaron Ezrahi, the three major components of the Zionist-Israeli collectivist ethos were nationalism, socialism and Judaism. Primarily a national movement, its particular nature was shaped by socialism and Judaism. Socialism was mostly influential during the pre-state era and in Israel’s early decades, as evidenced in Labor Zionism, the most dominant Zionist strand until the mid 1970s. However, throughout the years, socialism’s prominence has declined and was replaced by neoliberal ideas and a growing Judaic-particularistic sentiment. Zionism’s early relations with Judaism were quite complex. It was clearly a product of cultural revival and reconstruction of the Jewish identity and tradition, but it was motivated by the negation of exile and a rejection of religious Jewish life in nineteenth century Europe. With time, religious strands within Zionism grew dominant and religious ideas became central in Israeli public discourse and politics.

This unique blend of collectivist ideas left little room for individualism or liberal concepts. Zionism advocated personal reform through collective liberation: once liberated from his exilic condition, each person would become the subject of the collectivist project and the bearer of the collective’s tasks. At first, labor and settlement were the primary means to establish the modern link between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel, and the use of force was considered a matter of last resort. With time, the emphasis on security and militarism increased, and the belief in a peaceful resolution to
the struggle over the land lost its hold. Achieving these tasks and missions required inventing a new Jew, one who could turn Zionist ideology into practical reality.

B. The New Jew, the Pioneer and the Sabra

The Zionist revolution was to a large extent a bodily revolution: Its ambition was to reform the Jewish body, to re-invent it, and to make it a vital part of Jewish identity and pride. As Meira Weiss suggested, it was “a revolutionary attempt to re-embody the Jew.” Zionism’s political vision of collective renewal entailed an underlying body politics that was embodied in the image of the “new Jew.” The new Jew was distinct from the “old Jew,” the spiritual, soft, and crippled image of the exilic Jew that was ironically grounded in anti-Semitic stereotypes. Specifically, the old Jew was typically portrayed as lacking courage, dignity, integrity, physical fitness, and aesthetics; his body was portrayed as light-skinned, weak, ill, fragile, and unattractive. In contrast, the ideal image of the new Jew represented a motivated person who controls his destiny and actively carves a place in history for himself; is worldly, lives in harmony with nature, and cultivates the land; and is civilized and possesses honor, integrity, and confidence.

The pioneer (the halutz) and the Sabra (the tzabar) are two tangible figures who illustrate the transformation of the new Jew and exemplify Zionism’s occupation with the Jewish body. The pioneer was primarily a pre-state icon that represented the transformation from exile to liberty. He combined Zionist ideology and practice by immigrating to Israel and making Zionist ideology a reality. The pioneer was depicted as a young person, who left all behind and immigrated to Palestine to fulfill the Zionist missions of labor, defense, and settlement by bare-handedly building the country,
cultivating its soil, paving its roads, and defending its inhabitants and land when necessary.\textsuperscript{26}

The Sabra was an icon of the nation-building era, the first generation of native-born, a natural worker and fighter who was strongly and authentically connected to the land.\textsuperscript{27} The image of the Sabra was of a practical, worldly person, very direct in personal interaction, simple in dress, with strong physical attributes.\textsuperscript{28} The body of the Sabra was idolized as masculine, healthy, physically fit, young, beautiful, and attractive, often portrayed as thin, tall, athletic, and suntanned.\textsuperscript{29}

The physical rehabilitation of the Jew was perceived as interrelated to the moral and political one. Max Nordau, who coined the term “Jewry of Muscles,” maintained that: “[G]ymnastics and physical training …. will give us self-confidence and self-respect.”\textsuperscript{30} Various Zionist activities were connected to physical fitness, from the establishment of Jewish sports associations,\textsuperscript{31} to an educational emphasis on physical training, demanding fieldtrips, and developing scouting and camping skills of native-born Sabras.\textsuperscript{32} The rejection of the exilic Jew as weak, fearful, and submissive is most vividly illustrated in the condemnation of the Jews in the Holocaust for not forcefully resisting the Nazi regime. Negation of exile was understood, particularly by native-born Sabras, not only as negation of the Jewish existence in exile, but negation of the exilic Jew.\textsuperscript{33}

C. Exclusion and Difference

The Zionist project of renewal had additional consequences. Recent post-colonial, Mizrachi, feminist, and queer critiques of Zionism and of Israeli citizenship re-read the images of the new Jew, the Pioneer and the Sabra, as cultural texts, showing that while
previously portrayed as abstract and genderless figures, these images were in fact exclusionary fictions that continue to inform contemporary Israeli politics. The “Zionist idealization of health, power, and perfection,” generated an ideology of “the chosen body” and affected all groups that did not fit this ideal.

Most obviously, the ultimate Others were the native inhabitants of the Land of Israel/Palestine. Palestinian-Arabs could not share the Zionist vision, in which the Land of Israel was assumed to be “a land without a people for a people without a land” and whose goal was “conquering the wilderness.” Interestingly, the image of the local Arab was treated with ambivalence—admired for being a skillful worker and a fierce defender of the land, but at the same time negatively portrayed as savage, barbaric, and primitive.

However, Zionism excluded Jews themselves. Mizrahi Jews (from Arab and North African countries) were treated by the Zionist establishment with arrogance as primitive people who needed to be educated and civilized. The Sabra’s body was conceptualized as a white Euro-Christian figure, modeled according to features of Soviet propaganda posters or Greek sculptures, and influenced by the Aryan ideal of perfect body.

Similarly, the “chosen body” was a gendered body—specifically, a heterosexual male body, with no perceived feminine or homosexual characteristics that were negatively attributed to the old exilic Jew. These attributes were based on negative anti-Semitic stereotypes that ridiculed Jewish maleness as inherently and pathologically deformed. The primary challenge for the feminist critique was the widespread portrayal and assumption of Zionism as an egalitarian movement in which women were an integral part, as workers, soldiers, leaders, and equal voters. In reality, women’s status was more
Studies show that women were expected either to perform the traditional role of caring for men and children or to adopt the demanding masculine characteristics that the new Jew’s image posed. While women were expected to reject typical feminine conventions such as characteristic dress, make-up, and body language, the primary national task of the female body was still giving birth and raising the next generation of native-born Israelis. In fact, women had to fight to take part in national tasks, and their hard-won struggles involved difficult compromises.

The queer critique of Zionism faced different challenges. Since lesbian women and gay men were never a part of Zionist collective imagery, these scholars turned to examine the deep cultural assumptions and social conditions that underlay the exclusionary dimensions of the Zionist vision, especially with regard to gay men. Their studies contributed substantially to a critical understanding of the Zionist imagery and its underlying body politics. Thus, Daniel Boyarin argues that Judaism’s gender structure was once a site of “oppositional resistance” to the dominant European culture, showing that the Talmudic culture in the pre-modern era idealized men who were marked by “scholarliness, quietism, modesty, and a spiritual aptitude.” According to Boyarin this perception changed when Jewish leadership adopted the “anti-Semitic image” and accepted popular views that associated the Jew with femininity and homosexuality. Modern leadership responded by endorsing assimilation or commitment to Zionism—two seemingly contradictory solutions, yet both essentially based upon accepting those stereotypes and working to eradicate them by transforming the Jew into a masculine, healthy, and "normal" male.
D. Ableism and the Zionist Body

The claim that an essential aspect of the Zionist project was the liberation of the Jew from his perceived femininity is by now a well-researched and substantiated claim. Yet, much less attention has been given to the more substantial implication of that aspiration: liberation of the Jew from his alleged physical and mental pathologies, from his perceived inherent condition as a disabled person. A plain reading of Zionist texts and their feminist and queer critiques reveals an open and explicit rejection of, and even repulsion toward, the sick and disabled body.

Zionism’s view of the body was situated in a growing scientific discourse that evolved during the nineteenth century and which expressed itself in the medicalization of the human body. Sander Gilman’s work shows how Jews, like other social groups, were racialized through a scientific depiction of their body as impaired and damaged. Jews were commonly portrayed as ugly, long-nosed, hunchbacked, dirty, dark haired and skinned, and physically disproportionate. Physical imperfection was also tied to the practice of infant circumcision, which rendered male Jews different by “objective” medical standards. Jews were perceived as having mental illnesses too, including sexual pathologies and "nervous illnesses" of all types, particularly hysteria, then considered a typical female mental illness. Gilman found that additional diseases historically attributed to Jews included leprosy, tuberculosis, cancer, syphilis, alcoholism, homosexuality, drug-addiction, and—“Jewishness.”

Nineteenth century's scientific and medicalized discourse gave rise to diverse yet interrelated phenomena: the rise of scientific anti-Semitism and the emergence of Zionism, the pathologization and medicalization of homosexuality and the invention of
heterosexuality, the dehumanization of disabled people and the emergence of disability as a distinct category. These phenomena were connected, not only by the similar mechanisms that shaped them, but also through the ways they constituted each other.\textsuperscript{53} The Jew, the queer, the woman, and the disabled were all inferior categories that were used as interchangeable labels to denigrate members of these social groups.

Nevertheless, the role of disability in that web of interchangeable labels was not fully explored until recently. While negative portrayals of most categories were perceived as unjustified, the demeaning view of disability was generally understood as reasonable and sound. Contemporary disability scholarship is dedicated to exposing the social and cultural construction of disability and to turning disability from a fixed and neutral medical concept into a contingent and contested social category.\textsuperscript{54} Moreover, as Douglas Baynton’s work has taught us, underlying the social perception of the Jew, the queer, the woman, and the ethnic as inferior, were bodily images and cultural metaphors that were grounded in stigmatic views of disability and illness.\textsuperscript{55} Disability, according to Baynton, serves not only as a reason to discriminate against disabled and sick people but also as a justification for the exclusion and discrimination that other groups experienced in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe.

I argue that Baynton's argument is particularly relevant in the understanding of Zionism as well. When Zionist thinkers were faced with prejudice and shame generated by ableism and healthism, their reaction was to distance Jews from those very images and stereotypes.\textsuperscript{56} The result was, therefore, not an overall rejection of those stereotypes, but rather the redirection of this language against those Jews who did not meet that ideal,
including women, elderly, gay men, and Mizrahi Jews, but the eventual result was the
reinforcement of the view of disability as the ultimate inferiority.

Healthism and ableism, I argue, were inseparable parts of the Zionist project and
disabled people were, thus, destined to be outcast from the Zionist imagery. Disabled
people were perceived as being too sick, too deformed, too weak, and too dependent to
be part of the Zionist vision. Disability in fact, represented all that Zionism wished to
disassociate with the new Jew. It is not only that disabled people could not take part in
Zionist missions and goals; more importantly, disability functioned as a central metaphor
for Jewish existence in exile. In other words: "Handicap [was] a reminder of the Jew’s
“crippled” condition in pre-Israel times."^57

This is the reason I find Herzl’s neglected vision of Zionism so telling. The
fantasy of having “a crippled leg without being laughed at,"^58 offers an alternative
understanding of disability specifically and of "difference" more broadly. It suggests a
political vision in which “a place of our own” is a place of dignity for “who one is,” and
not where one is transformed to meet others’ expectations. The adoption of such a vision
could have constituted an inclusive and truly egalitarian Zionist project.

E. Ableism in Practice: Discriminatory Immigration Policy

Zionism’s views of disability as a burden and a contradiction to the Zionist
project were most vividly demonstrated in policies related to Aliyah (immigration of
Jews to Israel). As certain recent studies have shown, ableism was not only an underlying
assumption or a rhetorical tool, but also a practical position and a powerful consideration
in policymaking processes.
One study establishes that during the pre-state era an exclusionary immigration policy that "favored quality over quantity" prevented immigration of those who were diagnosed by Jewish physicians in their European countries of origin as mentally ill. People with mental disabilities were viewed as a burden because they were perceived as unfit for productive work; they, therefore, were unqualified for immigration permits. By the end of the 1930s, hundreds of immigrants were expelled to their countries of origin, one third were diagnosed with “nervous” or mental illness.

Another study shows that even after the establishment of the State of Israel and the enactment of the Law of Return in 1950, Israel adopted a selective immigration policy that was based on health and disability-related criteria. While those selective criteria were mainly implemented in Morocco and Tunisia, the language used by Zionist leaders to justify selection in those countries presented a mix of ableism and orientalism in which disability functioned as both a justification and a metaphor to restrict Aliyah from those countries. The study cites Eliezer Livneh, an Israeli parliament member, who in 1952 expressed the following view in a local newspaper: “We should not allow in any way a reverse selection: that the healthy, the young, the skilled, and the well-off would remain in their communities of exile and the retarded, backward, and uncivilized would be brought to Israel. This would be the complete distortion of Zionism.”

Both studies demonstrate how disability operated as a fundamental organizing principle of the Aliyah enterprise and as justification to exclude some groups from this enterprise. To be sure, such screening policies were implemented in other countries at that time, as well as by the British regime in Palestine. However, since Aliyah was the highest command of Zionism, the understanding that disabled people cannot take part in
it or were considered of lesser value as Olim (Jewish immigrants) calls for further elaboration. Clearly, the reasons for this screening were partly rooted in the economic situation of the era and the practical preference for individuals who could participate in the most pressing national tasks of labor and settlement. But unlike other countries, the Land of Israel was not merely a new destination for immigration but rather a historical homeland to which to return. Moreover, the Zionist ethos of return and the idea of "ingathering of exiles" seemed to send a universal message that any Jew is a desirable immigrant. Finally, Zionist policymakers’ intolerance towards disability- and illness-based stereotypes was ironic since those were the stereotypes that they faced and sought to eradicate. Ultimately, I argue, Zionist selective immigration policy both reflected and constituted a hierarchy of values and bodies in which disability was the underlying badge of inferiority.

III. Disability in the Service of the Collective

While disability was in many ways antithetical to the Zionist vision of renewal and the image of the new Jew, close scrutiny of the Zionist ideology and practice reveals that not all disabilities were treated equally. While most disabled people were indeed devalued, some disabled people had a place of worth in the Zionist imagery because their disablement was a product of serving the Zionist goals of security and labor. Specifically, I argue that underneath the meta-power structure that differentiates between the disabled and the nondisabled, were internal hierarchies that distinguished between the valued and devalued disabled people.
The underlying infrastructure of the hierarchies among disabled people in Israeli society is rooted in a body politics that was infused by two sets of values: labor and productivity, on the one hand, and defense, security, and militarism, on the other. The following examines the evolution of each set of values and the changing dynamics between them, showing that persons who became disabled while participating in fulfilling those missions were still valued members of society, and that along the years an additional division emerged between the more valued disabled soldiers and less valued, although not totally devalued, disabled workers. This division corresponded to the ideological shift that Zionism witnessed with the decline of labor and the rise of security and militarism. The bodily manifestation of this shift was the surpassing of the naïve image of the worker by the heroic figure of the soldier. The result was a three layer hierarchy among disabled soldiers, disabled workers, and the general population of disabled people, which was later formalized and institutionalized in Israel’s system of welfare benefits.

A. Productivity and Labor

We are a parasitic people. We have no roots in the soil; there is no ground beneath our feet.\(^68\)

From now on, our primary ideal should be – labor. We have been impaired by labor … and by labor we will be cured. We should make labor the center of all our aspirations; the foundation of all our creations. If we’d only realized the ideal of labor – we could be cured from the affliction we were contaminated with, we could heal our rapture from nature.\(^69\)

A.D. Gordon.
a. **Zionism in Early Decades**

Productivity and labor were highly esteemed values in the Zionist movement and until the 1970s remained dominant in Israeli society. As A.D. Gordon’s words demonstrate, labor was meant to cure the “parasitic” nature of the Jew. Using images of impairment and healing, Gordon idealized productivization of the Jew through labor as the only way to turn him into an earthly and authentic person.

The connection between productivity and labor was rooted in concepts from eighteenth and nineteenth century Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskala*). Inspired by European Enlightenment, *Haskala* was an intellectual movement that promoted secularization of Jews, their assimilation, and productivization through physical labor and engagement in worldly professions such as agriculture, crafts, arts, and science. The meaning of productivity was shaped by enlightenment ideas of citizenship and by intellectual responses to anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews as “parasites.”

Zionist thought was influenced by these ideas, but added to productivity a collectivist meaning of nation building. Productivity was connected to ideas of self-sufficiency and self-reliance of Jews as a people, and to personal reform that would allow individuals to become useful members of society. For early Zionism, labor became a central value that established the contemporary link between the reviving Jewish nation and its historical land. The belief was that only sweat and labor invested in the land would provide justification for its rightful defense. In David Ben-Gurion words:

> At the center of the realization (*hagshamah*) of Zionism, at the center of the building of the land, at the center of settlement and *Aliyah*, at the center of redemption and resurgence (*tkumah*)—we see labor. Labor is the breath of the *Yishuv* and the Zionist enterprise; Hebraic labor is the glue between the nation
and the land, the covenant of life and future that we re-endorse with the land of our past. Labor is the only guarantee to our integration and groundedness in the land from which we were disconnected for thousands of years.\textsuperscript{76}

The meaning of labor, as a Zionist value, was derived both from socialist and nationalist worldviews. From a socialist perspective, manual labor was the number one productive power.\textsuperscript{77} For Labor Zionism, which was inspired by socialist ideas,\textsuperscript{78} the meaning of labor was also tied to a broader socialist worldview that aspired to form a just and egalitarian society with a broad-based working class, central economy, and solidarity and mutual aid among workers.\textsuperscript{79}

For almost all strands of Zionism, physical labor—or more particularly, cultivation of the land—was a venue to promote the relationship between the nation and its land and a means of curing the Jewish people from the ills of unproductive life.\textsuperscript{80} This understanding of labor was also tightly connected to romantic nationalism that traditionally praised the return to nature and the simplicity and authenticity of village life.\textsuperscript{81} In conclusion, in early Zionism labor was the primary means to conquer the Land of Israel\textsuperscript{82} and a broad-based Jewish working class was considered necessary for the creation of an independent Jewish society.\textsuperscript{83}

In those years, the worker (\textit{haPoe’l}) became the subject of the national revival project.\textsuperscript{84} The “Hebraic worker” epitomized the pioneering ideology and symbolized the transition to the purest type of productivity.\textsuperscript{85} Labor, then, became the mutual interest that united the Zionist movement in its first decades. Yet, the underlying relevant interest was productivity, which connected non-socialist circles to the ideal of labor and resulted in wide support for the labor movement.\textsuperscript{86}
With the generational shift, from pioneers to Sabras, the relation to labor changed. While the pioneers adjusted to manual labor with great effort and out of ideological commitment, Sabras were natural-born farmers whose love for nature and labor was immediate and authentic.87

In this world, which worshiped and adored productivity and labor, there was little room for disability, which seemed to contradict the language and images employed by most Zionist thinkers. The effort to cure the Jews from their "parasitic nature" and the belief in hard physical work as the ultimate "cure," showed little tolerance for individuals who could not live up to this ideal and were perceived as ill and dependent. In Zionism’s early decades, labor represented the ideal of physical and mental health while disability represented the pathologized conditions of the Diaspora Jew.

b. Compensating Disabled Workers

Early state welfare policy illustrated the hierarchies existing among disabled people in Zionist ethos. During the pre-state era and in Israel’s early years disabled workers enjoyed better treatment than most disabled people. I argue that the social value attached to their status as workers allowed this group to transcend that wall of bodily (im)perfection.

During the pre-state era the majority of disabled people lived in poverty and depended on private charities for support. Still, among them, disabled workers enjoyed a relatively better system enforcing social responsibility.88 This system was comprised of two major mechanisms that were promoted by the Histadrut (The Union Federation of Labor), an organ of the labor movement and the largest labor union in Mandatory
Palestine. The Histadrut lobbied before the British authorities to enact the Workers’ Compensation Ordinance, 1927, and established its own “Handicap Fund” (Keren Nechut) in 1929.\textsuperscript{89}

The Workers’ Compensation Ordinance was one of the very few Mandate era welfare-oriented laws and the only law addressing the needs of disabled people. The Ordinance assumed employer responsibility even in the absence of proved negligence.\textsuperscript{90} Yet it covered only a narrow list of dangerous vocations, provided very basic compensation, and most importantly, while it obliged employers to compensate an injured worker, it failed to compel them to privately insure their workers.

The Histadrut Handicap Fund, designated for workers who remained disabled following an injury, had ambitious goals but lacked resources. It provided limited assistance—twelve to eighteen months only—and payments were usually transferred directly to service providers. Still, the Fund provided services to any worker who paid membership dues, whether the circumstances of the injury were work-related or not.\textsuperscript{91} Although both mechanisms were inadequate, their initiation exhibited a growing awareness of work injury as a preferred category of disability benefits.

In 1954 following the creation of the State of Israel, a general social security mechanism was created and a new work-injury program was established.\textsuperscript{92} It was considered the flagship program of the new National Insurance Law (NIL) and provided an advanced and comprehensive scheme of disability insurance, including both allowances and social services.\textsuperscript{93} The basic allowance was relatively generous, calculated as seventy-five percent of a previous salary and multiplied by the degree of individual disability.\textsuperscript{94} Services included medical treatment, and work related rehabilitation and
vocational training. The program’s main pitfall was its failure to cover non-work related injuries.\textsuperscript{95} Although progressive as a civil-oriented scheme of social insurance, it was less generous than the disabled veteran program that was already enacted at that time.\textsuperscript{96}

In contrast, the interests of the general population of disabled people were easily compromised during the enactment of the NIL. Although early social security proposals included a section dedicated to general disability insurance, these proposals were later abandoned without much deliberation.\textsuperscript{97} Even the Histadrut, which advocated the establishment of such a program before the British regime, did not find it a worthy cause.\textsuperscript{98} The majority of disabled people could benefit only from a discretionary and minimal public assistance program (\textit{Sa’ad}).\textsuperscript{99} Only in 1974 was a general disability insurance program enacted, but it was still insufficient as it was based on need, instead of insurance, and provided little economic security to its recipients.\textsuperscript{100}

In sum, a clear correlation emerged between the hierarchies of de/valued and un/worthy bodies and the differentiated system of disability benefits. It began during the pre-state era and was institutionalized during the first decades of Israel. For those whose bodies represented the Zionist ideals and were able to serve these national tasks, there was a place of value and worth in the public imagery even if they were injured. This, I further suggest, was not \textit{despite} their disability, but \textit{due} to their disability. The framing of disability within the context of work-related injuries was, therefore, not a mere tragedy; rather, it was understood as a \textit{sacrifice}, an event that showed one’s ultimate commitment to the ideal of national and personal reform through productivity and labor.
B. Defense, Security, and Militarism

Along with productivity and labor, another set of esteemed Zionist ideological and practical values was defense and security. As the following shows, during the pioneering era a defensive ethos was dominant, but later on a more proactive approach to power evolved. Similarly, while in the beginning defense and labor were equal in worth, over the years security and militarism became dominant and the fierce image of the fighter eventually replaced the naïve figure of the worker.

a. The Rise of Power within Zionism

Similar to productivity and labor, the esteemed status held by defense in early Zionism was connected to the interrelated projects of nation-building and personal reform.\(^{101}\) Zionism was a reaction to persecution and anti-Semitism that the Jews had faced in European countries.\(^{102}\) Consequently, State dreams for the Jewish people meant a place where Jews as a people and as individuals would feel safe and secure and would be able to defend themselves, their dignity, and pride.\(^{103}\)

Although Jewish heroism and power were integral parts of the Zionist project from its early days, it took time for these ideas to become dominant.\(^{104}\) At first, the labor movement dictated the tone, stressing that the Land of Israel/Palestine should be conquered through non-militaristic actions, such as Aliyah, settlement, legal purchases of the land, and political negotiations with the British regime.\(^{105}\) Jewish settlements were defended by local brigades and settlers themselves.\(^{106}\) Those killed in violent encounters were depicted as workers who died while defending their land and harvest. According to the defense ethos, fighting was not a goal, but rather a necessity forced upon the
settlers. This ethos entailed a self-image of Zionist settlers as “persons of labor and peace” whose aim was to defend Jewish land and pride, but not to fight.

Research shows that as of the 1920s, Zionism's view of power was transformed from a reactive-defensive version to a more proactive-offensive mode. Several developments contributed to that change, among them, the rising violence in Palestine and the impact of the Holocaust and World War II. According to Shapira, the 1930s-1950s brought the rise of the offensive ethos. Ben-Eliezer makes a stronger claim, arguing that “in the years 1936-1956 the military-based solution to the Arab-Jewish conflict increasingly became a value, a method, an ideology.”

The changing patterns of primacy among Zionism’s collectivist values were also reflected in Zionism’s popular images and icons, as the image of the new Jew shifted from one of a peaceful settler to that of a “worker-fighter.” The ideal settler was equally ready to work and to fight. His image was vividly described by Yitzhak Tabenkin, a prominent educator in the Labor Movement, as “a person with a shovel in his hand and a rifle on his shoulder.” Similarly, those years witnessed the rise of the Sabra and the decline of the pioneer. While the pioneer persona represented peaceful efforts to conquering the land though labor, the Sabra manifested a natural and obvious connection to the land and was admired for being fierce and courageous.

The shift in Zionism's collectivist values was completed after the 1948 War of Independence: Although labor and productivity remained influential, defense and security seemed to prevail. According to Shapira, the War was justified both by the defensive and the offensive ethos, as evidenced in the “no-alternative” rhetoric which served to both condemn and legitimize the war. Ben-Eliezer claims that after the War,
militarism turned from an ideology—which was employed by exclusive elite groups—to a general project of the entire Jewish society.\textsuperscript{117} In any event, by the end of the War, the fighter’s image triumphed and the worker was pushed aside. Now it was the fighter who created a common ground, admired by most sections of society.\textsuperscript{118}

The founding of the State of Israel also marked the turning of the army, the newly established IDF, into a dominant institution in Israeli society. The army’s dominance resulted not only from the continued conflict between Israel and its neighboring countries, but also from its growing role in advancing civil tasks, including social integration, immigration absorption, settlement, and instilling good citizenship and love of the country among the young generation and new arrivals.\textsuperscript{119}

If the 1930s marked the shift from labor to defense, the 1940s-1950s marked an additional shift from defense to security and militarism. What might seem to be mere semantics, was an expression of a much deeper changes: a shift towards the view that the goals of the Zionist movement were to be achieved by force. Eventually, security became a sweeping concept in Israeli public discourse; civil goals and missions such as immigration, settlement, economic independence, and science were often framed as security matters.\textsuperscript{120}

I maintain that these processes also have impacted upon the status of disability in Israeli-Zionist public imagery. The change in emphasis from labor as a civil vision to power as a militaristic solution exacerbated the conditions that supported their exclusion. Zionist body politics rejected the disabled body by explicitly aspiring to recreate the Jew as masculine, healthy, and powerful, and implicitly redeeming the Jewish body from his perceived condition as imperfect and even deformed. If the naïve and romantic image of
the worker was inaccessible to disabled people, then the fierce, courageous, and heroic image of the soldier was fully blocked before them.

b. Privileging Disabled Veterans

The changing place of the military and the rising proactive power-based approach in Zionism were also reflected in the dynamics of early welfare policies regarding disabled veterans. During the pre-state era there was no centralized army, but rather several voluntary underground military organizations who fought against the Arabs who lived in Palestine and the British regime. The actual benefits that disabled veterans received are remarkably under-researched. According to one source, some programs were established by the representative bodies of the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine and were partially supported by the British Mandate.121 These programs were limited in their resources, informal in their structure, and constituted an unofficial policy.122

When the State of Israel was founded and a centralized army was established, the state took full responsibility for the needs and interests of disabled veterans and provided generous benefits to those who were wounded in war.123 The Invalids (Benefits and Rehabilitation) Law, 1949,124 was the first welfare law that the state enacted and the first law that addressed the needs of disabled people. Despite its seemingly inclusive title, the law provided benefits solely to those injured in the 1948 War. These benefits were later supplemented by additional services and financial support that were provided by Zahal (IDF) Disabled Veterans Organization (ZDVO), the official representative body of disabled veterans.125 The Law’s allowances and services were constantly expanded and
improved in the following years. Today, it is still considered the most generous welfare program in Israel.126

From early stages, the Invalids Law’s relative generosity was manifested on many levels and with time became all encompassing.127 Its definition of disability was the broadest, its eligibility criteria were the lowest, and its basic allowance was relatively high (based on a salary of a medium grade state employee). Once determined, the allowance was granted for life—whether the person worked or not, and if unemployed, additional supplementary allowances were available. Additional benefits included generous attendance and mobility allowances, grants for marriage and higher education expenses, housing allowance, and various social, medical, and rehabilitation services.

Additionally, IDF disabled veterans, commonly called Nechei Zahal, occupy a unique status in Israeli national ethos. Despite their impairments and imperfections, their bodies were not just valued, but often glorified and heralded for carrying the marks of war. The heroism they represented transcended the perceived inferiority of their “deformed” body.128 In 1998, when Israel celebrated fifty years of independence, the ZDVO published a special album in which contemporary leaders expressed their appreciation to IDF disabled veterans. Then President Weizman said: “Nechei Zahal carry in their bodies and souls the traces of this struggle which unfortunately has not ended yet.”129 Prime Minister Netanyahu said: “You carry in your bodies and souls the marks of [the] persistent struggle of our people.”130 The Minister of Defense said: “I am filled with appreciation for your persistence capacity, your sternness, your heroism, and especially your contribution to Israeli society as a unique and virtuous group, despite facing injury and rehabilitation.”131 In these statements the meaning of disability
surpasses the mark of inferiority and tragedy and becomes the symbol of heroism and glory, a badge that people who were born disabled or who were injured in prosaic circumstances will never be able to share.

In conclusion, it was during Israel’s first decade that today's hierarchies of disability benefits were crystallized and formalized. While the program for the work-injured was progressive and mollifying in comparison to the benefits received by the general population of disabled people, the IDF disabled veterans’ program was far more generous and enjoyed even greater political and social support. The differences in societies views of various groups of disabled people—the worthy and the unworthy, the needed and the needy—informed the structure of benefits that each received. Moreover, the overall differential structure of benefits maintained and reinforced the existing social hierarchy.

As this article shows, this clear hierarchy of benefits correlates with a parallel scale of bodies (soldiers, workers, and the generally disabled) which further corresponds to the preferred sets of values in Zionist ethos (security, labor, and productivity). The priorities among these values have changed through time and eventually defense and security were prioritized over labor and productivity was preferred over dependency. The meaning of disability was, therefore, shaped by the person's social status while incurring the injury and the values that were attached to the circumstances of the injury. It was then further reinforced and formalization through the establishment of a hierarchy of welfare benefits.

My suggestion is that Israeli society assumed responsibility only over some disabled people and only under certain circumstances, precisely because, as part of the
general idealization of bodily perfection, becoming a disabled person was perceived as becoming imperfect. It was a “crippling” event that threatened to transform not only the person’s body, but also his or her social position and value as a person. In response, society valorized those persons who were injured during “sacred,” “worthy,” or “admirable” activities, thereby elevating them above those who are “truly” imperfect, defected, or abnormal. The Zionist project of nation-building involved an inherent tension: the attractive images of the new Jew as the worker-fighter and the rising ethos of security and militarism and their exclusionary implications stood in contrast to the compelling and seemingly egalitarian Zionist vision of return and ingathering of exiles.

IV. Conclusion

In this article I explore the manner Zionist ideology and values created an environment, conditions, and norms that reinforced and contributed to the marginalization and exclusion of disabled people in Israeli society. I show that the hierarchies of disability in Israeli history and their underlying body politics are relevant to the understanding of the marginal status of disabled people and the limited place for disability in Israel’s first decades. This complex history continues to inform today’s politics of disability benefits. Clearly, Israeli society has gone through fundamental changes, changes that are beyond the scope of this article. But the meta-structure of Israeli disability policy and its inner hierarchies remain the same.

In such an environment, the meaning of disability depends on the circumstances of injury. Under these conditions the possibility of developing a shared understanding of
the similarities in the experience of disability is suspended and opportunities for cooperation among disabled people are lost.

Eventually, the hierarchies of bodies and values which define and shape the meanings of disability in Israeli society contribute to the overall exclusion of all disabled people, privileged or not. This differentiated understanding of disability was constructed against the prevalent assumptions regarding disability as imperfection and inferiority only to distance the privileged and the needed from the unprivileged and the needy.

What lies beneath these hierarchies is the deeply rooted assumption that a disabled body is a defected, deformed and inferior body. Challenging this shared stigma requires that all disabled people acknowledge their own disability, i.e., recognize that all disabled people suffer from exclusion and subordination as disabled people. The hierarchy of bodies and values, which defines and shapes the meaning of disability in Israel, discourages such self-acknowledgement. Rather it upholds the negation of the social and political aspects of one’s disability and, thus, inhibits the emergence of a collective critical consciousness.

3 See Part II.A.
4 See Part II.B.
5 See Part II.C.


30 Max Nordau, Address to Second World Zionist Congress (Basle, Switzerland, 1898).


Kedar, “The Legal Transformation of Ethnic Geography,” 942. See also Shohat, *Israeli Cinema* (analyzing the place of the palestinian-Arabs in early Israeli cinema, especially in the movie *Sabra* (Tzabar, 1933)).

Shohat, *Idem*.


For two excellent collections on the subject, see Margalit Shilo Et al (eds), *Jewish Women in the Yishuv and Zionism: A Gender Perspective* (Jerusalem, 2001)[Hebrew], and Deborah S. Bernstein (eds), *Pioneers and Homemakers: Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel* (Albany, 1992).

Ariella Friedman, “On Feminism, Femininity, and Power of Women in Israel,” in Dafna N. Izraeli Et al. (eds), *Sex Gender Politics: Women in Israel* (Tel Aviv, 1999) 24-8; Deborah S. Bernstein, "Human Being or Housewife? The Status of Women in the Jewish Working Class Family in Palestine of the 1920s and 1930s," in *Pioneers and Homemakers*, 235.


*Ibid.*, 63-64.


See notes 6-8 and accompanying text.


Mor, “Tell my Sister”.

Eliezer Livne, May 15 1952, Beterem.


Sufian, “Mental Hygiene and Disability”; Mor, “Tell my Sister,” 4-5.

Mor, Ibid.; Sufian, Ibid.

A.D. Gordon, Some Reflection (1911) [Hebrew].

A.D. Gordon, On Labor (1913) [Hebrew].


Slutsky, Ibid., 33-48.

Ibid., 41-42.

Sternhell, Nation Building or a New Society, 83; Abraham Doron, "The Histadrut, Social Policy and Equality," in Yosef Gorny Et al (eds), The Histadrut From Workers Society to Trade Union (Be'er Sheva, 2000) 693, 695 [Hebrew].

Shapira, Land and Power, 146.


Anita Shapira, Visions in Conflict (Tel Aviv, 1989) 360 [Hebrew].
See notes 15-16 and accompanying text.


Almog, The Sabra, 254-56. See also Slutsky, The History Of The Zionist Movement, 168-72.

Sternhell, Nation Building or a New Society, 39; Shapira, Futile Struggle, 15.


Shapira, Sternhell’s Complaint, 310.

Sternhell, Nation Building or a New Society, 155.

Lev Luis Grinberg, The Histadrut Above All (Jerusalem, 1993) 20 at FN2 [Hebrew].

Slutsky, The History of the Zionist Movement, 41-42.


Izaak Kanevsky, Social Insurance in the Land of Israel: Its Achievements and Problems (Tel Aviv, 1942) 73, 112-13, 130 [Hebrew].


Kanevsky, Social Insurance in the Land of Israel, 71-3, 112-13, 130.


For the program for disabled veterans, see Part III.B.b.


Mor, Ibid., 88-89.


102 Shapira, *Land and Power*, supra note 9, at 19-23.


104 Ben Eliezer, *The Making of Israeli Militarism*.


Invalids (Pension and Rehabilitation) Law, 5709-1949, 3 L.S.I 119 (1949). In 1959 a consolidated version was published: Invalids (Pension and Rehabilitation) Law [Consolidated Version], 5719-1959, 13 L.S.I. 315 (1958-59) (hereinafter: the Invalids Law). The official translation of the law’s title is the Invalids Law, but the original term is equivalent to the Disabled Law or the Handicapped Law (Hok HaNechim).

Ralph M. Kramer, The Voluntary Service Agency in Israel (California, 1976) 85.


The following review of benefits is based on: Gal, ibid., 238-239; Mor, “Between Charity, Welfare, and Warfare,” Part IV.

Mor, Ibid., 118, 122.


Ibid., 2-3 (emphasis added).

Ibid. 3-4 (emphasis added)

Gal, The Perils of Compensation; Mor, “Between Charity, Welfare, and Warfare”.

I took this expression from: Gal and Bar, “The Needed and the Needy.”

Although the benefits that disabled veterans are entitled to today are still very generous, there is a growing criticism raised by disabled veterans against the state and the army’s rehabilitation authorities for their patronizing attitude, outdated approach to rehabilitation, and the reduced benefits that they receive. Another important development is the decline in the place of disabled veterans in Israeli national ethos.