

Kosher karate

By Herb Keinon

Jews love to synthesize. What is Ashkenazi cantorial music but liturgy in operatic guise? What is Yiddish, but a mixture of medieval German, local vernacular and Hebrew? And what is that great treasure of Jewish philosophy, Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, but a blend of Aristotelian philosophy and Judaism?

So no one should be too surprised to learn that there exists on God's green earth the Tora Dojo Martial Arts Association, an organization that attempts to blend Judaism with ju-jitsu, Tora with Tae Kwon Do, Kabbala with karate.

A picture of Rav Nahman of Bratslav wearing a gi and a black belt, not a *getel* (prayer belt), would seem an apt symbol of what Tora Dojo is trying to accomplish.

Haim Sober, 43, who founded the association some 22 years ago in New York, was in the capital this week holding a two-day seminar at Mevo Betar for Jerusalem students of his kosher karate.

A professor of Hebrew, biblical archeology and history at New York's Yeshiva University, Sober holds black belts in four martial arts disciplines. Some 10,000 Jews of all ages have already learned the martial arts, and absorbed some *yiddishkeit*, through classes organized by his association, he says.

In Jerusalem, his martial arts approach is taught at the Baka community centre. This class was started by some of Sober's former students who made aliya.

According to Sober, who has been involved in karate since he was 12, the classic Chinese and Japanese martial arts methods are made up of two parts.

There is the Bruce Lee aspect: the kicking, jumping, screaming, punching and flipping that is the fantasy of skinny, bespectacled kids the world over.

And then there is the thinking side, the philosophic and meditative aspect that Sober says is an integral part of the martial arts, but which the commercial karate academies around the world have adopted only as a poor relation.

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"We distil the philosophy and put it in a Jewish framework," Sober says, his head adorned by a black kippa emblazoned with the Chinese words, "The martial arts nourish me."

There is one martial arts academy in New York which takes its students to a Buddhist monastery for training. How can a Jewish boy do that?"

But what Jewish boys, and girls, can do is learn the kicks and slaps of the Orient within the confines of their New York yeshivot, synagogues and Hebrew schools, where the association sponsors classes.

"For many New York kids, especially Russian and Iranian immigrants, this association is their only connection with Judaism," he says. Sober denies that bringing Jews to Judaism was a primary goal of Tora Dojo, but does not hide his pleasure that this has been one of the association's side-effects.

Sober explains that practitioners of classical martial arts, when they meditate, strive to reach a



Carol Sober, left, gets in her kicks as husband Haim leads his martial arts disciples. (Brian Hender photos)

Zen state in which they become one with Buddha. Tora Dojo, however, tries to direct the meditation of the advanced student so he becomes one with the God of Israel, a state that in kabbalistic parlance is known as *dveikut*.

"The Chinese and Japanese martial arts are based on Chinese and Japanese culture and religion," he says. "Jews might not want to be exposed to that, so we take the Oriental breathing and meditation methods and combine them with methods used by kabbalists to inspire *dveikut*."

Sober, who sits on a couch with his back ramrod straight, wears a piece of lavender jade around his neck that is "used by people from the East for meditative purposes." *Tzitziot*, he adds with a chuckle, also form a part of his everyday wardrobe.

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"We believe that the Orient learned its type of *dveikut* from the Jews," he says. "The period after the Jews were finally exiled from Babylon is the time when this idea of *dveikut* started flowering in the East."

The position of the classical Jewish sources with regard to martial arts, or, more precisely, to fighting, is a subject that Sober deals with at length in the seminars, like the one at Mevo Betar, that he runs for his students. Among other things, he analyses the attitude of Jews throughout the ages to fighting and self-defence.

Sober first became interested in the martial arts 31 years ago because he was tired of seeing local toughs prey upon the Jews of his New York neighbourhood. "We lived in the West Bronx during a time when the population was changing there," Sober remembers.

"Jews with yarmulkes were beaten up all the time. Local toughs would knock down your

books, call you a kike and hit you in the face," he says. "Nobody did anything to defend himself."

Sober wanted to fight back. His father, who used to box, sent him to a martial arts academy to learn how. "I had a knack for it and became firmly entrenched," he says.

He studied with the best martial arts masters in New York's Chinatown, people who spoke only pidgin English. As a result, Sober took up Chinese, which he reads and speaks fluently today. His skill in martial arts has led him to the People's Republic of China a number of times, where he says he has trained with the best.

"When I was 12, I'd listen in my *heder* to what my rabbi was saying, and I realized that it was similar to what my masters in Chinatown were saying as well," he says. "They both spoke of the idea that there was one universe, that God is incorporeal, and that no human attributes can be given to God."

The rabbi and the martial arts masters differed, however, in their attitudes toward fighting. Sober relates. "One day, after I had gotten into a fight in the neighbourhood, my rabbi took me aside and said that Jewish boys don't fight, that if you lie down with pigs you start to smell like them. This is the type of attitude we were up against when we started Tora Dojo."

Although his association began under the ban-

ner of the need for Jews to defend themselves, Sober emphasizes that neither he nor Tora Dojo has ever had anything to do with the Jewish Defence League or its founder, Meir Kahane.

Times have changed, he says, and now enrolment in Tora Dojo classes is less a result of the need for self-defence, and more because it is seen as good exercise and as a way to socialize with other Jews. "Now the Jews live in the suburbs, and they are preyed upon less. Besides," he laughs, "now they have the money to hire bodyguards for protection."

Not everyone. In the *haredi* sections of Brooklyn the prime motives of those enrolled in Tora Dojo remains self-defence. "We have kids in Brooklyn with shaven hair and *peyot*," Sober says. "They don't come for the exercise, or to be around Jews, but because their parents want them to be able - if need be - to give the *goyim* a good *klop*."