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Everyone's Shotokai fighting

By Ariel Rubinsky

Tags: Israel

A skinny but determined 10-year-old, wearing a karate outfit, stands facing a much heavier and much taller opponent. They are demonstrating "Sumo games," a popular exercise these days in children's martial arts groups. The skinny boy bursts forward and his larger opponent pushes him back easily, trying to floor him. But even though he uses all his strength, the skinny boy remains in the same spot and even makes his large rival lose his balance for a moment. The fight ends without a clear victory, but there is plenty of hand striking - this is, after all, karate, "the attempt to examine how the little man deals with the big man," as Bernard Mathieu, the head of Shotokai in France, explains. Mathieu visited Israel last week and held a seminar for local karate instructors in Jerusalem.

Shotokai is a Japanese karate style that emerged from Shotokan, an older and better known school of karate. Shotokan was developed by Gichin Funakoshi, who brought karate to Japan in the 1920s and turned it into a hit with the locals. But unlike his dogmatic Shotokan school, which barely allows for a reexamination of techniques, Shotokai is very non-conformist.

"Traditional martial arts consider themselves to be the absolute truth and thus unquestionable," Mathieu says. "They tend to assemble in one 'church,' blind to the rest of the world. We, on the other hand, treat every individual case differently." Mathieu, a 63-year-old professor of English culture, has been doing Shotokai for some 40 years. He says that "the system is continually developing, even now. There's just no way to claim that it's perfect." Our master, Mitsusuke Harada, likes to say: We must always examine everything anew, all the time. Today's truth is not necessarily the truth of tomorrow. So we continue to question and I find that interesting."

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Dr. Yehuda Bar Shalom, who heads education studies at the David Yellin College in Jerusalem, and chairs the Shotokai organization in Israel, adds that the developers of the system, Mitsusuke Harada and Shigeru Egami, both students of Funakoshi, admired their master's teaching skills, but believed that Shotokan was unsuitable for someone who wanted to do karate throughout his entire life. They also criticized many of the training systems Funakoshi introduced, in particular the very trademark of karate exercises all over the world - the long lines of practitioners carrying out a fixed number of defensive and offensive techniques while counting off. Harada and Egami asserted that the counting-off system interrupts movement and disrupts the flow, not to say that it is rooted in the militaristic atmosphere that prevailed in 1920s Japan. Harada even voiced the fear that there was a similarity between the rows of practitioners, all moving in unison and shouting out in perfect coordination, and Nazi demonstrations.

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Always a partner

"In Shotokai, we emphasize constant movement and maximum coordination with a partner," Mathieu explains. The movement flows in a manner reminiscent of the "soft" martial arts, including Tai Chi and Aikido. "In order to be effective, the body must be relaxed. A large part of the work is internal - learning how to control the body and to prevent unnecessary tensions," Mathieu says. "First I have to get to know myself, to control my body and my movements so I will later be able to adapt myself to a partner and give him my full attention. All our activity is directed at working with a partner; even if I am exercising alone, there is always a partner in my imagination."

Is this an effective means of self-defense? "Yes. In the long run, it is even more effective than a course in hand-to-hand combat," Bar Shalom says. "The difference is that, with our technique, training changes your consciousness and you stop being afraid. Many people who underwent a course in hand-to-hand combat failed when the moment of truth arrived because they were only used to exercising. Our system slowly changes your body language, so you can remain relaxed and calm even under duress. Of course this also has an effect on your daily routine, the way you walk in the street, your work. In my case, for example, it affects my style of teaching at the college."

According to Gladys Mathieu, Bernard Mathieu's wife, who has been doing Shotokai for some 35 years, "Self-defense is part of the initial study. This can be the goal of beginning to practice any form of martial arts - especially for women who are more afraid of being attacked. But as time passes, the main goal becomes research, to find out how your body works, how to feel your muscles, how to fill your body with energy."

Shotokai arrived in Israel at the end of the 1990s, when a new immigrant from England, Michael Ressa, opened a small class at Kibbutz Mishmar Hanegev. Bar Shalom, who has more than 20 years of experience in Shotokan, met Ressa and was impressed by the new system. About a year ago, after meeting Master Harada in England, Bar Shalom decided to switch to Shotokai. Some of the students of the Shotokan group he had set up in Re'ut followed his lead. Today the chief instructor in the Shotokai classes at Re'ut is Amira Bar Shalom, Yehuda's wife. Altogether there are some 80 people who practice Shotokai in Israel, half of whom are children. Most of them practice in the Jerusalem area, but some also attend Ressa's class in Mishmar Hanegev. (Ressa is the chairman of the system's technical committee in Israel.) Another three classes are due to open next year, meaning the number of Shotokai students will double.

A culture of questions

Bar Shalom believes that the relatively quick growth of Shotokai, along with the fact that a comparatively large percentage of those who practice the system worldwide are academics, can be attributed to what he calls the system's intellectual inquisitiveness. In Israel Shotokai is not just practiced by educators, but by a large number of religious people, too, including a considerable number of ultra-Orthodox - which has prompted Bar Shalom, who defines himself as "secular, left-wing and a Haaretz subscriber," to set up a group for men only. However, he emphasizes that there will soon be a mixed group for men and women as well.

"This is a system for those who ask questions and examine things, which is why academics like it so much," he says. "Contrary to popular stigmas, the ultra-Orthodox, too, come from a culture that likes to ask questions. Our Jerusalem group consists of ultra-Orthodox, national religious and secular men with a wide variety of opinions and backgrounds, which accords with the system's pluralistic nature."

"We don't discuss politics - we are busy with karate," says Eliezer Berger, one of Bar Shalom's more veteran students, who followed his master when he switched from Shotokan to Shotokai. Berger, 52, is ultra-Orthodox and teaches at a Jerusalem yeshiva. He even encouraged several of his students to train in Shotokai, especially those suffering from a short attention span and hyperactive tendencies. He believes the exercises have improved their condition considerably.

Berger says that most of his ultra-Orthodox acquaintances respect his doing karate and are even envious of his ability to continue doing it. It is only the extremist fringe that speaks about "wasting one's time with sports."

Berger explains: "In Me'a She'arim, they believe a person should spend all his time learning the Torah. But I know why I exercise: When my body is healthy, then my spirit is healthy, too, and that helps me with most areas in life."

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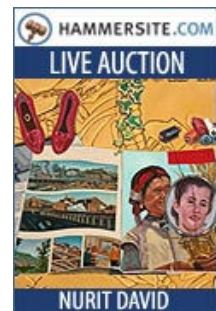
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