

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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WHAT IS JEWISH ABOUT AMERICA'S "FAVORITE PASTIME"?

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[I thought you might enjoy reading the introduction to this book. Enjoy!](#)

Introduction

Judith Z. Abrams

What is so Jewish about America's pastime? Among all our national sports, why is it that it is baseball that is so prominent in Jewish life? What is it about baseball that caught the imagination of Jewish immigrants, writers and rabbis...and still does to this very day? These are the questions this book seeks to answer. For there is, undeniably, a link between baseball and Judaism. We see in the essays in this book sociological, literary and theological analyses which demonstrate how deeply baseball permeates and reflects Jewish life, culture and faith. Actual sermons, as well as a rare first-person history of a Jewish major league player's wife and an essay that accompanied a set of Jewish major leaguer baseball cards, will document that this is no mere academic or theological discussion. Rabbis are actually giving sermons on baseball. This is a real phenomenon, not just a theoretical possibility. The authors of these pieces encompass the full spectrum of Jewish life, from Reform to Orthodox, from secular scholars to mystics.

One of the earliest works of kabbalah (Sefer Yetsirah) establishes three realms of being: space (olam), time (shannah) and the human soul (nefesh). It is as esoteric as halakhah is prosaic. Hillel Goelman explores the correlation of baseball to these three Jewish mystical concepts. He demonstrates how the game of baseball has mythic powers to give meaning to human life by explaining the most profound mysteries of our existence. An individual, through baseball, can locate himself in space, in time and in God's plan for all human souls. His evocation of classical texts, secular scholarship and literary analysis combine to explain why baseball, more than any other sport, is so intrinsically meaningful for Jews. His postscript reveals that his essay is no mere academic treatise: he has lived, and is still living, in baseball's boundless sea of time that transcends space and even the death of his father.

While the role of Jews in baseball is frequently examined in literature, it is seen in visual arts as well. Ori Z. Soltes examines the role of Jews and baseball in the visual arts as testimony to baseball's utility as a means by which Jews could attain a comfortable identity as mainstream Americans. Focusing particularly on Hank Greenberg, he notes that the player had many messianic qualities, going so far as to liken him to Bar Kochba and Theodore Herzl. Greenberg played in Detroit, home base to the antisemites Father Coughlin and Henry Ford. By not playing in a crucial game that fell on Yom Kippur, he openly subscribed to his religious identity and powerfully enfranchised Jews to express their Judaism more openly.

The confluence of the World Series and the High Holydays is an issue that yearly faces Jewish baseball fans. Tracing the decisions of Jewish players and owners through the decades, Jeffrey S. Gurock analyzes the meanings that Hank Greenberg's, Sandy Koufax's and Shawn Green's decisions to play, or not to play on the High Holydays, reflected about Jews' comfort in American society and culture. Though major league baseball has yet to take account of the Jewish calendar, it has accommodated Jewish fans by providing kosher food and even minyanim (prayer quorum) at various ballparks. As Jews' position in society changes, and particularly as the acceptance of Jews in mainstream society has grown, so Jews, and especially Jewish baseball players' decisions to play or not to play on Yom Kippur has changed. What was considered messianic by Soltes (Greenberg not playing on Yom Kippur) becomes a decision to

balance Jewish and American identities in a different era, as seen by Gurock.

"Generation to generation" is the theme that Rebecca Alpert investigates in her examination of baseball in Jewish American writing. Her thorough exploration of baseball and the connection of generations includes the way baseball mediates not just between fathers and sons but between mothers and daughters, grandparents and grandchildren. She cites many newspaper articles and a sermon, which was apparently delivered and then published, to document the reality about which she writes in Jewish life, not only in Jewish writing.

While it is the players that may, perhaps naturally, be the focus of our attention, Jews have had a large role to play behind the scenes. Eric Schulmiller's presentation of his "Avot" and, one might add, "Imahot" of baseball is a delightful, yet substantive, double play of classical biblical and rabbinic texts and an encyclopedic knowledge of baseball history. He fleshes out, in great detail, the back-stories, so to speak, of many of the legendary Jewish figures in baseball history. In his biography, he, too, acknowledges the importance of passing on a love of baseball from father to son.

Our holiest texts, especially Torah and Talmud, often come down to us through the mediation of commentators who make these sometimes-epigraphic texts comprehensible and loveable. Jordan Parr argues that the experience of baseball is likewise made memorable, and desirable, through the mediation of radio commentators. A baseball game is like a session of Talmud study, opines Parr, and one's fondness for the commentator can translate into deeply etched memories and an enhancement of the inherent meaning of the moment.

Joshua Segal's article examines the physical, spiritual and intellectual aspects of baseball that are similar to Judaism. Stephen Fuchs' essay testifies to the power his baseball idols had on him. His role models actually affected the way he participated in sports. He did not play a competitive tennis match because of what his role models, Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax, did.

Both Reuven Goldfarb and David Wechsler-Azen concentrate not only on the correspondence between the players' positions and the usual schematic diagram of the Zohar's sefirot (processes within God) but see similarities to Jewish spirituality in all sorts of other aspects of the game and Judaism as well. Again, the fact that we have two articles supports my contention that these connections are real and meaningful....not just a theoretical conceit.

Dan Gordon also sees mystical aspects of Judaism in baseball, particularly the four-leveled interpretation of Torah known as Pardes and the four bases of a baseball diamond. In addition, he explores the parallels between Maimonides' seven levels of charity and the seven ways of contributing to one's team.

The article of Shmuel Jablon and the responsa written by him and his elementary (!) school students testify to the reality of baseball in Jewish education today in a day school setting. Martin Abramowitz documents his (successful) quest to create a set of Jewish Major League Player baseball cards. A unique piece of oral history is provided by May Abrams, widow of Cal Abrams, a Jewish major leaguer. Rabbis Avi Schulman, Louis Rieser, Michael Cohen and Andrew Klein (the latter basking in the miraculous World Series win of the Boston Red Sox in 2004) contributed sermons they gave on the topic of baseball. All these are testimony to the potency of baseball in Jewish America's religious and social life.

Even with the bounty of writing we have here, there is still more left to cover. Articles that were not included in this book, but should be in any truly exhaustive examination of Judaism and baseball would include an exploration of baseball in Israel, the similarity of the baseball field to the Biblical tabernacle and the Temples and the way a baseball stadium resembles a standard page of the Babylonian Talmud. (The infield is the Mishnah and Gemara, the outfield is the commentaries of Rashi, the Tosafists, etc., and the people in the stands are the students.) An article documenting the engulfing loss generated by the Dodgers leaving Brooklyn, a wound that is felt by some to this day, and its similarity to the feelings engendered by the destruction of the Temples, would be needed to make this volume complete. More pieces documenting the importance of baseball in Jewish life would have been welcome. For example, Rabbi Mindy A. Portnoy not only wrote a children's book, *Matzah Ball* (KARBEN, 1994), about a child taking Pesach food to a baseball game, but celebrated her twentieth year in the rabbinate by throwing out the opening pitch at Camden Yards in Baltimore, an event arranged by her congregation.

Truly, America's pastime has uniquely strong bonds with Judaism; bonds stronger than that of any other sport with our faith. And baseball, uniquely among our major national sports, fosters a bond between the generations. Indeed, that was the motivation that started me on the path to editing this book: I wanted to make a connection to my son through baseball. He is an avid Astros fan and, in order to understand his world better, I came to be a fan myself. Both he and I could see the connections between Judaism and baseball, connections far beyond the issue of playing on the High Holydays.

Thus, the reality became a book and hopefully the book will foster the reality: a connection of generation to generation of Jewish baseball fans.

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