

TAKE ME OUT TO THE SYNAGOGUE

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I was recently called by a member of our congregation beseeching me to deliver a sermon on the upcoming high holy days. While I naturally had the experience of speaking before judges, lawyers, legislators, client groups, faculty and students, among others, nothing quite made me so nervous as providing remarks on religion, given my own ambiguities about formalized religion. So I reacted quite naturally - I thanked the caller for the invitation, put off any decision as long as I could in the hopes that another speaker could be found, discovered that the congregant was very persistent in seeking my supposed wisdom, and eventually caved in to the repeated requests that I preach to this new audience. Once having accepted, my panic intensified as I acknowledged my superficial formal knowledge about the holidays to come and turned to the one source of inspiration I trusted. . The result was the following remarks, as delivered before Congregation Beth Tikvah on Friday evening, September 26, 2003.

Where to begin? We greet each other with "L'Shanah tovah"

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(for a good year).¹ The literal meaning of Rosh Hashanah is "head of the year" or "first of the year."² Yet, there is little similarity between the American tradition of exclaiming "Happy New Year!," joining the midnight drinking bash and the following day's plethora of football compared to Rosh Hashanah, one of the holiest days on the Jewish calendar. So, kids, no, you cannot stay up until midnight tonight.

However, the Jewish New Year and the American one share a significant likeness: in Judaism, we mark a time to begin solemn introspection, reflecting back on the trials and tribulations of the past year, while many Americans use the New Year's commemoration to make "resolutions." Celebrants of each occasion promise to make changes and plan for how they will address the upcoming year.³ Yet, on Rosh Hashanah, much of our time is spent in the synagogue,⁴ not in front of the television or shopping the sales of the American New Year. Nor do we as American Jews start writing the year 5764⁵ on our checks.

At this point, I know that there is a 10 year old who may be listening and is thinking "whatever."⁶ Actually, that's about as much as I will relate of the basics. When I was asked to give these remarks, I admit to being panicked; I was used to a different audience and questioned my ability to add anything of substance to what is truly thought to be the eve of the holiest time in the Jewish year. After much angst and literal soul searching, I then turned to the most natural source to get a topic: my children. They began by asking if they really had to go to services (a non-topic, for sure), then eventually instructed me to not talk about law, because that was always "so boring" (at least in the minds of this 10 and 12 year old), and they should know, because they have occasionally attended my classes. But they both suggested that I talk about sports, with my son especially wanting to hear something about baseball, particularly about

1 *Judaism 101: Rosh Hashanah*, at <http://www.jewfaq.org/holiday2.htm> (last visited Sept. 25, 2003).

2 *Id.*

3 *Id.*

4 *Id.*

5 *Supra*, note 1.

6 From the lexicon of actress Hillary Duff of television's *Lizzy McGuire* fame.

Sandy Koufax and the Jewish holidays. So I guess this will be a talk about history.

As the American calendar indicates, we are now on eve of the baseball playoffs. As a long suffering Chicago baseball fan, I know the inevitable end of the season awaits.⁷ But I must admit that baseball has a unique hold on American emotions. It is capable of inspiring adoration and loathing in a single season; yet, despite self-absorbed and showboating athletes, obstinate owners, strikes (not those called by the umpire), rising ticket prices, players on steroids and corked bats, fans keep coming back. And it was as recently as 2001 that baseball added poignant beauty to the horrific wake of 9/11 with one of the most thrilling and emotional World Series in history. So why do we watch? Because it makes us feel good and gives us comfort; hopefully, that is also the reason many of us are here tonight.

But now to drift back further in history. Since the days of Lipman Pike, who first played baseball for the courtly sum of \$20 a week in 1866, generations of Jews have sought to balance our religious obligations with our love of America's national pastime. Two cases stand out above the rest, especially due to the significance of the players involved.⁸

In 1934, the Detroit Tigers (yes, that's right!), were involved in a tight pennant race. Their first baseman was Hank Greenberg, who many have coined the "Jewish Babe Ruth."⁹ Games were scheduled that year on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In 1965, the player involved was Sandy Koufax, a pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers, who was faced with missing a game for a similar reason - the first game of the World Series, no less, was scheduled on Yom Kippur. These two are considered the two greatest Jewish players in baseball history.¹⁰ Each was a public figure faced with a choice, one involving a

7 Which, indeed, it recently did as the Cubs lost the National League Championship Series by four games to three, dropping the final three games in that series.

8 Brian Moynihan, *Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax*, at http://www.baseball-almanac.com/articles/greenberg_and_koufax (last visited Sept. 24, 2003).

9 Jeff Merron, *Koufax and Greenberg - same dilemma, different decisions*, at http://www.espn.go.com/classicf/s/merron_ongreen.html (last visited Sept. 24, 2003).

10 *Supra* note 8.

personal, private decision, this being magnified by the fame of their athletic accomplishments.

First, Hank Greenberg. Yes, he questioned whether he should play on Rosh Hashanah. The Detroit media knew about Greenberg's plight and pursued the views of local rabbis; the Detroit Free Press's headline eventually pronounced "Talmud Clears Greenberg for Holiday Play."¹¹ As Greenberg stated in his autobiography, "The team was fighting for first place, and I was probably the only batter in the lineup who was not in a slump. But in the Jewish religion, it is traditional that one observe the holiday solemnly, with prayer I wasn't sure what to do."¹² Greenberg did skip batting practice that day, yet he reflected again and ultimately chose to play on Rosh Hashanah. He hit two home runs; the Tigers won 2-1. The following day's headline in the Detroit Free Press was in Hebrew (although it's not clear if the headline read from right to left!) and exulted "Happy New Year, Hank."¹³

Although Greenberg still faced a conflict over whether to play on Yom Kippur, this episode generated much less media attention than his Rosh Hashanah ordeal, because the Tigers had the pennant in hand by then. He did sit out that day and instead attended synagogue. Indeed, upon his arrival at services, the congregants gave him a rousing round of applause. And this time the Free Press ran a poem by Edgar Guest that celebrated his choice:

Came Yom Kippur-holy fast day world wide over to the Jew,
 And Hank Greenberg to his teaching and the old tradition true
 Spent the day among his people and he didn't come to play.
 Said Murphy to Mulrooney, AWe shall lose the game today!
 We shall miss him on the infield and shall miss him at the bat
 But he's true to his religion-and I honor him for that!¹⁴

Whether he meant to serve as an example by not playing on Yom Kippur, Hank Greenberg's angst and decision were

¹¹ *Supra* note 9.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

representative of that faced by other Jews of that day who also sought a balance in their lives. It has been said that Greenberg's choice appeared as a critical dilemma -- how to balance concern for parents, religion, and tradition with commitment to his American profession and his desire to fully participate in American life.¹⁵

Then there was Koufax, arguably the greatest pitcher in baseball history. He dominated the major leagues in the 1960's, shattered numerous strikeout records, hurled four no-hitters and a perfect game (obviously, against the Chicago Cubs), led the league in earned run average a record five straight years and was the youngest player ever inducted to the Hall of Fame, as arm problems caused him to prematurely retire at age 31.¹⁶ As the great Willie Mays said, "I knew every pitch he was going to throw. . .and I still could not hit it."¹⁷ Another Hall of Fame player, Willie "Pops" Stargell, said that "hitting against him was like eating soup with a fork."¹⁸ For Koufax, the decision may have seemed tougher, because, after all, this was the first game of the World Series. Koufax regularly pitched on the Sabbath, but he never pitched on the first day of Passover, on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. Indeed, in his autobiography, he relates that "There was never any decision to make, because there was never any possibility that I would pitch. . .the club knows that I don't work that day."¹⁹ And his manager knew this - in 1961, he had scheduled him to pitch on Rosh Hashanah, and was criticized for doing so. He quickly made the change and lost the game. Subsequently, his manager kept a Jewish calendar on his desk every year, scheduling his pitching rotation so it would not conflict with the Jewish holidays.²⁰ So Koufax did not pitch that first game, yet he won the respect and admiration of devout Jewish non-fans. Instead, he spent the day in synagogue in

¹⁵ *Supra* note 8.

¹⁶ Sanford Braun, *Sandy Koufax*, at <http://www.jewsinsports.org/profile.asp?sport+baseball&ID=5> (last visited Sept. 24, 2003).

¹⁷ 7A. *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Supra* note 8.

²⁰ *Supra* note 16.

Minneapolis, the site of that day's game.²¹ The person who did pitch that day for the Dodgers was Koufax's Hall of Fame teammate, Don Drysdale; he gave up seven runs in less than three innings and the Dodgers lost badly. When the manager came to take Drysdale out of the game, Drysdale said to him, "I bet right now you wish I was Jewish, too."²² Koufax pitched the next day and lost, but then he came back to shut out his opponents in games five and seven; the Dodgers were world champs and Koufax was named Series Most Valuable Player.²³

The careers of Greenberg and Koufax spanned times of intolerance, when particular groups were fighting for acceptance. In Greenberg's case, it was for acceptance of the Jewish people. In Koufax's, the intolerance was about race, not religion. Yet, while Anti-Semitism still existed in the 1960's, its presence in baseball had not been felt strongly since possibly World War Two, as compared to the segregation of minorities at times by their very own teammates.²⁴ And clearly, not all Jewish ballplayers followed these examples. In 1935, during the era of Hank Greenberg, Harry Eisenstadt was a rookie pitcher on the then Brooklyn Dodgers; while he was not initially asked to play on Yom Kippur, his manager asked that he pitch for an injured reliever. The first batter he faced hit a grand slam home run. Phillies shortstop Eddie Feinberg chose to play in a doubleheader on Yom Kippur in 1938 - and went 0 for 8.²⁵ We can fast forward to our own era; in 1996 - backup catcher Jesse Levis, explained his decision to play on Rosh Hashanah, saying "it's not like I'm Sandy Koufax. I don't have that kind of leverage. I hope that God forgives me." His manager put Levis in the game as a late inning pinch hitter and later commented, "It totally slipped my mind. I didn't even think about it until afterward."²⁶ Most recently, Shawn Green of the Dodgers, who were in the midst of a pennant race, sat out a game on Rosh Hashanah, noting, "There is nothing I would rather do than play against the Giants in a

²¹ *Supra* note 9.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Supra* note 16.

²⁴ *Supra* note 8.

²⁵ *Supra* note 9.

²⁶ *Id.*

pennant race, but some things take precedence for me.”²⁷ And Gabe Kapler, then of the Texas Rangers, in reaching his decision to play, remarked, “I have mixed emotions. Nobody is more proud of their heritage than I am and nobody is more proud of being Jewish than I am. I consider myself to be a totally spiritual person; I have a relationship with God, but it’s my relationship and the way I choose to practice my beliefs. I’m actually very skeptical when it comes to organized religion.”²⁸

So for sports and non-sports fans alike, for service and non-service fans too, does your decision matter? Of course, it does. We are not revisiting the long debated and controversial separation of church and state; instead we are seeing this in the context of the possible separation of church and sports. Koufax’s decision clearly did not prolong his ill-fated, short-lived career, but he did what he thought was best. And I already realize that my children will play their soccer games tomorrow, foregoing following in the footsteps of Greenberg and Koufax, which I suspect is only “normal” at this stage of their lives. Hopefully, our own personal decisions and the choices that we make will provide us comfort and peace.

Epilogue

I readily admit that I did not know how these remarks would be taken, not having vetted them before any audience in advance. I was amazed and taken aback when members of the Congregation approached me after the conclusion of the service and commented that they had actually enjoyed my “sermon,” including one member who said it was the best he had heard since he had starting attending in 1969. Another kindly mentioned that she knew who was my primary audience, and that they (my children) had been rapt in attention. Thus, the greatest satisfaction came in hearing from my children that not only had I just slightly embarrassed them (“whatever”). My daughter’s comments ranged from “not boring” to “good,” while my son noted that the talk was “short, sweet and to the point” and “that anyone who likes sports would like it.” He concluded by suggesting that it was “good enough to publish.” And so, now that the Cubs season has been officially been put

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Supra* note 9.

to rest and we once again resolve to "wait until next year," here I am following my son's advice. . .