

HOME (PLATE) FOR THE HOLIDAYS?

**Jewish Major
League ball
players?!**

**The truth is that
Sandy Koufax
wasn't the only
slugger to sit it out
on Yom Kippur.**

**ROBERT L.
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As the High Holiday season approaches, every Jew for whom the Days of Awe have special significance can be expected to look deeply into himself or herself and ask appropriate searching questions: "Have I wronged anyone whom I must ask for forgiveness?" "Have I deceived anyone in my business or professional dealings?" "Have I failed to keep some of God's commandments?" "Should I be available for pinch-hitting duty?"

Wait a minute. Run that one by me again, please. Surely that last item is out of place—the "What doesn't belong in this picture?" question in the series.

Well, not if you're an identifying Jew and a major league baseball player. Then the question hits, uh, close to home, and your resolution of the issue is not just a matter between you and God, but between you and the *kahal* (congregation) of fans and media.

Probably every Jew of my (baby-boom) generation knows that Sandy Koufax sat out an important game for the Dodgers on Yom Kippur; most Jewish men of my father's generation know, as well, that there was some excitement regarding whether Detroit Tigers slugger Hank Greenberg would or wouldn't play on the High Holy Days. But the facts surrounding both these incidents are frequently altered—or even reversed—in the telling.

"Everyone I grew up with," wrote a pleasant book reviewer in a New York Jewish paper last year, "remembers that Sandy Koufax was the only Jewish pitcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers and that in 1961 he refused to pitch in a Yom Kippur game." Oh, dear. Koufax wasn't the only Brooklyn Dodger Jewish pitcher; the most famous game he sat out was a World Series game and was in 1965 (although there *was* an incident in '61—see below), and the Dodgers were no longer in Brooklyn in '65 or '61. And the reviewer got most of those errors from the book she was praising.

Even more unfortunately, *another* New York Jewish paper recently noted

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that Koufax didn't pitch "on the first day of Yom Kippur." (On the second day, presumably, he ate only hard-boiled eggs and water and didn't throw hard fastballs.) And the Greenberg story is equally shrouded in confusion: in the (mistaken) "reminiscences" of people who have told me conflicting versions of whether Greenberg did or did not play—and in some reference books (including *The Jew in American Sports*) as well.

Most Jews my age are surprised to hear that there was a player before Koufax who excited nationwide controversy concerning whether or not he would play on the High Holy Days. But if those who do remember Hall of Famer Hank Greenberg are somewhat hazy about the details of his story, it may be because of the unorthodox (and certainly non-Orthodox) way in which Greenberg eventually resolved the issue.

Born in the Bronx of Rumanian Jewish parents, twice the American League's Most Valuable Player and something of an ethnic standard-bearer for second generation Jewish Americans in the 30s, Greenberg had received little notice as a rookie in 1933, when he sat out the High Holidays. But in 1934, Greenberg's Detroit Tigers (he was their preeminent slugger) were fighting for their first pennant in 25 years. Whether or not Greenberg would play Boston on Rosh Hashanah was a question of conscience for him, a subject of passion for Tiger fans and a matter of concern to Jews everywhere. Would he play?

Greenberg says he consulted Leo Franklin, then Detroit's most renowned rabbi. Dr. Franklin's ruling, as Greenberg recalls it: Rosh Hashanah is a "happy holiday" and there are records of New Year ball playing on the streets of Bethlehem in Talmudic times, so Hank could play. Yom Kippur was another matter.

Although some newspapers reported that Greenberg was still uneasy about playing, Rosh Hashanah certainly turned out to be a happy holiday for him. He hit two home runs: the first tying the score, 1-1; the second winning the game, 2-1. The delirious *Detroit Free Press* printed Greenberg's picture on its front page the next day,

with "Happy New Year" in Hebrew above the photo. And a Cleveland scribe triumphantly wrote that "only one fellow blew the shofar yesterday so you could hear it. He was Hank Greenberg. He blew the shofar twice, and the ears of the Boston Red Sox are still ringing." Other sports writers interpreted Greenberg's exploits as signifying Divine approval of his decision to play.

Greenberg spent Yom Kippur in the synagogue and the Tigers lost (although they went on to win the pennant). But he reports that his teammates, and the fans, by and large respected his decision. Indeed, the syndicated poet Edgar Guest was moved to write an ode of appreciation, which concluded:

Come 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, "We
shall lose the game today!"
We shall miss him in the infield and
shall miss him at the bat,
But he's true to his religion—and I
honor him for that!

Greenberg does not recall the issue coming up again; it would have been an issue in the 1935 World Series (the Tigers had again won the pennant), but Greenberg had broken his wrist and couldn't play anyway. Interestingly, though, the question did come up for a Jewish pitcher who toiled for the Brooklyn Dodgers 20 years before Koufax. This was Harry Eisenstat, like Koufax, a Brooklyn-born left-hander. Eisenstat also consulted with a rabbi, who gave him similar advice, so he was in uniform, although not scheduled to pitch, on Rosh Hashanah, 1935. (He was then a rookie.) The "happy holiday" belied its reputation, however, when Eisenstat was called on to relieve against the New York Giants and his first pitch was hit for a grand-slam home run.

Although it is not well known, Al Rosen, the Cleveland Indians' slugging third baseman in the 1950s and the second Jewish Hall of Fame player (after Greenberg and before



Morrie Arnovich

Eisenstat's successor, Koufax), never played on Yom Kippur either—but he, too, played on Rosh Hashanah. Curiously, the rabbi *he* consulted, the well known Abba Hillel Silver, gave him the same justification: that Rosh Hashanah was a "day of happiness" in a way that was not true of Yom Kippur.

Rosen, now general manager of the Houston Astros ball club, recalls that the moment of truth on this issue came for him in 1953, when he was fighting for the league batting title (which, indeed, he was to lose by one point). True to conviction, Rosen didn't show, but the game was rained out anyway—which Rosen (like Greenberg, but unlike, presumably, Harry Eisenstat) has no trouble interpreting as an instance of Divine, and benign, intervention.

Cal Abrams was an outfielder for the Dodgers, Orioles and other teams during about the same period that Al Rosen was playing. He reports occasional anti-Semitic remarks being directed against him (something Rosen and Greenberg also experienced), but was first made aware that others saw him as Jewish, and thereby mysterious and somewhat exotic, when he was playing on a Dodger minor league farm team in Mobile,

Alabama. "I hear you're a Jewish player," a farmer in the stands called out to him, in a tone of friendly curiosity. "What are you, Jewish Protestant or Jewish Catholic?"

The child of a not-very-traditional Jewish background, Abrams might not have confronted the playing-on-the-High-Holidays issue if not for long-time Dodger coach Jake Pitler (who was himself briefly a player with the Pittsburgh Pirates). Abrams recalls with some amusement that the first time he reached first base as a Dodger (he had been brought up by the club toward the end of the season), first-base coach Pitler, in a variation on Groucho Marx's "Hello, I must be going," congratulated him on making the big leagues and promptly advised him that "I assume you'll be staying out three days starting next week." Abrams confides that he had no idea what Pitler was talking about; in fact, the Dodger coach had made a policy of not working on any of the High Holidays and felt, as he told Abrams, that "I'd look stupid if you showed up." So Abrams didn't. But afterwards he worked out his own solution: "If my team was fighting for a championship and the game might count, I'd figure God would forgive me and show up and play. If not, I'd stay home."

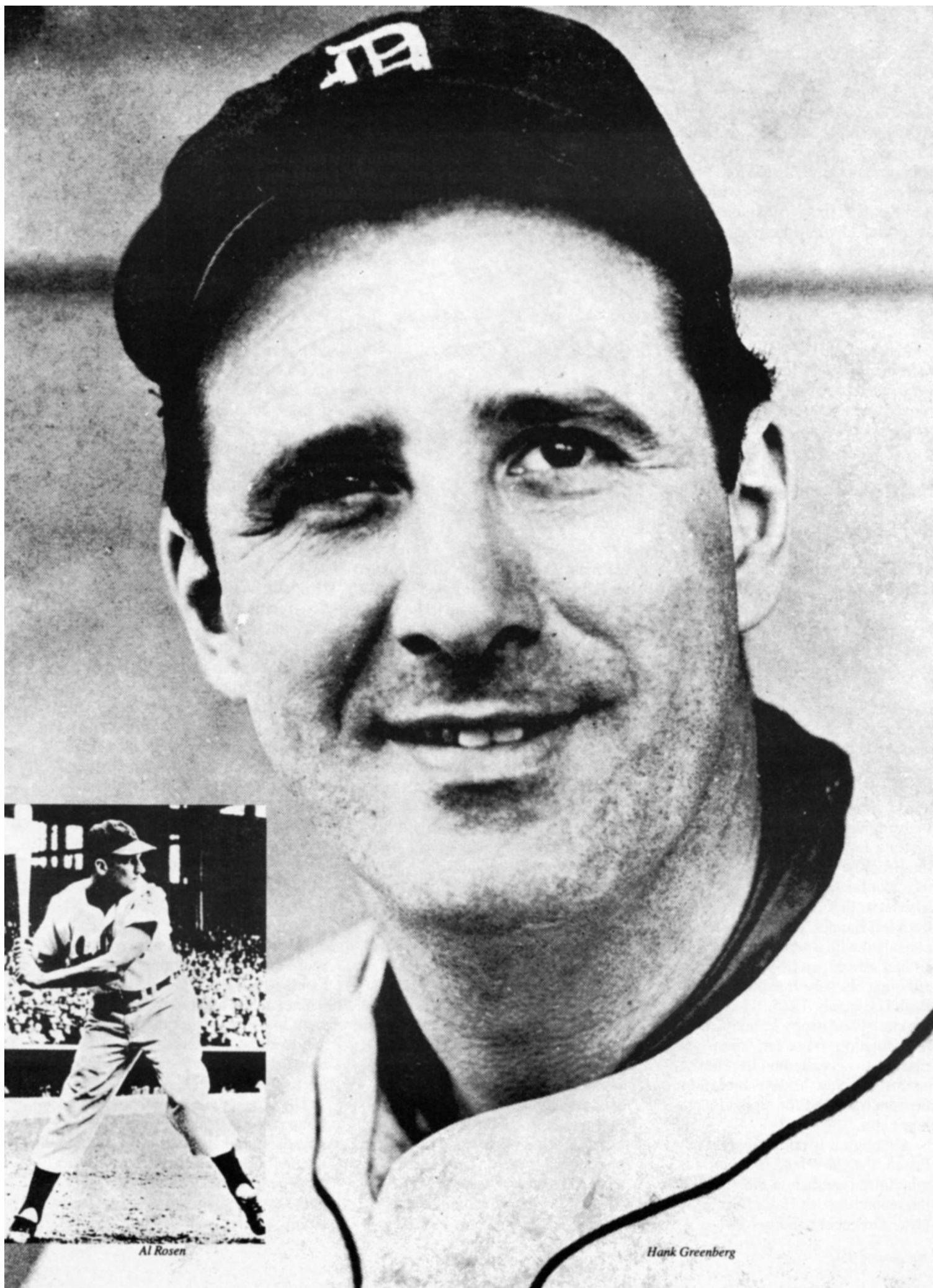
It was the same Jake Pitler, not many years later, who encouraged Sandy Koufax to follow his instincts about not playing on Yom Kippur. In the 1961 season, manager Walter Alston scheduled Koufax to pitch on Yom Kippur and had to change pitchers at the last moment; thereafter, he was said to keep a Jewish calendar on his desk.

Four years later, the first game of the World Series (against the Minnesota Twins) fell on Yom Kippur and Koufax, the year's Cy Young Award winner as the league's best pitcher, went to temple rather than pitch, an incident that was the subject of national press coverage and, of course, intense Jewish interest.

The Koufax story, by the way, had an amusing postscript. When Don Drysdale, another Hall of Famer and Koufax's replacement in the first game, was bombarded by the Twins in the third inning and had to be taken out for a relief pitcher, the first words



Al Rosen



Hank Greenberg

he said to manager Alston were, "I bet right now you're wishing *I* was Jewish." Drysdale still enjoys repeating the remark.

Actually, determining who in the big leagues is Jewish is not always a simple matter. John Lowenstein of the Baltimore Orioles is not Jewish but apparently gets a kick out of the fact that people think he is, and even enjoys putting them on: he was written up in the local Jewish newspaper and, sure enough, is included in the Jewish team in the recently published *The All-Time Baseball Teams* book. On the other hand, the Red Sox' Jeff Newman converted to Judaism (in an Orthodox ceremony) almost fifteen years ago, when he married a Jewish woman; his son became a bar mitzvah last year. Newman doesn't recall that the High Holidays question has come up with an important game, but he thinks that he would play if the situation did arise.

Future Hall of Famer Rod Carew married a Jewish woman, is raising his children as Jews and intends to convert formally at some point; some have assumed he was Jewish ever since he appeared on the cover of *Time* wearing a *chai* necklace. But Carew does take his Jewish learning and observance seriously; in an interview for radio a few years ago, he told me that the important thing for him was that "on the holidays that are very, very important I will not go out there and play." (Carew has been known to show up at the ballpark on Yom Kippur but not suit up on grounds of illness—which, he has found, sometimes means fewer questions and less explaining).

Elliott Maddox, who *has* converted to Judaism, says he made sure he didn't have to play on Yom Kippur or the first day of Rosh Hashanah; another former Yankee, Ron Bloomberg, reportedly had it written into his contract that he wouldn't have to play on either holiday.

John Lowenstein, by the way, is not the only ball player ever wrongly assumed to be Jewish. Edward Clarence Whitner, a non-Jew who played 53 games for the Yankees (and had one at-bat for the Phillies) in the early 40s, was renamed Ed Levy in the hope that



Sid Gordon

under that moniker, he would bring Jewish customers to the turnstiles. And by way of bizarre footnote: In researching this article, I followed up a mistaken tip that the Dodgers' Steve Sax was Jewish and called him at the hotel where the team was staying; he returned the call, told me that he "played now on the Holidays but might not if I had a family," and called me back two days later to ask me, of all things, to wire money to his brother. Two days of perplexed investigation revealed that the man who had called me back and (the second time) asked for money was not Steve Sax at all but a—Jewish—con man who was picking up Sax's messages and fleecing fans out of thousands of dollars. (He was arrested by the FBI the day after I last spoke to him.)

Such anomalies aside, it is remarkable that, so far as I can determine, Newman is the only identifying Jewish ball player in the major leagues today. By contrast, in one of Sid Gordon's first games as a New York Giant in 1941, he was one of *four* Jewish players in the starting lineup! (One of them, outfielder Morrie Arnovich, was the son of Orthodox Jewish parents and was reportedly one of the few Jewish major leaguers to try to observe the dietary laws.)

Ball playing was the subject of many Talmudic references and numerous rabbinical decisions—not all of them in agreement—regarding which sports were and which were not permissible on Shabbat and the holidays. So Hank Greenberg and Al Rosen were quite justified in going to a rabbi for guidance about playing on the High Holidays—although, of course, probably no halachic authority would sanction *professional* ball playing (as opposed to sport for recreation) on any *yom tov*—a distinction that was already being made by rabbis in the 12th century.

This baseball season would otherwise be a propitious time for Jewish ball players to demonstrate their commitment: Rosh Hashanah for 5745 occurs on the last weekend of the regular season, while Yom Kippur coincides with the baseball Playoffs (or Championship Series) leading to the World Series.

The truth is that I had always intended to exemplify this particular act of *Kiddush HaShem* myself. I grew up dreaming I would be not only a baseball superstar but also an identifiably Jewish one, and as I matured religiously (if not in other ways), I decided that playing for pay on Shabbat would really be inadmissible. My plan was to become so big a star that I could write my own ticket, and then make clear—albeit in exchange for a cut in pay—that I could not work (i.e., play) on Shabbat.

It is embarrassing to report that although I am now two years older than the average age of *retirement* for successful ball players, and some ten years past the average age at which less successful players are released, I am still not absolutely convinced that this ennobling fantasy will not come to pass. But I fear it is not to be. If nothing else, there are the sobering words of Baltimore-born New York Giants infielder Andy Cohen (1926, '28 and '29), who arrived at the Polo Grounds hailed as "the Jewish hope"—one in a series of players who manager John McGraw, and many in the press, hoped would be a Jewish star who could fill the seats. "It is hard for fans," Andy told reporters, "to believe that a guy named Cohen can play ball." ★