8-15-2008

Bringing Baseball to Israel

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Recommended Citation

Bringing Baseball to Israel, Baltimore Jewish Times, August 15, 2008

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Baltimore Jewish Times

Sunday, August 24, 12:00 to 4:00 p.m. See page 7 for more information.
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BRINGING BASEBALL TO ISRAEL

Orioles instrumental in outreach to would-be Little Leaguers.

Gezer team members (from left) Mair Corsia, Ruvi Weissman, Alon Hankin and Ephraim Schiffmiller sit with their coach, Lee Siegel.
A

It is written in the Book of
Kings, the territory of Gezer — which is now a
patchwork of rolling farmlands in the
center of Israel — was once
occupied by an Egyptian pharaoh
and presented as a dowry to his
dughter, who had just become the
wife of King Solomon. That was in
the 10th century B.C.E.

Today, Gezer is home to a
different
field of dreams: a
ardently
cherished
emerald-green grass and
soil the color of burnt
umber, sur-
rounded by a fence and
high chain-
link backstop — an almost
perfectly
tailored baseball diamond —
set in
the

roughwestern slopes of the
Judah hills near Modi'in, 30
kilometers northwest of Jerusalem.

This is actually one of six
ballparks
in the country, but clearly the
crown jewel in a growing
franchise that is
overseen by the Israel
Association of
Baseball. The purpose of the IAB,
says
Web site, is to install the values of
"equality, egalitarianism, tolerance and
good sportsmanship [where] children
from Arab and Jewish schools
meet on the baseball diamond to
learn a
new sport and make new friends."

On a bright blue Sunday morning
in early June, the Gezer field is the site
of a Little League game between
the home team and the
Modi'in Miracles.

Though the sun has not yet fully risen
over the hills, the
early summer
heat has already
settled in. The
locals do not
mourn
what
happens the boys
from Gezer have
just received:
shorts, caps and
other gear —
from none
other than the
major league
baseball team in Baltimore, which
is someplace
in America. It's both a
public relations
gesture by the
Orioles and an honest reflection of
corporate altruism promoting
the American
atmosphere at home and abroad.


The Orioles sponsor
a number of programs
beyond the four
equatorian of Camden
Yards, a sundial league in the
inner city of
Baltimore, a bat-and-
glove project in the
Caribbean. And the
orange-and-black logo shows up at, of
all places, a small
in the middle of Israel.

There are actually
more than a few
Orioles fans in
the Holy Land,
most of them


One of the latter is
Avi Szefer, a 30-year-
old son who spent some time in
Rockville, where his cousin, Sam
Lerner, introduced him to baseball at
Oriole Park. Mr. Szefer met his wife,
Noa, while serving in the Israeli Defense
Forces. He teaches in Ashkelon; she
trains assistance dogs. They have a
5-month-old son, Nathan, and they
live in Ashkelon — close to where
a rocket launched from Gaza recently
hit a building. Today all three of
them are decked out
in Orioles orange.

Mohe Schecter
and Elliott
Pheterson,
Baltimore-
bred but long-
time residents
of Israel, also
follow their
country
team. Both of
them cut their
ball-playing
aT the weekly Sunday
morning game at Wel-
wood in Pikesville. Mr. Pheterson
played a mean third base; Mr. Schecter
is a power-hitting outfielder. Mr.
Pheterson, who lives in Sede Gat,
wears an Orioles hat when he makes
an annual visit to his mother in
Baltimore. Mr. Schecter, from his home
in Jerusalem, can tell you where the
Birds are in today's American League
East standings.

In July of 1968, Ellis Kaplan, like-
wise born and raised in Baltimore,
came to Kibbutz Lavi, in the Lower
Galilee. He has lived there ever since,
working in Lavi's furniture factory
and hotel, photographing its exotic
flowers and sending weekly e-mail
misives to his friends back home.

He remembers when the Orioles
returned to Baltimore in 1954, and
he'd watch games at Memorial
Stadium wearing his old Orioles hat
and an Al Kaline glove. The sweet
nostalgia of those days lingers on —
the special sights, sounds and smells
of the ballpark. Well, not all of them:
"To this day Mr. Kaplan doesn't eat
pizza, the result of being overwhelmed
by the cheesy odors from
fans surrounding him at every
game he attended. "I didn't care for
the smell," he says.

In 1955, Mr. Kaplan went to a
Labor Day doubleheader with his
friend Ronnie Schwartzman, a neighbor
from Boarman Avenue. When
their names were called out by the
public address announcer — Please go
to the Orioles' office! — they were
thrilled with anticipation. Had they
won a prize? Free tickets? But it
turned out merely that Ronnie's
father had decided to come to the
game, and that they'd have a ride
to Harlem. (It's hard for an Israeli today
to remember when there were no cell
phones by which such messages could
be relayed.)

A few years later came a more
exciting experience in the announc-
ing booth. "I wouldn't want it
again, but I once even went to
graze in the foreign pastures of
Griffith Stadium in Washington,
D.C.," says Mr. Kaplan "My cousin,
Charlie Brotman, was [and still is]
a very well-known sport figure
in the D.C. area, and he was the PA
announcer for the Washington
Senators' games. He invited me to
'help him' announce a Senators'
doubleheader. What an experience.
We walked all the way up to
the roof of the stadium. [There was
go no elevator.] Between the two games,
he took me down to the Senators'
dressing room and introduced me
to the players. My only problem
was that I couldn't understand what
language they were speaking — it
couldn't have been English — all
I heard were expletives."

Kayla Weissman stands outside the field where baseball is played.

If you build it, they will come.

"Field of Dreams" (1989)
Now this is the way King Solomon conscripted the labor corps to build the Temple. . . his house . . . and Gezer.

1 Kings 9:15

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have paths and pitching mound. A backstop was added later, together with covered benches for players and a refreshment stand.

In 1989 a scoreboard and an outfield fence were installed for the quadrangular Macabiah Games, where Jewish softball teams from the United States, Canada, South America and Israel competed. During the Persian Gulf War in 1991, a four-game series took place between local players and American soldiers operating Patriot missile batteries. The teams won, 3 games to 1.

Prior to the 1997 Maccabiah Softball Championships, the field was expertly remodeled under the direction of George Tuma, the legendary groundskeeper for the Kansas City Royals at the time and overseer of 31 Super Bowl venues.

The IAB is a non-profit organization and part of the Israel Olympic Committee, the Confederation of European Baseball and the International Baseball Association. It has a close working relationship with Major League Baseball International.

Its main focus is on kids. Religious and ultra-Orthodox, secular, boys, girls, rich and poor — kibbutz children, city dwellers, Jews, Christians, and Arabs — all of whom play together on the same field and often for the same team. Few organizations in Israel can make such a claim.

Leagues are grouped according to age: Minors (8-10), Juveniles (10-12), Cadets (13-15), Juniors (16-18) and Seniors (18 and over). There are presently more than 70 teams in the country, including Tel Aviv's first Jewish-Arab team, in Jaffa. The very first sports contact of any kind between Israel and Saudi Arabia was on a baseball field, in a European Little League tournament. A month before Israel signed a peace agreement with Jordan, the Israeli national baseball team played an exhibition game with the Jordanian national team.

The Israel Baseball League was the dream of Larry Baras, a Boston-based baking entrepreneur who was raised in Silver Spring and educated at Talmudical Academy in Baltimore. The league's inaugural season was last year, when six teams (from Beit Shemesh, Modi'in, Netanya, Petach Tikva, Ra'anana and Tel Aviv) each played a 45-game season. Although the rules were those of Major League Baseball, there was also something uniquely Israeli about the experience: Each game was preceded by the singing of “Hatikvah,” the hot dogs at the concession stands were all kosher and some 20 percent of the players were sabras.

The rest of the rosters were filled with amateur and minor league players from the United States, Dominican Republic, Australia, Canada, Russia, Japan and Colombia. They each received $2,000 for the season, and the amenities weren't much better. Most of the players shared dormitory rooms in high school dormitories near Tel Aviv. There were also Baltimore connections here as well. One of the Nettanya Tigers was Benjamin Engichart, who played high school ball at the Hebrew Academy of Greater Washington and attends the University of Maryland. (His teammate at the academy, Joe Friedman of Baltimore, plays in the Israel Softball League.)

On Aug. 19 of last year, in Petach Tikva, Ron Blomberg's Bet Shemesh Blue Sox shut out Art Shamsky, Modii and Miranda, 3-0, in the Israel Baseball League's inaugural professional championship game. In February, the IBL announced that eight of its players from last season have moved up into the professional ranks. Among them are Eladio Rodriguez and Jason Reyes (both signed by the Yankees); Maximo Nelson (with the Japanese champion Chunichi Dragons); Juan Feliciano (who turned down Triple-A offers from the Nationals, Astros and Pirates to sign with the Sultanes de Monterrey of the Mexican League); Rafael Bergstrom and Jason Benson (Atlantic League); and Josh Doane and Noah Walker (both invited to spring training by the Boston Red Sox).

This week the IBL is putting on a week-long baseball festival that will put on an all-star team against one made up of premier Israeli players. The event will run from August 14 through August 21.

But it's at the Little League level that baseball in Israel promises to flourish, and that's where those who are interested in promoting the game continue to invest their most greatest enthusiasm. The Jewish National Fund, earnestly seeking to accommodate the growing number of players in Israel (currently estimated at more than 2,000), runs a “Project: Baseball” whose goal is to develop synthetic turf fields around the country (See JNF.org/baseball).

The problem is where to play. Besides Gezer, there are only five other baseball fields in Israel (at the Baptist Village, Chassimonim, Tel Aviv, a kibbutz near Akko, and Ra'anana). The JNF owns three parcels of land (in Netanya, Tel Aviv and Beersheva) that have been designated for future fields and plans are under way to construct a diamond in Jerusalem.

The Jewish National Fund and others — including the fledgling Baby Birds who are this year's boys of summer at Gezer — seem to share the belief that, just as there will always be an Israel, if they build more fields of dreams, the players, from all over, will keep coming.