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# Hammerin' Hank & the Golden Arm: Remembering Baseball's Jewish Hall of Famers

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**HAMMERIN' HANK & THE GOLDEN ARM**  
*Remembering Baseball's Jewish Hall of Famers*

**By Kenneth Lasson**

*It was a constant thing. I think it was a spur for me to do better.  
Not only were you a bum; you were a Jewish bum.*  
– Hank Greenberg, on being taunted

*I don't know why people insist upon making something big out of that . . . I am not devout,  
but I have religious principles by which I've lived, and by which I intend to keep living.*  
– Sandy Koufax, on not pitching during Yom Kippur

Where have you gone, Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax?

Baseball's two Jewish Hall of Famers are iconic figures in the national pastime, routinely listed among the top players of all time. Greenberg, who would have been 100 years old in January, "was one of the truly great hitters," said none other than Joe Dimaggio. "When I first saw him, he made my eyes pop out." Koufax, who turned 75 at the end of December, "had the greatest arm I've ever seen," said the legendary general manager Branch Rickey.

Remembered by Jews and Gentiles alike for their principled decisions to sit out key World Series games so that they could attend Yom Kippur services, both Greenberg and Koufax are featured prominently in are featured in the recent documentary *Jews and Baseball: An American Love Story*.

But what was once America's primary national pastime – and symbolic of how we valued competition and fair play – major-league baseball did not easily embrace Jews, Blacks, and other minorities. Although there were some Jewish players in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it wasn't until Greenberg achieved superstar status in the 1930's and Koufax became one of the most dominant pitchers ever in the 1960's that the studious but athletically-challenged stereotype of Jews was shattered. (The color barrier wasn't broken until 1947, when Jackie

Robinson was signed by Branch Rickey to a Brooklyn Dodgers contract.)

As the new season begins, some fans may wonder whether they'll ever see the likes of them again.

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Henry Benjamin Greenberg was born into an Orthodox household in 1911. When he was eighteen the New York Yankees offered him a contract, but he turned it down because they already had a young first baseman named Lou Gehrig. Instead Greenberg spent a year at New York University, then signed with the Detroit Tigers.

During three years in the minor leagues (during which he hit for a high average and 73 home runs at Raleigh, Evansville, and Beaumont) , Greenberg encountered anti-Semitic slurs and incidents. Things weren't much different when he was promoted to the majors in 1933. Spectators yelled coarse racial epithets, as did some players on opposing teams. ("Hey, Mo!" was among the mildest. More common were "Jew b\*\*\*\*\*d" and "kike son-of-a-b\*\*\*\*\*") But he finished his first season in Detroit with a .301 batting average, 12 homers, and 87 runs batted in.

. Jewish fans – both in Detroit and around the American League – took to Greenberg almost at once, offering him everything from free meals to free cars, all of which he refused.

In 1934 Greenberg, on the strength of a .339 batting average, led the Tigers to a four-game lead in the American League pennant race. September 10<sup>th</sup> of that year was Rosh HaShanah. The Tigers were playing the Boston Red Sox. Fans and rabbis debated whether Greenberg, who by his accomplishments on the field was slowly winning acceptance for Jews among non-Jewish Americans, should play on the High Holy Days. Some rabbis (at least one them Orthodox) offered Talmudic opinions that he could, others (what else is new) that he shouldn't.

Greenberg came up with his own compromise: he would play on Rosh Hashanah, but not on Yom Kippur. Came the New Year and parents sent their children out of the synagogue to listen to reports from the ballpark; cantors stopped praying to be filled in. Greenberg hit two home runs that won the game, 2-1; afterwards he told teammates he felt guilty about it. The next day, the *Detroit Free Press* carried a headline across its front page, in Hebrew, wishing

Greenberg a Happy New Year.

Ten days later, though, he spent Yom Kippur in at the conservative Shaarey Zedek synagogue on West Chicago Boulevard in Detroit. He was startled to find himself greeted with a standing ovation from the congregation as he entered the sanctuary. The Tigers lost that day, but Greenberg's absence inspired these lines from poet Edgar Guest:

*Come Yom Kippur - holy fast day wide-world 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 honor him for that!*

The Tigers went on to win the pennant, but lost the World Series to the St. Louis Cardinals in seven games. The Cardinals were particularly abusive, with a constant stream of epithets toward Greenberg. (“Moses!” “Kike!” “Throw him a pork chop – he can’t hit that!”) So were the Chicago Cubs in the ‘35 Series. Plate Umpire George Moriarty warned some Cubs players to stop yelling anti-Semitic slurs and eventually cleared the players from the bench. (Moriarty was disciplined for this action by then-commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis, who had a rule that ejections during the World Series had to be cleared with him first.)

Greenberg sometimes retaliated against the ethnic attacks, once going into the Chicago White Sox clubhouse to challenge manager Jimmy Dykes and at another time calling out the entire Yankee team. “When I was playing,” Greenberg said later, “I used to resent being singled out as a Jewish ballplayer. I wanted to be known as a great ballplayer, period. I'm not sure why or when I changed, because I'm still not a particularly religious person. Lately, though, I find myself wanting to be remembered not only as a great ballplayer, but even more as a great Jewish ballplayer.”

And that he did.

He was the first Jew voted Major League Baseball's Most Valuable Player (1935 and 1940), and one of few to be unanimously voted American League MVP (1935), and one of only three to earn MVP honors at two different positions (first base and left field). In 1937 he hit .337

with 183 rbo's and 40 home runs – one of them said to be the longest ever hit at Boston's Fenway Park.

In 1938 Greenberg challenged Babe Ruth's record of 60 home runs in a season. With five games left, he had hit 58. Several pitchers chose to walk him rather than give him a chance to overtake Ruth (twenty percent of his plate appearances during September resulted in free passes), and he didn't. Throughout that season, he recalled in his autobiography, "I felt a responsibility. As time went by I came to feel that if I, as a Jew, hit a home run, I was hitting one against Hitler."

But "Hammerin' Hank" (to others "The Hebrew Hammer") went on to become a five-time All-Star, twice named the American League's Most Valuable Player, the first major league player to hit 25 or more home runs in a season in each league. In 23 World Series games, he hit .318, with five homers and 22 RBI.

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Greenberg could well have become the greatest slugger in baseball history, were it not for his patriotism. In May of 1940, after being drafted into the Army, he was the first major leaguer to enlist. His annual income dropped from \$55,000 (close to a million dollars in current terms) to \$21 a month (about \$300 currently). "I made up my mind to go when I was called," he said. "My country comes first."

Honorably discharged two days before Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, he re-enlisted and volunteered for service in the Army Air Force First major leaguer to enlist in US Army after Pearl Harbor, although his age would have exempted him from serving further. He graduated from Officer Candidate School and was commissioned as a first lieutenant, eventually scouting locations for B-29 bomber bases in the China-Burma-India Theater. Promoted to captain, Greenberg served with a distinguished record for 45 months – the longest of any major league player.

"He's a bigger hero than when he was knocking home runs," said U.S. Senator Josiah Bailey. He could "fight the Nazis with a B-29 instead of his bat."

When the war ended in 1945 Greenberg, by then 34, returned to the Tigers in midsummer

– hitting a home run his first game back. He finished the season leading his team virtually tied with the Washington Senators with one game remaining, against the Browns. In the top of the ninth inning the Tigers were losing, 3-2. There were no lights in St. Louis’s Sportsman Park and it was getting dark. Greenberg at the plate with the bases loaded, when Umpire George Pipgras said, “Sorry Hank, but I’m gonna have to call the game. I can’t see the ball”– to which Greenberg supposedly replied, “Don’t worry, George, I can see it just fine.” On the next pitch he hit a grand slam home run, to win the pennant. The Tigers went on to win the 1945 World Series.

Greenberg played two more years. In 1946, he returned to peak form, leading the league in home runs (44) and RBIs (127), both for the fourth time. He was second in slugging percentage (.604) and total bases (316) behind Ted Williams

Baseball statisticians project that had he not missed five seasons during World War II, Greenberg would have accumulated from 1,800 to 2,000 runs batted in and more than 500 homers.

In 1947 Greenberg was traded to the National League, where he was one of the few players publicly to befriend and encourage Jackie Robinson as he endured racism wherever he traveled. “Don’t let them get to you,” advised Greenberg. “You’re doing fine. Keep it up.” After his playing days were over, Greenberg said that he’d never had to face the bigotry that Robinson endured. Birdie Tebbetts, one of Greenberg’s teammates during the 1930’s and ‘40’s, said that other than Robinson the big first baseman was the most abused player in baseball history.

In 1954, he became the first Jewish player to be elected to baseball’s Hall of Fame in Cooperstown.

“Class tells,” said Robinson later. “It sticks out all over Mr. Greenberg.”

“I joined the Beverly Hills tennis club to eat lunch with him,” said actor Walter Matthau. “I don’t even play tennis”

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During his twelve-year career with the Dodgers, Sandy Koufax never had to endure the blatant anti-Semitism that Greenberg had faced. His best seasons were a six-year stretch from

1961 to 1966, when he was virtually unhittable. He won 129 games during that period and lost 47. Part of his legend is that he left baseball at such an early age, because of arthritis. He retired at age 30 with 165 wins and 87 losses.

Koufax was born Sanford Braun in 1935 in Brooklyn and raised in Borough Park. His parents divorced when he was three and his mother remarried six years later to Irving Koufax. He attended Brooklyn's Lafayette High School, where he was better known for his basketball prowess and on the Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst team. When he was 15 he joined a local youth baseball league, where he started out as a left-handed catcher before moving to first base.

In 1954 Koufax attended the University of Cincinnati as a pitcher, and went 3–1 with 51 strikeouts and 30 walks in 31 innings. Koufax tried out with the Giants and the Pirates, where he broke the thumb of the team's bullpen coach. Branch Rickey, then the Pirates' general manager, told a scout that Koufax had the "greatest arm I have ever seen." But by then he had already committed to the Dodgers.

"There are two times in my life the hair on my arms has stood up," said Al Campanis, a Dodgers scout, "the first time I saw the Sistine Chapel, and the first time I saw Sandy Koufax throw a fastball."

The Dodgers signed Koufax for \$6,000 (\$49,000 in current dollar terms) salary, with a \$14,000 bonus (\$114,000 currently). Koufax planned to use the bonus to finish his university education, if his baseball career failed. It didn't.

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The "Man with the Golden Arm" was an artist on the mound. Dodgers broadcaster Vin Scully described him walking onto the field as "a maestro ascending the podium to conduct his symphony." His fastball was clocked at 102 miles per hour. "You can't hit what you can't see," said Hall of Fame shortstop Ernie Banks on Koufax "Either he throws the fastest ball I've ever seen, or I'm going blind," said Phillies outfielder Richie Ashburn "He throws a 'radio ball,' a pitch you hear, but you don't see," said Phillies manager Gene Mauch.

His curveball was also one of the best ever. In her best-selling biography *Koufax: A*

*Lefty's Legacy*, author Jane Leavy tells this story: In the 1963 World Series, Koufax is facing the Yankees' best hitter, Mickey Mantle.

Book on Mantle is never, ever throw him the curve. [H]e's so strong that he can still crush the ball even if his body is fooled but his hands are still not committed. Koufax faces Mantle three times and throws all fastballs. Third time up, crucial situation, he gets two strikes, then shakes off the fastball sign, twice. Catcher catches on, puts down two fingers for the curve – which was a horrid thing, a nose-to-toes diver that just killed batters, best curve in the game – but still, he'd been told NOT to throw this thing to Mantle. But he does. Ball comes in eye-high, then dives, crosses the plate at Mantle's knees. Mantle flinches a bit but never moves. Called strike three. He stands there an extra second, then says to the catcher, 'How the \*\*\*\* is anybody supposed to hit that \*\*\*\*?' and walks back to the dugout.

Years later, Willie Mays said, "Sandy would strike me out two or three times a game and I knew every pitch he was going to throw: fastball, breaking ball. I knew it. He would let you look at it and still I could not hit it."

"Trying to hit him was like trying to drink coffee with a fork," said Pittsburgh's Willie Stargell.

Koufax was named the National League's Most Valuable Player in 1963, and won the Cy Young Award in '63, '65, and '66 by unanimous votes – in each of those seasons leading both leagues in wins, strikeouts, and earned-run-average. He was the first major-leaguer to pitch four no-hitters (including the eighth perfect game in history). In 1972, his first year of eligibility, he became the youngest member ever elected to the Hall of Fame. He was 36 years old.

In 2007, when he was nearly twice that age, Koufax was drafted by the Modi'in Miracle of the inaugural Israel Baseball League. "It's been 41 years between starts for him," said Modi'in manager Art Shamsky. "If he's rested and ready to take the mound again, we want him on our team." (Koufax declined.)

In 2010, Koufax was included among those invited to the first White House reception in honor of Jewish American Heritage Month. President Obama noted that he had "something in common" with Koufax: "He can't pitch on Yom Kippur. I can't pitch." The mention of Koufax's name brought the biggest cheer at the event.

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*Jews and Baseball: An American Love Story* documents Jewish ballplayers in every decade since the beginning of baseball.

Lipman Pike, who many baseball historians say became the first professional ballplayer when he accepted \$20 a week from the Philadelphia Athletics in 1866, had both power in speed. In 1872 and 1873 he played for the Baltimore Canaries (also called the Yellow Stockings) in the National Association, leading the league in home runs for both seasons. In August of 1873 he accepted a challenge to race a horse in a 100-yard dash. The event was held in Baltimore's Newman Park; Pike won by four yards, pocketing \$250 in prize money (close to \$5000 today).

Browns pitcher Barney Peltz was known for his baseball card nickname "The Yiddish Curver"; his career ERA ranks first among Jewish pitchers (1.90, ahead of Koufax's second-place 2.76). Mose Solomon, called "The Rabbi of Swat," had a brief career with the New York Giants. Moe Berg had a fascinating career as a player (he played 16 years in the majors, hitting .287 for the 1929 White Sox) and American spy during World War II (he once parachuted into Yugoslavia to evaluate the strength of anti-Nazi resistance groups). A *magna cum laude* graduate of Princeton (he later went to Columbia Law School), it was said of Berg that "he spoke seven languages and couldn't hit in any of them."

Among the best Jewish ballplayers after Greenberg and Koufax were Al Rosen (Rookie of the Year for the 1950 for the Cleveland Indians), the Dodgers' Shawn Green (.283 average over 15 seasons, 328 home runs) and the Red Sox's Kevin Youkilis (.294 lifetime average, 112 homers, still playing).

Many baseball notables outside the playing field were also Jewish, including Commissioner Bud Selig, players union director Marvin Miller, and a number of team owners.

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The day in 1965 when Koufax sat out a World Series game for Yom Kippur produced two of the best one-liners in baseball history. When Don Drysdale struggled during that game and manager Walter Alton came out to the mound to remove him, Drysdale said, "I bet you wish I was Jewish too!"

And when a reporter later asked Koufax why he thought it happened that he was

scheduled to pitch on Yom Kippur, he replied, “God knows.”

*Kenneth Lasson, a law professor at the University of Baltimore, is a frequent contributor.*