

## Baseball, Jews and the American dream

by **Jared Sichel**, posted on Apr. 7, 2016 at 11:08 am

In 1903, the Yiddish-language *Forverts* published a letter from a Russian immigrant, who'd written to say he didn't understand the point of the game of baseball, the sport so beloved by all Americans.

"What is the point of a crazy game like baseball?" the perplexed reader asked. "I want my boy to grow up to be a *mensch*, not a wild American runner."

"Let your boys play baseball and play it well," *Forverts* publisher Abraham Cahan wrote back. "Let us not raise the children that they grow up foreigners in their own birthplace."



Six years later, the *Forverts* published a column that attempted to explain this strange game to its readers, many of them recent immigrants from Europe eager to leave behind the Old Country to become American. The piece was illustrated with a baseball diamond with Yiddish notations, including detailed explanations of the "defense party" and the "enemy party" — meaning the team in the field and the team at bat.

"To us immigrants, this all seems crazy, however, it's worthwhile to understand what kind of craziness it is," the *Forverts* said. "If an entire nation is crazy over something, it's not too much to ask to try and understand what it means."

More than a century later, Americans are still crazy about baseball. Major League Baseball is the second-largest professional sports league in the world by annual revenue (\$9.5 billion in 2015), second only to the National Football League. And, more importantly, baseball, more than any other sport, has served as a means of assimilation for wave after wave of newly arrived immigrants to the United States, a ready bridge to connect with Americans and their culture.

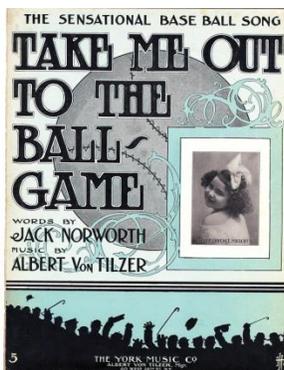
Now, timed to the opening week of Major League Baseball's 113th season, the Skirball Cultural Center is unveiling "Chasing Dreams: Baseball & Becoming American," an acclaimed exhibition organized by the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH) in Philadelphia. The show will be on view for the duration of the baseball season, through Oct. 30, highlighting the sport's role as an active player in America's

major dramas of the 20th and 21st centuries — immigration, racism and racial integration, wars, assimilation and acculturation. The exhibition also shows how baseball’s role in these phenomena was just as pivotal for Jews as it has been for other cultural groups, including Italians, Blacks, Mexicans, Japanese and Latinos, a particularly impactful group within Los Angeles baseball, which the Skirball’s installation especially focuses on.

“While we can see in the story of American Jewish life this important kind of connection to baseball as our national pastime, as a symbol of ideals, as a public display of Jews’ integration into American society, it has indeed played a similar role for other minority populations,” said Josh Perelman, co-curator of the exhibition and the chief curator at NMAJH.

The show emphasizes memorabilia and data, but also stories even seasoned baseball fans might not have been aware of — whether highlighting Jewish stars like Sandy Koufax and Hank Greenberg, or more minor figures, like catcher Moe Berg and Thelma “Tiby” Eisen, the latter a Los Angeles native who grew up in an Orthodox Jewish home and was an outfielder in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL).

“Chasing Dreams” is organized around four distinct sections and includes some interactive experiences, including a virtual-reality game that enables the visitor to experience playing in the field, and a cage (replete with a chain-link fence) where visitors can throw off a mound. (Just like Sandy Koufax!)



The exhibition opens with an introduction to the sport’s early history and key founders — ones whose names you might not know, like Lipman Emanuel “Lip” Pike, a 19th-century baseball star, who was not only the game’s first Jewish player, but also is believed to have been the first-ever professional baseball player. There’s also Albert Von Tilzer, son of Polish Jewish immigrants, who wrote in 1908 the iconic song “Take Me Out to the Ball-Game” with singer-songwriter Jack Norworth. On display is a reproduction of the original lyric sheet, along with the sheet music to “Jake, Jake, the Yiddisha Ball Player,” a baseball polka written by composer Irving Berlin and lyricist Blanche Merrill. There’s also space dedicated to Barney Dreyfuss, known among hard-core baseball aficionados as the Jewish

German immigrant who bought the Pittsburgh Pirates and co-invented the first World Series championship — today one of the biggest annual athletic spectacles in the world. Visitors also can read an excellent reproduction of the 1903 World Series agreement, drafted and signed by Dreyfuss and Boston Americans owner Henry Killilea.

Amid the baseball trivia is a pendant awarded to Deacon White of the Detroit Wolverines as part of the sport’s precursor to the World Series, which was named for a Jew — actress Helen Dauvray, who married John Montgomery Ward, shortstop for the New York Giants. From 1887 to about 1893, Dauvray personally awarded the Dauvray Cup and accompanying pendants to the winning team of the championship game between the National League and the American Association. The owner of the New York Giants, as it happens, was Andrew Freedman, son of Jewish German immigrants, and a successful businessman and

Tammany Hall insider who bought the Giants in 1895, while in his mid-30s. Known as one of baseball's most unpopular owners ever, he fought with everyone, including fans. The exhibition includes a Polo Grounds pass bearing Freedman's signature from 1898 — the same year the short-fused owner pulled the Giants off the field after Baltimore Orioles outfielder Ducky Holmes exclaimed an anti-Semitic slur.

The show's "Shaping Identity" section profiles players who found a home in baseball, and through it helped shape what being American meant for them. Hank Greenberg, who, with Koufax, is considered one of the greatest players in American professional sports history, is a linchpin of the exhibition.



According to Birdie Tebbetts, Greenberg's teammate on the Tigers, Greenberg — also known as "The Hebrew Hammer" — "was abused more than anyone except Jackie Robinson." It didn't help that Greenberg played in Detroit in the 1930s and '40s, during the time of notoriously anti-Semitic inventor and manufacturer Henry Ford and Father Charles Coughlin, both of whom worked to poison many Americans' attitudes toward Jews.

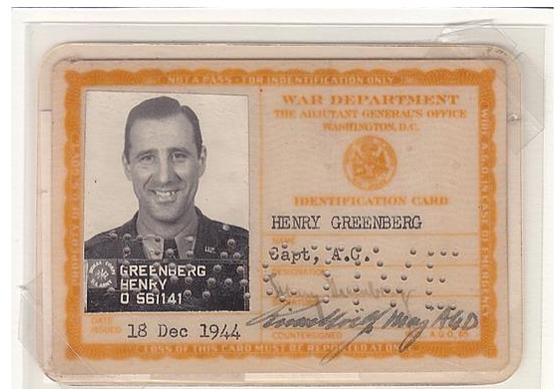
Greenberg's own Detroit Tigers uniform is on display in the show, along with a crown awarded him by the Maryland Professional Baseball Players Association as part of its "Sultan of Swat" award.



Perhaps most touching — even more than his decision to not play in a crucial game on Yom Kippur in 1934 — is Greenberg's original military identification card from 1944. Greenberg was the first player to register for the draft, in October 1940, and served 47 months — longer in World War II than any other player, during which time he did not play even one inning of his beloved baseball. He eventually became a member of the Army Air Forces in the Pacific theater, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

"My country comes first," Greenberg famously said.

Berg and Eisen are two of the lesser-known Jewish ballplayers highlighted in the exhibition. Berg wasn't a particularly good baseball player by MLB standards, but the Princeton and Columbia graduate made his mark as perhaps one of the most intelligent people the game has ever seen, as well as being a spy for the predecessor to the CIA — the Office of Strategic Services — during World War II.



For her part, Tiby Eisen was born in Los Angeles in 1922 to Dorothy (Shechter) Eisen and her Austrian immigrant husband, David Eisen. In 1940, Tiby wanted to play football but was denied by a city council's

ruling that women couldn't play tackle football in Los Angeles. Eventually, she pivoted to a sport where female involvement was more accepted — baseball, joining the all-female league in 1944 and becoming one of its most successful players in the league's short, 11-year history.



“Chasing Dreams,” though, like baseball itself, is not about only one ethnic group. As much as the show celebrates the role of Jews in baseball, as well as the role of baseball in bringing Jews into the American mainstream, “Chasing Dreams” demonstrates how the sport also served as a bridge between Jews and non-Jews, and likewise, for other minority groups striving to enter the American mainstream through the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries.

Notably, there's the iconic portrait of Greenberg and Joe DiMaggio, the Italian-American New York Yankee, and there's the extensive space given to the “Overcoming Adversity” section, showing the journey of Black Americans like Jackie Robinson and Hank Aaron, and Mexican Fernando Valenzuela, Cuban Raul Lago and Puerto Rican Roberto Clemente, as well as Japanese-born Ichiro Suzuki.

One particularly jarring set of letters can be found in an exchange between the Washington baseball club and its minor league team, the Chattanooga Lookouts, in December 1953, six years after Robinson integrated the sport. The Washington team was one of only a handful that had not yet signed a Black player.

Ossie Bluege, director of Washington's “farm league” operations, wrote to Lookouts owner Joe Engel that Lago had applied to attend a Nationals baseball camp in Florida, cautioning that “whether he is colored or not” would be determinative in whether he could attend.

“If he's white all go and well, if not, he stays home. ...” Bluege typed, adding in his own hand below that, “If any colored blood want to know now.” Engel then wrote to the American Club in Havana, “If Raul Lago has any colored blood at all, I do not want him to come to Winter Garden.” They got the response they needed to give Lago the green light:

“NO COLORED BLOOD AT ALL, POSITIVELY WHITE, AS SNOW BALL.”

From the perspective of today's world of multiracial and multiethnic teams, that things like this happened in baseball seems bizarre, but even this ugly interaction is part of what makes baseball, as Perelman said, “a mirror for our society, revealing all of our strengths and all of our things that we have to celebrate as a nation, but also the challenges we face and the ground we still have to cover.”

Throughout its history, baseball has, Perelman believes, charted a sort of “chronology of ethnic identity and minority acceptance” in America — the game reveals the nation's shortcomings, even while it serves as a proxy for America's remarkable success in overcoming those deficiencies.

Today, the advancement of Jews or Italians or Blacks in American sports is no longer at issue. But baseball can still be seen as serving an acculturating role for Latino immigrants and their descendants.

“The meaning of diversity in baseball is very much today centered around the Caribbean and South America,” Perelman said. “It is part of the ongoing story of the sport that how diversity is defined in baseball changes over time and illustrates the nature of immigration and ethnicity at a particular moment in American history.”

Gabriel “Tito” Avila Jr., founder of San Francisco’s Hispanic Heritage Baseball Museum, describes baseball as a “catalyst” for Latino assimilation into American culture, and said the sport has helped acculturate and assimilate Latino Americans since Colombian-born Lou Castro became the first Latino professional baseball player with the Philadelphia Athletics in 1902.

The main issue with Latino involvement in professional baseball wasn’t their ethnicity or national origin — it was their skin color, and, in fact, Latinos and Blacks shared a particular bond, because many of the Black Latinos (Afro-Cubans, for example) played with African-Americans in the Negro Leagues. It wasn’t until Minnie Miñoso, a Black Cuban, debuted in 1949 with the Cleveland Indians that a Black Latino broke the crumbling color barrier that Robinson cracked two years earlier.

Avila, 65, is a son of Puerto Rican immigrants and grew up in New York City playing stickball, handball and baseball in the streets with the other Latino kids in his neighborhood. He went on to play semi-professional baseball and opened the Hispanic Heritage Baseball Museum in 1998.

“It’s a different game altogether [today],” Avila said, pointing out that Latinos, for many years now, have moved well beyond the sport’s periphery, with players like Robinson Cano, Felix Hernandez and Alex Rodriguez cementing Latinos’ place in the game much as Greenberg and Koufax and Robinson did decades ago. “We’ve got superstars. We’ve got players that have put us deep in the game of baseball in every position.”

Adrian Burgos, a history professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign who specializes in Latino sports history, added that what distinguishes Latino baseball players from those in other immigrant groups is that Caribbean Latinos have a rich baseball history dating back about as far as that of Americans.

“Latinos have been playing this very effusive, ebullient, emotional, enthusiastic version of baseball going back to the 19th century,” Burgos said. Baseball for Latino Americans, according to Burgos, gives them a “common language” with their American neighbors.

“They are already fanatics of the game,” Burgos said. “So what really helped them when they migrated to places like New York or Chicago or other urban areas throughout the U.S., the familiarity with baseball gave them an in to having conversations with their neighbors: ‘Did you see Gomez pitching against Greenberg? Did you see Clemente?’

“I think that baseball, more than any other sport, has served as a mirror of American society,” the show’s co-curator Perelman said. “Not to say that other sports don’t have their own stories, but in my opinion, baseball has been the most powerful and the most significant.”