

Oh To Be A Center Fielder

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Although they rank high among Nobel Prize winner, Jews are not generally known for their athletics. But as “Chasing Dreams” at Philadelphia’s [National Museum of American Jewish History](#) demonstrates, baseball has fielded its way through the American Jewish psyche, from its very beginnings.

You probably already know about Jewish Hall of Famers, Hank (“The Hebrew Hammer”) Greenberg and Sandy Koufax, and their proud refusals to play on Yom Kippur ,or Andy Cohen, the “Tuscaloosa Terror.”

But how about Rudolph Kalish and Lipman Pike, who were part of the line-up in the 1800s. And then there’s Moe Berg, a major league catcher, described alternatively as “the brainiest guy in baseball” or “the strangest man ever to play baseball.” During World War II, Berg became a spy for the OSS, the CIA’s predecessor.

But the list of players is only part of the story.

Where Jews and baseball meet the most naturally is, not surprisingly, in the commentary – both the written and the oral tradition. Baseball themes run through books by Jewish writers from Bernard Malamud’s “The Natural” through Chaim Potok’s “The Chosen.”

For the ultimate fan, Philip Roth, baseball often served instead of religion. “Baseball was a kind of secular church that...bound millions upon millions of us together in common concerns, loyalties, rituals, enthusiasms and antagonisms (“My Baseball Years,” a 1973 essay in *The New York Times*). In “Portnoy’s Complaint,” the kvetchy hero seems to perk up only when describing baseball. “Oh, to be a center fielder, a center fielder - and nothing more.”



Omer Counter made of Louisville Slugger baseball bats. Keneseth Israel Congregation, Louisville, Kentucky.

The oral tradition is well-represented by the many iconic Jewish sportscasters, from Howard Cosell and Mel Allen to today's Chris Berman and Mike Greenberg, all of whose incisive and often irreverent spiels have enlivened the action on the field.

As the exhibit makes clear with photos and recordings, for newly arrived Jewish immigrants and their children, America's national pastime offered a compelling and unthreatening path to integration. I have many memories of my own father, a devout Orthodox Jew, poring over baseball statistics with my brother and even occasionally attending games, cheering for the winning team in his thick Polish-Jewish accent. Even over a century ago, Rabbi Solomon Schechter could say, "Unless you can play baseball, you'll never get to be a Rabbi in America."

But for the ultimate melding of baseball and Judaism, check out Keneseth Israel Congregation's Omer Counter (for counting the 49 days between Passover and Shavout) made of Louisville Slugger baseball bats. The card for each day of the Omer corresponds to Jewish major leaguers who wore that number.

"Chasing Dreams: Baseball and Becoming American," is on view ,along with a wide array of public programming, through October 26, 2014 at Philadelphia's National Museum of American Jewish History, 2014 at 101 South Independence Mall East, Philadelphia.