

Jewish Community Voice

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‘Take me out to the ball game...’

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Pinchas Num. 25:10-30:1

At the end of June, my spouse, Barbara, and I experienced “Chasing Dreams: Baseball and Becoming American” at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philly. I was skeptical. Jews in baseball? Okay, there was Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax. I was pleasantly surprised. So here are just a few connections between the Torah reading Pinchas and “Chasing Dreams.”

Pinchas was zealous for God and insisted on purity of the faith and regard for God’s word. He became enshrined as the ancestor of the High Priest, Koheyn Gadol, forever.

Baseball has its commissioner, heads of each league, owners, GMs, rules—and, what is a “balk” anyway? The baseball exhibit displayed the Yiddish Daily Forvertz full-page description explaining the game to our immigrant ancestors. Solomon Schechter explained, although it may be apocryphal, “Unless you can play baseball, you’ll never get to be a rabbi in America.” (Schechter speaking to a young scholar, Louis Finkelstein, according to Jeff Jacoby, in a Commentary book review in October 2009)—a perfect connection between the portion and the game of baseball.

The influence of Jews in baseball cannot be underestimated in all the leagues: Negro, Minors, Majors, and Little League. From players and club owners to concession stand employees and stadium procurers, Jews were pervasive in the sport. Spreading the sport around the country was part of our piece of American history. (Check out “The Dearborn Independent,” issue of 10 September 1921, for a Henry Ford’s eye view of our part in the game. Oy!)

In Pinchas, we view the preparations for dividing the Promised Land. Chapter 27 reveals the dilemma of a man's death and having five daughters, and no sons, survive him. Only males may inherit property, so Tzlofchad's daughters came to Moshe for their share. God conveyed to Moshe that their cause was just and they too would have a slice of the Promised Land. They paved the way for women in the future. One such woman was Thelma Eisen.

Thelma "Tiby" Eisen, named one of the top 20 players in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League 1943-54. "We played a big charity game in Chicago for a Jewish hospital," she recounted. "My name and picture were in every Jewish paper. My uncle, who had said, 'You'll get a bad reputation, a bad name,' was in the stands, just bursting with pride that I was there."

Before his death, Rabbi Zusya said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'" We may not all be a Pinchas, showing our zeal for God so dramatically or be able to make a name for ourselves as did Machla, No'a, Chogla, Milka, Tirtza or Tiby Eisen, but we can become the best person we can be.

Now relax, watch the game, and Shabbat Shalom!