

**Baseball (An Jewish American Pasttime)**  
**Part of America at 250: Jewish Ideas and the American Experiment**  
**Presentation by Dr. Robert A. Harris**

**TEXTS REFERENCED**

Giamatti, A. Bartlett. "[The Green Fields of the Mind.](#)"

Kingwell, Mark. "[Fail Better: Why Baseball Matters.](#)"

Lukinsky, Joseph Sander. *Maybe the Lies We Tell are Really True: Selected Writings Education, Judaism, and Jewish Education* (excerpt in packet)

Potok, Chaim. [The Chosen.](#)

Verducci, Tom. "[The Left Arm of God: Sandy Koufax Was More Than Just a Perfect Pitcher.](#)" *Sports Illustrated*.

**NOTES FROM THE SESSIONS**

Mishnah Megillah 1:1:

מְגִלָּה נִקְרָאת בְּאַחַד עָשָׂר, בְּשָׁנִים עָשָׂר, בְּשִׁלְשָׁה עָשָׂר, בְּאַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר, בְּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר, לֹא פְחוֹת וְלֹא יוֹתֵר.

The Megilla is read on the eleventh, on the twelfth, on the thirteenth, on the fourteenth, or on the fifteenth of the month of Adar, not earlier and not later.

**"The Green Fields of the Mind" (A. Bartlett Giamatti)**

Is one obligated to recite it before the radio broadcast of the final game of the season has come to an end? Or may one read it later that evening? Must it be read in its entirety, or may one read it in thirds so as to complete it once every three years? Must one read it aloud, or may one read it silently?

I have regularly invoked baseball lore during sermons and teaching, among my favorites are:

*For a Sukkot sermon on Ecclesiastes:*

Vin Scully, during Friday's Cub-Dodger game: "Andre Dawson has a bruised knee and is listed as day-to-day. (Pause.) Aren't we all?"

*For a High Holiday sermon, citing Yogi Berra:*

We may be lost, but at least we're making good time.

*From an email I wrote to a friend in 2003:*

I guess it would take half a lifetime, but also i could try to do it in 1/2 a paragraph. I think it is, in its own way, a metaphor for living, freedom and expression within a set of rules, individuality and team play,

long moments waiting for something to happen - and being ready to take advantage of that something, immediately, when the time arrives. the beauty in the moves, both the beauty and the athleticism, the competition and the hand extended to the foe, and the camaraderie and bonding, the sheer unexpectedness of what will happen next, and the knowledge that it will all end by the ninth inning... unless it is a tie-score, and then the game extends indefinitely, the fact that there is no "time clock" as in most other games... should i go on?

(Note: just to be on the safe side, I ran several phrases of this throughout chatgpt & etc. to make sure that I am really the author of this paragraph.... apparently I am but feel free to continue to check.)

*The refrain of a song I wrote some fifteen years ago (partial):*

And the Holy Trinity

That does the trick for me

Is baseball, Torah and rock 'n roll

*Umpire Story*

from Fail Better: Why Baseball Matters, by Mark Kingwell

The "three umpires in a bar" philosophy is a famous anecdote exploring epistemology—how we know what we know—through their approaches to calling balls and strikes. It illustrates the progression from objective realism to subjectivity and, finally, to radical constructivism, highlighting that perception and interpretation create reality.

- Umpire 1 (Realism): "I call 'em as they are." Represents the view that objective truth exists independently of the observer.
- Umpire 2 (Perspectivism): "I call 'em as I see 'em." Represents the view that reality is filtered through human perception.
- Umpire 3 (Constructivism): "They ain't nothing until I call 'em." Represents the view that reality is created by the act of interpretation; the decision itself creates the truth.

1) Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Foundations of the Torah 1:1:

יְסוּד הַיְסוּדוֹת וְעִמּוּד הַחֲכָמוֹת לִידַע שֵׁיִשׁ שָׁם מְצוּי רֵאשׁוֹן. וְהוּא מְמַצֵּא כֹל נִמְצָא. וְכֹל הַנִּמְצָאִים מְשֻׁמִּים וְאֶרֶץ וּמָה שֶׁבִּיגִינָהּ לֹא נִמְצָאוּ אֵלָּא מֵאֲמַתַּת הַמְּצָאוֹ:

The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know that there is a Primary Being who brought into being all existence. All the beings of the heavens, the earth, and what is between them came into existence only from the truth of His being.

2) Koheleth 1:12–14:

13 וְנִתְּתִי אֶת-לְבִי לְדָרוֹשׁ וְלִתְּוֹר בְּחַקְמָה עַל כָּל-אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה תַחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא | עֲנִין אֲנִי קִהַלְתִּי הֵייתִי מְלֹךְ עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל בִּירוֹשָׁלַם:  
15 מֵעֲנֹת לֹא-14 רָאִיתִי אֶת-כָּל-הַמַּעֲשִׂים וְשֹׁנְעֵשׂוֹ תַחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהִגַּה הַכֹּל הַכֹּל וְרַעוּת רִוּם: רָע נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְבָנֵי הָאָדָם לַעֲנוֹת בּוֹ:  
יִכָּל לְתַקְּוֹ וְחֲסָרוֹן לֹא-יִיכָּל לְהַמְנוֹת:

I, Koheleth, was king in Jerusalem over Israel. 13 I set my mind to study and to probe with wisdom all that happens under the sun.—An unhappy business, that, which God gave men to be concerned with! 14 I observed all the happenings beneath the sun, and I found that all is futile and pursuit of wind...

3) Sifra on Leviticus 23:1–2:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה, הֲלֹא־מֵרָאשִׁית לְיִשְׂרָאֵל מִרְאֵת אֱלֹהִים מוֹעֲדֵי ה' אֲשֶׁר־רִיתָ קָרָא וְאֵתָם מִקְרָא יִקְדָּשׁ לָהֶם מוֹעֲדֵי י':

YHWH spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: The appointed-times of YHWH, which you are to proclaim to them [as] proclamations of holiness— these are they, my appointed-times:

תִּלְמַד לֹמֵר "אֲשֶׁר תִּקְרָאוּ אֹתָם... מוֹעֲדֵי י" ... אִם קָרִיתָם אֹתָם, "מוֹעֲדֵי י", וְאִם לֹא, אֵינֶן מוֹעֲדֵי י.

The Torah instructs: which you shall proclaim... these are they, my appointed-times: if you proclaim them, they are my appointed-times; if you don't, they are not my appointed times."

From Ed Greenstein: "sans erasure": the beauty/kedushah/intentionality of leaving mistakes in:

I never got to "The Baseball Haggadah" by Sharon Forman, from there I would have gone to:

Some of you may know the rabbinic rule, תדיר ושאינו תדיר – תדיר קודם, "when considering how to navigate between something that occurs regularly vs. something that happens only occasionally, what occurs regularly takes precedence (see Mishnah Zevahim 10:1: כל התדיר מחברו, קודם את חברו). But then again, sometimes one kind of roots for the unusual one to win out!

Passover is inevitably associated with Opening Day in my imagination, just as the Yamim Noraim/High Holidays were associated with the World Series.

From there I would have gone to:

For Jewish children in the 1960s, there was no greater savior than Sandy Koufax. As I'm sure everyone knows, Koufax chose not to pitch on Yom Kippur during the 1965 World Series. Don Drysdale started in his place, pitching poorly, and joked to manager Walter Alston, who came out to relieve him, "I bet right now you wish I was Jewish, too."

"The Left Arm of God" by Tom Verducci - tells another story: "At 8:30 on a Sunday morning in March, I attend a chapel service in the Sandy Koufax Room at Dodgertown. Players and coaches in their fabulously white Dodgers uniforms are there, but not Koufax. The Dodgers give glory to Jesus Christ every Sunday in a conference room named for the greatest Jewish ballplayer who ever lived. Outside the room is a picture of a young Koufax, smiling, as if he is in on the joke."

But a story fewer of us remember nowadays involves the other “greatest Jewish ballplayer who ever lived,” Hank Greenberg.

Hank Greenberg was an AMAZING baseball player. A team leader. A league leader. A Jew. Both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur fall in the regular season and in 1934 Greenberg's Detroit Tigers were involved in the pennant race. Greenberg wrote in his autobiography, "The team was fighting for first place, and I was probably the only batter in the lineup who was not in a slump. But in the Jewish religion, it is traditional that one observe the holiday solemnly, with prayer. One should not engage in work or play. And I wasn't sure what to do." Greenberg's rabbi said that Rosh Hashanah was a "festive holiday" and playing would be acceptable. Hank played and hit two home runs including a ninth inning game winner.

"I caught hell from my fellow parishioners, I caught hell from some rabbis, and I don't know what to do. It's ten days until the next holiday — Yom Kippur."

In a poem published in the Detroit Free Press, Edgar Guest concluded:

"Came Yom Kippur — holy fast day world wide 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 on the infield and shall miss him at the bat  
But he's true to his religion — and I honor him for that!"

Instead I skipped to:  
Forward (August 1909)

The Yiddish Daily

### 8 שווערע הלכה

(ס'ט גרויס רשמיות געוויינט דער רבנים קאנגרעגאציע, וואס איז אנטהאלטענע געווארען אין גוי'ס לעבען וואו, אין אונז וועלכער הינדערט רבנישע קעס האבען זיך געפראכען אויבער דעם "בניא", ווי צו פארשטיין די אפטיילונגען יונגע און חדר).



א גרויסע הרבנים: — אינגעלען אינגעלען, קום אין חדר, דער פלאך וועט  
דיך ווארען א פני! — געראדעווייט יו קייט, איל הימשיין!...  
„א י נ ע ל ע“

[Jews, Baseball, and The Yiddish Press](#)

[seforimblog.com](http://seforimblog.com)

#### MUSIC

##### *Take Me Out to the Ballgame:*

Jack Norworth, the lyricist behind "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," was not Jewish. He was, however, famously married to Jewish vaudeville star Nora Bayes, who first popularized the song, and his writing partner for the melody, Albert Von Tilzer, was Jewish.

The music and lyrics for *Damn Yankees* were written by the songwriting duo Richard Adler and Jerry Ross, both of whom were Jewish. Let's take a look at arguably the most Jewish song in the show, "You've gotta have heart:

You've gotta have heart, All you really need is heart

When the odds are sayin' you'll never win, That's when the grin should start  
You've gotta have hope, Mustn't sit around and mope  
Nothin's half as bad as it may appear, Wait'll next year and hope

When your luck is battin' zero, Get your chin up off the floor  
Mister you can be a hero, You can open any door, there's nothin' to it but to do it

You've gotta have heart, Miles 'n miles n' miles of heart  
Oh, it's fine to be a genius of course, But keep that old horse before the cart  
First you've gotta have heart

Translated and directed for Camp Ramah in Wisconsin (1980, then in Manhattan for my own company)

My translation includes what I thought was a moralistic saying of the ancient rabbinic Sages, אין דבר עומד בפני הרצון, "Nothing can stand in the presence of will" (familiar to English speakers as "where there's a will, there's a way"). However, apparently, there is no such classic rabbinic advice! One has to look at the Zohar, of all things, for this Aramaic observation: כל מילין דעלמא לא תליין אלא ברעותא, "all matters of the world are dependent on nothing other than will."

**Maybe the Lies  
We Tell Are Really True:**

*Selected Writings on Education, Judaism,  
and Jewish Education*

Joseph Sander Lukinsky

Edited by Barry W. Holtz with David V. Kahn



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## Chapter 19

### *My Baseball "Career"*

*[For many years, Joe Lukinsky's prowess as a baseball player was well-known and discussed in Jewish education circles. As time passed, the legends grew: he had a tryout for the Cubs, for the White Sox, he played minor league professional baseball, he turned down a contract so that he could become a rabbi! Finally, in the midst of a spate of Internet discussions about these matters, Lukinsky wrote an e-mail to his friend and longtime colleague Dr. Burton Cohen, in an attempt to set the record straight. Dr. Cohen was kind enough to share the e-mail and grant permission for us to use it in this volume.—Ed.]*

Date: Tuesday, 27 June 2006

From: Joseph Lukinsky

To: Burt Cohen

Subject: Re: My Baseball "Career"

Burt Shalom: This is getting out of hand. Here is the unvarnished truth about my baseball career. You can send it out unless you think it's too long.

\* \* \* \* \*

I only wanted to be a major league baseball player, until I got to college at the University of Illinois at Navy Pier in Chicago (the current U of I; Chicago wasn't yet in existence).

I spent most of my spare time playing baseball from the

time I was a little boy. I learned to play ball with my father, z"l, who was the best player among the uncles and friends who played in the park at picnics. At those picnics, we played 16" Chicago-style softball, a great game for learning how to play for kids. I once had a letter in the *New York Times* sports section defending it against a writer who said that compared with baseball, it was like Ping-Pong is to tennis.

I didn't make the team at Hyde Park High School until my senior year. Our coach, Heinie Schultz, had had a short stint with the Cincinnati Reds. He always favored the basketball and football players during the spring, where the tryouts were held in the gym, because of the bad Chicago weather. During high school, I played American Legion ball and was chosen for the American Legion All-Star team that played one game. I was warming up to go into the game in the sixth inning, when the game was called because we were more than ten runs behind.

I was big for my age, and in 1945, I played in the park league on a team called the Egyptians. It was founded by the five Menzyk brothers from Little Egypt, Illinois. Four were away in the service, except for Tony, who had crippled legs but played very well as a pitcher and catcher. When he caught, he didn't wear a chest protector or knee guards, just a mask. He was tough. They had a special rule in the league for him, allowing him to have a pinch runner without leaving the game, but he usually ran himself, even stealing bases!

The war was going on, and I was a big kid for my age, almost 15, and they let me play second on a men's team.

I finally made the Hyde Park High team in my last year, which was the season of 1947. I got a major [varsity] letter and played second base, hitting .300 and making no errors. In my last game, before graduation, I hit two home runs. At the same time, we had another park team sponsored by Jack's restaurant [the Jacks] that played in Washington Park in a league. We also had exhibition games against, usually, black teams in which we played for \$5-\$10 a man. We usually lost. I remember one game where there were about 2,000 people, almost all black, standing from third base to first. I hit a homer in that game, too. Those games were played in a very friendly atmosphere. That was about the extent of my career home runs, perhaps a couple more.

In college, during my second year at U. of I at Chicago, they had a baseball team for the first time, and I made the team but was a substitute and only got into a few games. I had decided to be a rabbi by then (originally accepted at HUC) and was going to the College of Jewish Studies.

I was an outfielder. Between high school and college, I went to four tryout camps, Cardinals, Pirates, Cubs, and White Sox, all at Joliet, Illinois. At the Cardinals camp, I was one of 150 people trying out. They ran a twenty-five-inning game each day for three days, not keeping score, and they put you in and took you out and then a few more times. Each day, they cut the squad, and I lasted into the last forty. Of those forty, they signed two(!) to minor league contracts. For many years, I remembered the names of the two who were signed, but as far as I could see, they never got to the majors. I could see the handwriting on the wall!

Joseph Sander Lukinsky

At the White Sox one-day camp, I did pretty well at the start. I got there late, and when I went out to the outfield I caught flies. I had perfected—with the help of my old friends Felix Mendelsohn, Jr., a newspaperman who loved to hit and chase flies (“fungos,” we called them then), and Dave Kahn, who later became president of American Jewish Congress—the art of turning my back on a fly ball over my head, running as fast as I could without looking back and then turning in time to catch the ball. (You rarely see this play any more in the majors.) Anyway, I did this several times in the WS camp, and **they called me in to bat (out of turn). The pitcher was throwing them over the plate easy, and I hit them all over. After batting for about ten minutes, I went back out to the field. A few minutes later, they called me in to bat again (even before many others had had their turns)—this time, against a very good pitcher who was pitching as if it was the World Series. I didn’t do very well.** I was sixteen at the time, and they told me to get some more experience and come back again.

Anyway, when I got to Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, I was sports counselor as well as regular counselor and teacher. I played Chicago softball again for the first time in years, and was good at it. Someone spread the rumor that I had played minor league ball, even major league. I always denied it, but once a rumor is out of the box, you can’t bring it back in. Later in Poconos, I hit the *beit am* (twelve-inch softball) on the fly many times when I was in my thirties.

The surfacing of the rumor on Ravnet gives me a chance to deny it officially again. Thanks to all who wrote

Maybe the Lies We Tell Are Really True

in, forwarded to me by Burt Cohen. This is the true and authentic story. The only thing I can add is that I have played, at least a few times a year (often in Central Park with Hispanics—I told them my name was José)—until recently and still love the game. I miss it very much here in Israel. They have some baseball, but I haven’t found anyone who just likes to hit flies and play pepper. The last really good workout I had was in 1997, when I stopped in a park to play with a father and son on the way back to my motel from Shabbat services in my High Holiday position in Richland, Washington. We had pepper, flies, and batting practice (I should have checked the *eruv*). Burt Cohen took me to a batting range a few years ago. There were a group of kids from day camps using the slower pitching machines, so I went up to the only one available—major league speed. I didn’t do very well. Later, a medium speed became available and I hit a few foul balls! That’s about all. Thanks for this opportunity to reminisce about my “baseball career.” Once I got started, it was hard to stop. Sorry it is so long!!

Best wishes to all. I’m still a Red Sox and Cubs fan. I switched from the White Sox only a few years ago.

Joe Lukinsky