Beyond Stereotypes

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Jews love big-league baseball. That’s all there is to it. Maybe this is the reason Martin Abramowitz’s 2003 publication of his collection of 142 baseball cards featuring Jewish Major League Baseball (MLB) players sparked such widespread interest regarding the connection between Jews and baseball (and the history that lies behind this relationship). Still, if the Jews are the Chosen People, very few of them have been choice enough to make it in the Big Leagues even when you consider the additional twenty-eight Jewish players who have entered the majors between the release of Abramowitz’s initial collection and the end of the 2013 season. As Boston Globe reporter Nathan Cobb observed at the time of Abramowitz’s initial publication, Jews represent almost 3% of America’s population but can only muster about .8% of this elite baseball fraternity (slightly improved in 2013 to a bit more than 1% of major league rosters) (Cobb). Of course, statistics do not get us behind the numbers. Maybe we dwell on the numbers because they are more easily measured than the intangibles that are really at the heart of this game so many of us love. Here, then are some numbers and accompanying thoughts about the Jewish men who have made their mark in and on MLB—both in and outside the white lines. Like Abramowitz’s original 142 (now 170) baseball cards, they give us a chance to stay in touch with a less well-considered but no less well-loved part of American Jewish heritage.

First, some vital statistics, collected for us by Abramowitz along with his cards (and now updated with his help to reflect the numbers as of the end
of the 2013 season): Over the years, Jewish batters have hit .265 on average as opposed to .262 for all the “others.” Jewish pitchers also have enjoyed a slight edge over the rest of the field: a winning percentage of .504 versus .500. In 2003 Abramowitz noted the following regarding the Jews who played MLB: six pairs are brothers, three sons or grandsons of rabbis and ten have altered their names. In addition, through the 2013 season, Jewish baseball players have belted 2,887 home runs and knocked in 13,984 runs. Abramowitz may be gently chided in 2003 for understating the numbers of Sandy Koufax’s no-hitters by one, attributing three, instead of four, to the Dodger hurler, who, during the five-year period from 1961 to 1966, established his credentials as one of the greatest pitchers ever (more on this below). During one conference at Cooperstown, Hall of Fame pitcher, “Rapid” Robert Feller, responding to a query from the audience, said that the greatest pitcher he ever saw was Sandy Koufax. No argument here. By the way, the other two no-hitters crafted by a Jewish pitcher were delivered by another southpaw, Ken Holtzman (Abramowitz 1–3; Feller).¹

Our zealous statistician has also noted that Jewish pitchers fanned over eight percent more than they walked—11,761 versus 10,145. With evident pride, he made the further point that Giants’ catcher, Hank Danning hit for the cycle (that is, a single, double, triple and homerun all in the same game)—only one of fourteen catchers ever to do so. He also identified the origins of his initial 142 subjects: 123 were born to two Jewish parents, six converted to Christianity, and thirteen had only one Jewish parent. A proud Bostonian, Abramowitz kveled with evident pride over the presence of nine Jews who wore Red Sox colors and three who played for the former “Beantown” Braves.

One glaring weakness of Jewish players, Abramowitz concedes, has been their lack of speed. They have stolen only 1449 bases. Brooklyn Dodger fans can attest to this painful fact in recalling the disaster of 1950: Wherein Cal Abrams, representing the winning run, was so slow around the bases that he was “gunned down” at the plate by the Phillies’ notoriously weak-armed Richie Ashburn in the ninth inning of the deciding final game of the season, thereby blowing the League Championship and losing the Pennant that is its emblem. Many years later, in an event sponsored by the Brooklyn Historical Society, the late Dodger outfielder insisted that he was actually a pretty fast runner. Many in the audience, including this writer, groaned in disbelief.

Literary critic Eric Solomon posits several salient reasons for the love connection between Jews and baseball. First, he writes, baseball provided “a superb avenue for acculturation.” Evidence of this assertion can be found in the writings of Abe Cahan. In his novel, Yekl (1896), the renowned Yiddish
A Stack of Jewish Baseball Cards

journalist equated baseball with Americanization. Second, the national pastime appealed to Jewish intellect due to its penchant for dialectics and documentation. Third, baseball sparked outstanding literature, privileging heads (the Yiddishe kep, to put this in the Jewish vernacular) over hands. Fourth, this city-game lured urban youngsters from out of their tenement enclaves in the ghettos. After all, what could be more urban about the Jewish experience than the transition from the shtetl to Gotham? Finally, baseball culture engaged Jewish sensibilities. As Eric Solomon noted:

. . . the national game rich in folklore, deep in mythology, full of anecdote in the Sholem Aleichem mode, cabbalistic in numerology, quasi-religious in gods, creative in language . . . denying time’s rules while emphasizing the conflict between youth and age—mythic, historical, spiritual, simple and complex. Harsh and beautiful, real and fictional . . . baseball, in simple, is America. (Solomon 77–78)

Baseball has unleashed vast stores of Jewish creativity. Witness the novels of Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Mark Harris, Jerome Charyn, Jay Neugeboren, and Eric Greenberg, the print journalism of Roger Kahn, Dick Young, Stan Isaacs, Maury Allen, Lester Rodney, and Bob Lipsyte, the broadcast journalism of Mel Allen (ne Israel), Marty Glickman, Al Michaels, Charlie Steiner, Warner Wolf, and Chris Berman to name just a few of the best. And, sui generis, there is also that hyperbolic wordsmith and solipsistic narcissist, Howard Cosell, who in many respects epitomized the best (and worst) with regard to the Jewish love of sports. Moreover, renowned public relations executive Marty Appel pointed out that the Jewish-baseball connection has always flourished in his field of wish-fulfillment, i.e., dreams under the aegis of creative Jews like Bob Fishel (and, I submit for the record, the genial Mr. Appel as well). With regard to the music-baseball connection, Jews also have excelled. Most notably, Albert Von Tilzer composed that all-time favorite, “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” (1908) and Paul Simon penned a lament for a vanishing hero in the line, “Where Have You, Gone, Joe DiMaggio?” that became a kind of eulogy for the fading twentieth century (Solomon 76–77; Riess, “From Pike to Green” 134–35).²

Baseball’s first Jewish professional (the first baseball card in our collection, as it were) was Lipman Pike, who earned $20 weekly as a second baseman (historian Peter Bjarkman placed him at third) for the Philadelphia Athletics in 1866. He hit .300 plus for ten seasons. According to Bjarkman and Roger Abrams, on July 16, 1866, Pike slugged six home runs in a single game—five
in succession. Not only did Pike earn the distinction of being the first Jewish professional baseball player, he also became the game's first slugger, bearing the appropriate moniker of the “Iron Batter” (Abrams 148–59; Bjarkman 307). In addition to his exploits on the “field of dreams,” he managed baseball for three years after he retired as an active player.

Historian Steven Riess declared that Jews gravitated to the business side of baseball, citing John M. Brunswick as the first such entrepreneur. [Eds. Note: See the article by Rebecca Alpert also in this volume.] These businessmen, primarily German-Jewish in origin, sought social acceptance as well as private gain through their baseball investments. Present at the creation were such Jewish owners as Nathan Andersen, Aaron Stern, Louis Kramer, and Julius Fleischmann. Another, Andrew Freedman, used his Tammany Hall connections to gain a controlling interest in the New York Giants from 1895 to 1902. Apparently, he had a well-earned reputation as a loutish owner, who lacked both diplomatic skills and the social graces. Roger Abrams scornfully described him as “arrogant, overbearing, and insufferable,” and compared him with a more contemporary bête noire, George Steinbrenner of Yankee fame, because he fired sixteen managers in eight years (Abrams 159). Still, Freedman took no guff with regard to his Jewishness. He once punched a New York Times reporter in the nose and pulled his team off the field in response to anti-Semitic remarks of a former player, James “Ducky” Holmes. He also tried to create a J. P. Morgan-like trust to control the game (Riess, “From Pike to Green” 117–19). Forced from the helm, he arranged transfer of ownership to another Tammany favorite, Charles Stoneham, later of Giants’ fame. A more benign brand of Jewish ownership could be found in Pittsburgh under the aegis of Barney Dreyfuss, in Boston under Emil Fuchs, and more recently in Milwaukee under Bud Selig before he became MLB commissioner.

Eastern European Jews might have tended to gravitate to a more street-oriented sport—basketball. [Eds. Note: See also the article by Ari Sclar also in this volume.] Baseball required more green space than was generally available in urban ghettos. And truth be told, Jewish parents mostly preferred that their offspring focused on work, study, and practicing the piano rather than playing sports. “To the pious people of the Ghetto,” comedian Eddie Cantor asserted, “a baseball player was the king of the loafers” (Riess, “Baseball and Ethnicity” 89). Nevertheless, many youths found baseball congenial as spectators as well as participants. Settlement houses encouraged sports among the immigrant children. Abe Cahan’s Yiddish daily, Der Forvertz (The Forward) characterized the rules of the game as a means to a desirable end—assimilation into mainstream
America. In his previously mentioned novel, *Yekl*, Cahan used baseball to illustrate the tensions within society. His protagonist, Yekl, loved baseball and boxing. For him, sports provided acceptance just as it conferred identity (Levine 87–88). After all, baseball represented a “secular nationalistic church” that historian Peter Levine has argued, “helped mitigate conflict between generations” (98). Already assimilated, affluent German-American Jews feared that their “co-religionists” from Eastern Europe posed a threat because they were “often charged with lack of physical courage and repugnance to physical work.” Therefore, anxious American Jews promoted the creation of settlement houses to craft a counter-image. Beginning in 1889, one of many agencies on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the Educational Alliance, attempted to reverse common perceptions through athletic training. “Let a young man develop his body, and he will neither shrink from imaginary danger nor shirk manual labor which falls to his lot” (*Official Souvenir Book* 19–23).

First among equals in athletic training, baseball proved enormously successful as an agent for acculturation. On the other hand, it also created something of a crisis for Jews following the infamous 1919 World Series between the Chicago White Sox and the Cincinnati Reds. The “fix” involved two prominent Jewish gamblers, Arnold “Whitey” Rothstein and former featherweight boxing champ, Abe Attell; and the resulting scandal fueled anti-Semitic sentiment. Henry Ford’s *Dearborn Independent* spread the most vicious canards whose intention was to do their utmost to slander and disparage the Jewish people. Two articles, which appeared in September 1921, focused on Rothstein and Attell as “Jewish dupes” who conned Gentile “boobs.” Ford warned against a Jewish conspiracy to corrupt baseball and other “Anglo-Saxon institutions” (Nathan 96–98).

Reacting to pervasive anti-Semitism, some Jewish ballplayers changed their names. *New York Times* writer, Ira Berkow, author of the definitive book about Hank Greenberg, identified ten players who changed their names for “business” reasons. He cited a number of Cohens who “morphed” into Corey, a White Sox pitcher, Ewing, a Cardinal shortstop, Bohne, an infielder with several teams, Kane, a Phillies pitcher, and Cooney, a Yankee third baseman (*Berkow* 2). They could run, as Joe Louis observed with regard to his opponent, non-Jewish Billy Conn, but they could not hide. This became ever clearer with the rise of Germany’s malevolent leader, Adolf Hitler, who would do all within his power to preclude this escape by way of assimilation as he rose to power on the wings of “Jew-phobia.”

The Great Depression both weakened the fabric of society and curtailed intercultural communication. Unhappy days were here again, and American
Jewry suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous defamation. Historian Leonard Dinnerstein argued that “anti-Semitic displays did not increase with the onset of the Great Depression” (Dinnerstein 105). From 1929 to 1933, he declared, Jews were spared the bigots’ bromides. Be that as it may, after the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Hitler’s ascent, combined with the deepening economic woes of 1933, American Jews experienced violent physical assaults, especially in New York City and Boston. Hitler’s vicious attacks struck a responsive chord with many Americans, who needed a scapegoat to explain their misery. Sinclair Lewis’s fictional “It” (of his 1935 satirical, political novel, *It Can’t Happen Here*) could—and, indeed, did—happen here. As has been well studied and documented, quotas prevented Jewish entry into medical schools and other institutions of learning; restrictive covenants barred Jews from residential areas; and large law firms that did not actually bar Jews from employment marginalized them. Many adherents of Father Charles E. Coughlin and Gerald L. K. Smith linked Jews with either heartless capitalism or zealous communism—indifferent to the logical contradictions in such claims. Virulent attacks were particularly popularized by the “radio priest” Coughlin, who shamelessly plagiarized propagandist Joseph Goebbels and his minions (Bird 55–56; Brinkley 266).

Nevertheless, in these same 1930s, baseball witnessed the entry into the Major Leagues of more Jewish ballplayers than ever before: twenty-five (exceeded only during the 1940s). These newcomers proved physically tough as well as intellectually astute. Buddy Myer, an outstanding Washington Senator shortstop and subsequent second baseman, enjoyed a stellar seventeen-year career, during which he batted .303. In 1935, he captured the American League batting crown with a robust .349 average. His most remembered “hit,” however, probably occurred in 1933 when Yankee bigot Ben Chapman attempted to maim Myer in the course of breaking up a double-play. Chapman, who would later try to run Jackie Robinson out of baseball, got it right in the *punim* (the Jewish moniker for “mug”) in swift retaliation. Although the Yankees beat the Senators 16 to 0, the fight between Myer and Chapman stole the headlines (Levine 126; Horwitz and Horwitz 123–25).

Princeton graduate and premier catcher, Moe Berg, reputedly knew twelve languages and, as the old joke goes, hit .200 in all of them. He also “doubled” in a most unorthodox manner—as an OSS spy for his country during World War II (Dawidoff). However, neither the competent Myer nor the intellectual Berg could match Hank Greenberg in mass appeal. Without a doubt, the national pastime produced an exemplary role-model in Henry Louis
Greenberg, a strong Jew who fought back. The impact of this American Jewish hero has been chronicled extensively, but his stature, like the Passover story, invites periodic retelling. In an age of increasing anti-Semitism, this Bronx slugger in a Detroit Tiger uniform served as both a beacon of light and a pillar of strength. As we have already noted, Detroit’s atmosphere was polluted by the fulminations of radio priest, Father Coughlin and the anti-Semitic tirades of auto tycoon Henry Ford. As MVP in 1935 and again in 1940, at two different positions, Greenberg challenged the stereotype of the spineless Jew. After a distinguished military record in World War II, he returned home in 1945, to become an icon for all Americans (Dorinson 66–82; Simons 83–102).

It is important to note, too, that “Hammerin’ Hank” took a role in advancing the cause of racial integration. For example, in 1947, as a member of the Pirates, he was the first Dodger-opponent to openly encourage and support Jackie Robinson. Recalling his own struggle with bigotry, the veteran Jewish slugger exhorted the rookie Robinson to “Stick in there. You’re doing fine. Keep your chin up.” After an accidental collision at first base, in which the lumbering Hank and the nimble Jackie became entangled, reporters, eager to stir up controversy, tried to incite the Dodger rookie in order to get some headline-making trash-talk about Greenberg out of him. But Robinson disappointed them by replying: “Class tells. It sticks out all over Mr. Greenberg” (Rampersad 177; Tygiel 192; Norwood and Blackman 121–31).

The Jewish fan-base ran especially deep in Brooklyn, and they revered Jackie Robinson. In a book that I co-edited with Joram Warmund, Jackie Robinson: Race, Sport, and the American Dream, there is section that we called “Fans’ Remembrances,” wherein, among others, Robert Gruber, Peter Williams, Ivan Hametz, Peter Levine, and Henry Foner evoked their personal recollections of the unconquerable trailblazer. Each contributor conveyed in highly personal terms the significance of Robinson’s advent. For Jews especially, Jackie epitomized the hopes as well as the dreams of a truly pluralistic America. Perhaps Foner said it best when, as the youngest of four famous brothers, he began die fir kashes (“the four questions”) on the first Passover night in 1947. “Why is this night different from all others?” Usurping the role of patriarch, young Henry answered his own question in a novel way: “Today, the first black American player entered the major leagues” (Foner 71; others in Dorinson and Warmund 43–69).

Jewish sportswriters Lester Rodney and Bill Mardo battled bigotry from the press box. As sports editor and writer, respectively, for the Daily Worker, a communist paper, Rodney and Mardo waged a relentless campaign against
Jim Crow baseball. Jules Tygiel has credited Rodney and his cadres with “forcing the issue before the American public . . .” and in conjunction with the black press and a small coterie of white sportswriters, many of them Jewish, “helped to alleviate the apathy that nourished baseball segregation” (Tygiel 36–37; Rampersad 120). In Irwin Silber’s memoir, Press Box Red, we learn how Rodney launched his crusade against segregation in 1936. Graciously, he paid homage to other writers, namely, Heywood Broun, Ted Benson, and surprisingly, the arch-conservative journalist and gadfly Westbrook Pegler for their efforts in this righteous cause. He also mentioned Joe DiMaggio favorably for stating in 1937 that the most difficult pitcher for him to hit was Leroy “Satchel” Paige (Silber 63–64). Oddly, Rodney mentioned Hank Greenberg only once in his book. Nevertheless, in conversations with this writer, he expressed deep admiration for the Jewish slugger, who interrupted a sensational baseball career to fight fascism abroad.

Returning to the game inside the white lines, Hank Greenberg passed the baton, so to speak, to Cleveland Indians all-star Al Rosen, whose Hall of Fame potential was cut short by injury. In his first full season as a major leaguer in 1950, he hit a league leading 37 home runs. The next year, “Flip” Rosen, while playing in all 154 games, slugged four grand slam home runs. In 1953, he was an unprecedented unanimous choice for American League MVP with a dazzling .336 batting average, forty-three homers, and 145 RBIs, just missing the coveted batting triple-crown by a thousandth of a point. Perhaps his finest hour came in the 1954 All-Star game, in which he banged out two homers and collected five RBIs. Rosen, who was active in Jewish charities and an excellent boxer, was never reluctant to defend the Jewish faith with his fists. Once a White Sox opponent called him a “Jew bastard.” Sox pitcher Saul Rogovin, also Jewish, remembered an angry Rosen striding belligerently to the dugout and challenging the “son of a bitch” to a fight. Living up to the label with which Rosen had branded him, the mongrel froze in silence. During a ten-year career, Rosen averaged .285 and totaled 192 home runs. He followed this with a successful career in finance, but his love for baseball brought him back to the executive suite as either president or general manager successively of the Yankees, Astros, and Giants. To those—like the stone-faced journalist and TV impresario Ed Sullivan, who questioned how true he was to his Jewish identity, Al Rosen could proudly claim that he never played on Yom Kippur (Riess, “From Pike to Green” 130; Levine 128; Horvitz and Horvitz 145–46).

As we examine our collection of 170 Jews in MLB, Sandy Koufax clearly merits special mention for his extraordinary exploits as the Jewish “main
man” on the mound. However, as Jane Leavy revealed in her book, the Dodger
great encountered prejudice throughout his rise to fame. Despite consider-
able progress brought about by Jackie Robinson’s breakthrough, to which
prominent Jewish figures contributed, the virus of bigotry remained virulent.
Like Greenberg and Rosen before him, Koufax was not particularly religious.
Nevertheless, he felt compelled to identify with his Jewishness, especially on
the holiest of days. Most famously, Koufax refused to pitch a World Series
game on Yom Kippur in 1965. Mets owner Fred Wilpon, a friend since high
school, insisted that Koufax was deeply Jewish primarily because of his New
York background (Leavy 182). The second Jewish player (the first was Hank
Greenberg) to enter Cooperstown’s Hall of Fame, Koufax’s spectacular career
was also shortened by injury. From 1961 to 1966, he was widely considered the
best pitcher in baseball. In that period, Sandy hurled four no-hitters, includ-
ing a perfect game against the Cubs on September 9, 1965. In 1963, he pitched
eleven shutouts. During his illustrious though injury-shortened career, Koufax
earned three CyYoung awards, one MVP, amassed 165 wins and a career 2.76
ERA. Twice, the Brooklyn-born lefthander struck out 18 batters in a single
game. He led the light-hitting Dodgers to three World Series championships
in four attempts with an astonishing .095 post-season ERA. Koufax won the
strikeout title four times, once with a record 382 Ks. Whether the sensational
southpaw encountered his quota of anti-Semitism is still a moot subject. Steven
Riess categorized this once virulent outbreak as a minimum threat while, as
indicated earlier, Leavy, in a more recent study, documented its persistence
(Leavy 71–73, 176–83; Riess, “From Pike to Green” 131).

In his seminal study, Riess illustrated that the number of Jewish par-
ticipants in MLB fluctuated from decade to decade. He identified, for example,
five in the 1900s, eleven in the 1910s, twenty-three in the 1960s, nineteen in
the 1970s, and ten in the 1980s (“From Pike to Green” 122, 131).3 Careers open
to talent beckoned elsewhere. Still, the recently retired Shawn Green contin-
ued the tradition begun by Lipman Pike. Awarded a scholarship to Stanford
University, Green made it to the “Bigs” in 1993 and soon blossomed into a
slugging star with the Toronto Blue Jays. In his first full year in the American
League, Shawn hit .288 with thirty-one doubles and fifteen home runs. 1999
proved to be Green’s best year in Toronto, when he hit .309, slugged forty-two
home runs, and knocked in 123 runs. Giving the lie to the “slow Jew” stereo-
type, Shawn stole twenty bases in twenty-seven attempts and scored 134 runs.
Then, after several outstanding seasons with his bat, glove, and feet, Green
returned to his native grounds in California as part of a trade for Raul Mondesi
Joseph Dorinson

with the LA Dodgers. In moving to Los Angeles, Shawn tripled his annual salary, zooming from $3,125,000 to $9,416,667. Green's best statistical year in LA was in 2001, when he blasted forty-nine home runs, recorded 124 RBIs, sported a .297 batting average and stole twenty bases in twenty-four attempts (“Shawn Green” 1–4). Green’s singular assault on Milwaukee pitching in May 2002 was one for the record books. On that memorable day, he hammered out four home runs, a double and a single, scored six runs, and had seven RBIs in a single game (Chass)!

We, who are less gifted, persevere as dreamers, spectators, and overall *mayvns* by remembering such athletic feats. Eric Solomon concluded his brilliant essay with an apposite reference to William Carlos Williams’ “The Crowd at the Ball Game,” in which New Jersey’s preeminent poet-physician praised the Jew in the crowd because:

The Jew gets it straight—it  
is deadly, terrifying—  
It is the Inquisition, the  
Revolution  
It is beauty itself . . . (Solomon 98)

In her brilliantly crafted book, Leavy, citing Fred Wilpon, observed astutely that the Koufax-Don Drysdale holdout in 1965 constituted the legendary southpaw’s finest hour off the field—“the most underestimated event in Koufax’s career” (Leavy 201). By bargaining collectively for the first time, Koufax and Drysdale (the twin towers of Dodger pitching power) ignited a revolution. Their stand in turn cleared the way for the heaviest Jewish hitter in the annals of American baseball. Granted, he never stood in physically at the plate, but Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA) leader Marvin Miller should be added as an honorary 171st to the other 170 MLB Jews for all he did by going to bat for all the Major League players. Indeed, while the two dominant pitchers proved vital to the eventual emergence of free agency, Miller brought a social conscience, rooted in trade union culture, grounded in prophetic tradition, and leavened with core values. Miller remembered that his father worked in lower Manhattan dispensing *tedaka* (alms) and wisdom in Chinese, English, and Yiddish (Miller, *A Whole Different Ball Game* 13; Miller, Personal Interview 1–3). *The Sporting News* listed Miller as Number Five among the top one hundred most powerful people in twentieth century American sports. In 1994, *Sports Illustrated* ranked Miller as Number Seven
in the top forty most influential figures in sports, placing him ahead of Wayne Gretsky, Arnold Palmer, Larry Bird, and Pete Rozelle. Walter Lanier “Red” Barber, the premier play-by-play announcer and commentator for the Dodgers and mentor to his illustrious successor, Vin Scully, identified Marvin Miller, along with Babe Ruth and Jackie Robinson, as one of the three most important men in baseball (Barra 1–3; “Marvin Miller”). Of this trinity, only Miller has remained inexplicably excluded from the Hall of Fame even though his leadership of the Players’ Union from 1966 to 1982, brought spectacular progress that culminated in a breakthrough in 1984. His efforts allowed the “diamond-workers” to gain full dignity, contractual freedom, monetary rewards, and occupational safety.

Born in the Bronx, Miller grew up in Brooklyn. His mother Gertrude taught public school while his father, Abraham, was a salesman in Manhattan. Marvin graduated from Brooklyn’s James Madison High School, where he will be inducted into the school’s hall of fame as of October 2014 and from which he graduated in 1932. Marvin started his college career at Miami of Ohio but finished at NYU in 1936, the same year he met his future wife, Theresa Morgenstern. They were married for seventy years before she died in 2009, and Miller survived her by three more years. Marvin’s work resumé included a stint of government service during World War II, and work with the Machinists’ Union, the United Auto Workers, and the Steelworkers Union from 1950 to 1964 as staff-economist, chief-economist, advisor, and assistant to Union President David McDonald (Miller, A Whole Different Ballgame 11–32).

In 1966, ace pitchers as well as energetic player-union leaders, Robin Roberts and Jim Bunning urged Marvin Miller to head their fledgling union after Judge Robert Cannon (a management representative) spurned their collective-bargaining offer. Through careful planning coupled with labor savvy, Miller won over dissidents and crafted a united front, resulting in a progression of victories that included raises in both minimum wage and average salary, improvements in safety standards, better fringe benefits, and increased pension allotments.

As Miller recalled in his illuminating memoir, his first major decision was to nix Richard Nixon as the union’s legal counsel (Miller, A Whole Different Ballgame 33, 82–83). Then he took on the Topps Chewing Gum Co., which was paying a mere $125 per player for those highly valuable memorabilia, that have served as the point of departure for these musings on Jews in MLB—namely, baseball cards. Applying muscle, Miller managed to wrest huge residuals from Topps for the hitherto exploited players. By the end of 1966, the
increasingly confident Miller had secured an agreement, which brought $4.1 million in annual funds (up from $1.5 million) for the players’ retirement plan. This Basic Agreement also doubled prior monthly disability and pension payments. Miller accepted a flat sum, rather than a percentage, from All-Star and World Series proceeds. Through it all, Miller listened, learned, and educated. Slowly, he convinced the players that, rather than being expendable chattel, they were of fundamental importance to the baseball scene and deserved appropriate compensation.

Inviting a list of grievances (*cahiers*), Miller heard about the lack of safety in Cincinnati’s Crosley Field, the fleabag hotels on the road, the doubleheaders after night games, and even the need for more outlets for hair-dryers. Advising the “angries” to “cool” it, Miller morphed into a Great Educator as well as Great Emancipator. He demanded—and received—data on salaries. Then he acted in concert with union members, who started their movement with a $344 annual dues payment. Dodger owner Walter O’Malley (according to writer Pete Hamill) reputedly bellowed: “Tell that Jewish boy to get back to Brooklyn” (Helyer 39).

The first comprehensive Basic Agreement, signed in February 1968, raised minimum salaries from $6,000 to $10,000 and directed the arbitration of grievances to the Commissioner. When the latter, William “Spike” Eckert, sided with the players on one issue, he was promptly fired, paving the way for Bowie Kuhn to take charge. Kuhn persuaded the owners to compromise, and a strike was averted in 1969. That same year, an irate Curt Flood refused to be traded from the Cardinals to the Phillies. Kuhn tried to maintain the status quo, and so, with the full support of Miller and the MLBPA, Flood sued. Initiated in 1970, Flood’s litigation culminated in a 1972 decision in which the Supreme Court ruled against him, 5 to 3.

Nevertheless, the artful Miller secured a second Basic Agreement from baseball’s management, which raised minimum salaries in graduated steps: to $12,000 in 1972 and then to $15,000 in 1975. It also reduced the maximum pay cut in a single year from 30% to 20%. Finally the Basic Agreement provided for impartial arbitration of grievances, thereby bypassing the Commissioner’s office. When the owners attempted to block additional union progress, the players called a general strike, their first ever, on April 1, 1972. They were not bluffing. The strike lasted for thirteen days and cost eighty-six games. At that point, the owners capitulated. The pension payments were pegged to inflation and rose accordingly.

March 1973 produced another Basic Agreement containing impressive gains. Minimum salaries rose to $16,000. The “Flood Rule” led to a ten-year
option (five with the same club) that empowered the veteran players to reject trades. Of equal importance, the Agreement provided for impartial salary arbitration. In 1975, Miller chalked up additional victories by freeing Jim “Catfish” Hunter from the clutches of Oakland owner Charles Finley because he had failed to comply with contractual obligations. Realizing that clause 10B of the Uniform Players Contract provided a wedge that would lead toward free agency, Miller launched an assault on the reserve clause with Andy Messersmith and Dave McNally as frontline litigants. Free agency was upheld initially by a three-person arbitration panel and subsequently reaffirmed by the Supreme Court. The players, to echo Dr. King, were “free at last.” Since 1922, baseball players had been yoked to a team for life via a “reserve clause,” because of a long-ago judicial decision handed down by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, no less. In a 7–2 verdict, Holmes had spoken for the majority, when he ruled that baseball was a sport, not a business thereby “starting”—in Miller’s trenchant words—“a whitewash of the baseball monopoly” (Miller, A Whole Different Ballgame 42). Finally, thanks to Miller’s efforts this infamous landmark Holmes decision of 1922 was overturned.

The “Lords of Baseball,” in John Helyard’s descriptive phrase, tried to turn back the clock by perpetrating a lockout in 1976 and seeking compensation for free agents in 1981, only to be defeated again by player solidarity that culminated in a strike initiated on June 12, 1981. It lasted fifty days with a loss of 713 games. A compromise settlement permitted teams to protect twenty-four players and a gain of one player in the amateur draft for a player lost to another club. Miller had ample cause to take pride in these achievements (Roberts and Olsen 136–37, 153–56). All that remains is for him to gain entry into Baseball’s Valhalla in Cooperstown. The “Lords” evidently underestimated Marvin Miller whose calm demeanor “belied a ferociously tenacious personality” (Roberts and Olsen 136). Economist Andrew Goodman correctly observed that Miller’s other contributions, less familiar to baseball aficionados, led to greater safety. These largely ignored innovations that he brought to MLB included “improved scheduling and padded outfield walls, better-defined warning tracks, and safer locker rooms” (Goodman 3). Moreover, tennis great Arthur Ashe asserted that Marvin Miller had contributed “more for the welfare of black athletes than anyone else” (Barra 1).

As educator as well as liberator, the late Marvin Miller had much to teach us, if only we had listened and learned. Upon receiving the John Commerford award from the New York Labor History Association, actor and trade union leader Theodore Bikel offered the following eloquent translation:
Now awake, the end's in sight
See your power, feel your might
Were it not for your strong hand
Not a wheel would turn in the all the
land. (Work History News 4)

Miller brought baseball and its workmen out of the wilderness into full
dignity as well as ample compensation: Freedom from indentured servitude to
realization of the American Dream.

One hundred and seventy might not seem a very large set of baseball
cards (even when you add an extra honorary card for Marvin Miller), when
stacked up against all the thousands of other MLB cards and the personali-
ties, statistics, heroics, wins, loses, championships, also-rans and general ups
and downs that they represent. It’s a select, even an unlikely group that, if not
culled from and separated out of the bigger pile, might not be very noticeable
at all. Still, Jews have come a long way since Lipman Pike first strode to the
plate, both on the field and off. Abramowitz the collector and chronicler, has
had good reason to draw this small group to our collective attention. Granted,
the 170 Jews who have played The Game and hopefully those who will add to
their numbers in the future are not usually the biggest or the brightest lights
to shine in our national ballparks. Nonetheless, they call attention to a unique
nexus between an ethnic and an athletic culture that in its own peculiar way is
as American as peanuts and crackerjacks.
Notes

1. Also see Benson 1–4. Bob Feller’s appraisal of Sandy Koufax was articulated at the 16th Annual Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball & American Culture in an interview by Edwin L. Plowman. We wish to thank Mr. Abramowitz, who has, as noted, updated the statistics to reflect, to the extent possible, the current numbers as of the close of the 2013 season (personal communication).


3. Bjarkman (343) notes that Jewish participation peaked with twenty-seven in the 1940s. Bjarkman’s overall data may be suspect; he erroneously identifies Ed Reulbach and Rod Carew as Jewish.

4. Roberts and Olson provide an excellent and succinct summary of Marvin Miller’s achievements.


