



Gratz Insider, April 2014 - Story Continuation

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### **'Chasing Dreams: Baseball & Becoming American'**

For most people, at least those above a certain age, the phrase "Jews in baseball" conjures up two images: Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax. And, yes, these two icons are featured prominently in the exhibit at the Jewish museum, with wall-sized photos and other memorabilia.

But what the exhibit deftly displays is that the phrase "Jews in baseball" also means more. First, there are the players. While Greenberg and Koufax are undeniable legends, they have over the years had many coreligionists in the major leagues: men like Moe Berg, the baseball catcher and World War II spy, and Mike Epstein, nicknamed "Super Jew." In fact, by touching a screen, visitors to the exhibit can obtain information on about 200 Jewish major league players. Fantasy baseball aficionados can then select from these players to create their own history-spanning Jewish fantasy team.

The exhibit also depicts baseball as an institution extending beyond the players, with Jews playing a variety of roles. As Monson commented, "It was an eye-opener to see how many Jews were involved in baseball over so many years in so many ways." There were Jewish owners who influenced the development of the game, like Barney Dreyfuss of the Pittsburgh Pirates, involved in creating the modern-day World Series. There was Albert Von Tilzer, the Jewish composer who wrote the music to "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." There was Esther Schimmel, the Jewish hot dog vendor from St. Louis, who refused to touch her non-kosher wares with her bare hands. There were also Jews working within the Negro leagues to foster the integration of the game.

In addition to showcasing such Jewish contributions to the sport, the "Chasing Dreams" exhibit portrays baseball as an image of American society. As one of the exhibit placards reads, "Baseball represents a shared American identity, melding immigrants and natives. Yet sometimes it also highlights our differences. It is, in short, a mirror of America."

As the signature American game, baseball was a vehicle for immigrants to become part of mainstream American culture. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, The Jewish Daily Forward pressed readers to take up the game, and even included a diagram of a baseball diamond on its pages for the purpose of teaching Jewish immigrants how to play.

As the exhibit depicts, the question faced by early Jewish ball players was whether they could have it both ways. Could they become American sports icons without denying their ethnicity? For Andy Cohen, the answer was yes when he refused to change his name as five other major league baseball players named Cohen had done before him. For Hank Greenberg, the answer was yes when he would not play on Yom Kippur. And for Sandy Koufax, the answer was resolutely yes when he chose to observe Yom Kippur rather than to pitch in the first game of the World Series. According to Monson, Koufax's decision not to play was "such a profound statement that it changed the whole scope of Jews in sports."

"Chasing Dreams" does not, however, present Jewish baseball players in a vacuum, but rather, considers them within the context of other minority players who broke barriers and made names for themselves within the sport. As a result, there are photos and memorabilia from the likes of Jackie Robinson, Roberto Clemente, Ichiro Suzuki and Justine Siegal.

Monson relished such memorabilia at the exhibit, especially the authentic jerseys of the players, like his personal favorite, Juan Marichal. In fact, the exhibit brought Monson back to his childhood days, spent with his diehard baseball-card-collecting brother. For visitors who grew up with the game, like Monson, "Chasing Dreams" definitely offers a sweet slice of nostalgia.

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*"Chasing Dreams: Baseball & Becoming American" is on exhibit at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia until October 26, 2014. Following its run in Philadelphia, "Chasing Dreams" will be displayed throughout the country. For more information about the exhibit and its accompanying calendar of special events, visit [www.chasingdreams.nmajh.org](http://www.chasingdreams.nmajh.org).*