

*Jews & Diamonds (Baseball Diamonds, that is)*

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It's sort of funny, isn't it that we are having a baseball-themed Shabbat. Why baseball? What is the mystique about this particular sport that has captivated Jews for so long? We aren't having a football themed Shabbat, even though there are several Jewish NFL players: Josh Rosen, Nate Ebner, Craig Joseph, and of course there's Bethesda native, Whitman and University of Maryland grad Michael Dunn. We're not having a basketball Shabbat...there are more Jewish owners than players in the NBA, and its about the same in the NHL. No hockey Shabbat either. Baseball is still a uniquely American pastime and a uniquely Jewish American pastime. About 120 years ago Solomon Schechter, the intellectual founder of Conservative Judaism in America and the first president of the JTS said that in order for rabbis to be successful in this country they had to understand baseball. I assume he meant that this is what people were talking about, this is what people were interested in, and rabbis should be able to talk to people and meet people where they are. Chaim Potok wrote in his acclaimed novel *The Chosen*, that while the yeshiva rabbis considered baseball to be *bitul Torah*, a hopeless waste of time and distraction from Talmud study, Reuven and Danny and the other characters considered it to be the "unquestioned mark of one's Americanism," particularly for Jews in the post war years when the book takes place. Nowadays half of MLB parks have kosher food concessions, so how bad could baseball really be for the Jews?!

Remember when people used to go to baseball games in three-piece suits and fedoras, and women would be in dresses and heels? I don't either, but I've seen the pictures! Going to baseball games was special...people wore their church clothes, or their synagogue clothes. Baseball was sacred, made even more so for Jews by the likes of Sandy Koufax, Hank Greenberg, and Al Rosen. And who isn't excited to see what happens with Jacob Steinmetz and Elie Kligman, two religious, *shomer shabbes* Jews who are determined to play professionally without sacrificing their religious convictions?

But on this Baseball Shabbat, I want to talk about the biggest news in baseball this year! And that of course is the changes to Major League Baseball rules. This feels like such a Jewish conversation. Like Judaism, baseball has a code of rituals, rules, regulations, and a governing structure for how even the slightest change is introduced to the game. And when change does come to these venerable institutions, it is always met with furious debate and conflicting opinions: with some saying this is what we've needed for a long time, and others suggesting that change is the harbinger of doom and extinction.

Who would have ever thought there would be a Designated Hitter in the National League? Or that the only sport without a clock would adopt a pitch timer? Or that the carefully measured distance between bases would be shorted by 4 and a half inches. Or that the bases themselves would be made larger? There's even talk of a robot umpire to call balls and strikes! What is happening to this beloved sport? And this, by the way, is just the beginning. New changes are already slated for the 2023 season. What's going on in the world? Will we even recognize this sport after all this change is implemented?

The real question is what's behind it all. The Pulitzer Prize winning sportswriter Red Smith wrote that there was a "pressing need...to revive the public's flagging interest in the sport." That

fans have been “alienated,” and the game has experienced a precipitous “downward trend.”<sup>1</sup> You know when he wrote that? In December...of 1968! People have been lamenting the slow pace of the game, the diminishing numbers of fans, the dulling of athleticism and entertainment value for decades. Do any of these arguments sound familiar to any of you? Are any of you members of a Conservative synagogue? It was right around the same time as Red Smith was demanding changes in major league baseball that Conservative Jews started calling for changes in synagogue services and rituals. I grew up going to baseball and football games at the old Cleveland Municipal Stadium, a concrete behemoth that opened in the 1930’s with a capacity of 75,000 seats, only to be replaced by a newer, baseball only park that seats half that many. How many synagogues in that same time period abandoned their old, cavernous, theater style sanctuaries for more intimate, versatile spaces? In 1968 only 6 players in all of professional baseball had a batting average better than .300. Where’s the excitement? I want to see more homeruns! In the synagogue space frontal services led exclusively and formally by professional clergy started to be transformed into more participatory experiences to be more engaging to congregants. In 1968, 14 of the 20 MLB teams had fewer than 15,000 fans per game. And I don’t think there’s a single Shabbat that goes by when someone doesn’t give me a headcount of congregants. Of course, what seems most important to any baseball fan or shul goer is how long it lasts. I am actually grateful for the length of baseball games, because they make shul seem short! Just last season fans had to wait an average of four minutes and seven seconds between each ball in play, making a game 3 hours, 10 minutes, and 7 seconds long. Can I just say that it is extremely rare that a Shabbat morning service is over 3 hours. It’s usually more like 2 and a half...and that’s if you get there right when it starts...*ahem!* The changes in the MLB are meant to make the game go faster, with more balls in play, more excitement...bigger bases mean more likelihood of successful steals, and the game should have fewer strikeouts and walks. I certainly identify with this pressure to keep things moving, to not schlep out services, and to never go beyond that not-so-imaginary time limit of 12:00. And don’t even get me started on the High Holidays!

Truly, the biggest surprise to me was that the MLB didn’t make the most obvious change to quicken the pace of games, which would be to remove a few innings. Lob off a few to make the game shorter. There was some pandemic experimentation with seven inning double headers. But with this new season, we’re back to the traditional nine inning post pandemic double headers! Herein lies yet another shared truth between baseball and Judaism. There is a point at which the integrity of the game, or the service, is on the line. While certain changes and alterations are certainly appropriate, there is a core, fundamental experience that must be preserved. I can’t even count how many books, articles, and blogs I have read calling for drastically shortening services, introducing musical instruments, and more English than Hebrew as the remedy that will save Conservative Judaism! There is no evidence that these changes have not created a cultural shift in synagogue attendance where they have been implemented. Sportswriter Paul Muschick recently wrote that changes in baseball run the risk of making “it less appealing to its biggest fans.”<sup>2</sup> I feel the same when it comes to Jewish life and what happens in shul. Instead of looking for the quick fix, moving away from tradition, or assuming that less is more, let’s instead focus our efforts on developing an appreciation, literacy, and love

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.si.com/mlb/2022/04/12/baseball-radical-changes-coming>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mcall.com/opinion/mc-opi-baseball-rule-changes-minor-leagues-muschick-20210506-6ma3mkgnjdjanhknxzwjycfbmby-story.html>

for our traditions. I admit that is a more demanding, more rigorous effort, but one that doesn't sacrifice a prayer experience that has been sacred to our people for millennia.

I want to conclude with one final anecdote:

Dave and Mike, both in their 90's, had played professional baseball together and, after they retired, had remained very close friends. Dave suddenly fell deathly ill. Mike went to visit Dave on his deathbed. After they talked a while and it became obvious that Dave had only a few more minutes to live, Mike said, "Listen old friend. After you die, try and get a message back to me. I want to know if there's baseball in heaven."

With his dying breath, Dave whispers, "If God permits, I'll do my best to get you an answer."

A few days after Dave died, Mike is sleeping when he hears Dave's voice.

Dave says, "Mike, I've got good news and bad news. The good news is, yes, there IS baseball in heaven. The bad news is, you're scheduled to pitch the top half of tomorrow's double-header!"

Shabbat Shalom