

Sandy Koufax and Anti-Semitism: Three acts to save the Jewish People

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I want to begin by asking your forgiveness because I plan to talk about baseball this year! But I promise not to mention either the Giants or the Cubs even though Yizkor is approaching and both teams could use a memorial for their seasons...

I want to talk about Sandy Koufax and the 1965 World Series between the Minnesota Twins and the LA Dodgers. Koufax was having the season of his life in 1965 and was unquestionably the Dodger's ace. As a result, he was scheduled to pitch game 1 in Minnesota. However, he asked to be moved to game 2 so as not to pitch on Yom Kippur.

This was a surprise from the otherwise secular Koufax. When asked by the press why he was sitting the game out, he responded enigmatically, "God knows." And indeed it's unclear what he did that day. He's never admitting in print or interview what he did.

However, like a modern-day Elijah, there are varying reports of Koufax's presence in Synagogue. Synagogues in LA report his having joined them for services, which seems unlikely since he was in Minnesota...Similarly Minnesota Synagogues report his presence as well. We don't really know. He may have simply remained in his room.

Yet something about the power of the day, a Sabbath of Sabbaths, a holy convocation for the Jewish people, motivated him to take a day of rest. Even for the secular Koufax, playing on Yom Kippur just felt wrong. And so in solidarity with the Jewish people and faith in which he had grown up, Koufax sat out game 1.

We know the rest of the story. He proceeded to pitch a mediocre game 2 and then, like an arm supercharged by God, pitched two shut out games in game 5 & 7. He had only two days of rest, though I guess since he was Jewish one was enough. He almost single handedly won the series for the Dodgers in a story that has now become part of the American Jewish narrative. (I am grateful for Rabbi Elliott Cosgrove for alerting me to some of the details of this story.)

Yet we have to ask: why did anyone care? Why has this even become such a part of how we talk about the American Jewish experience? After all, it wasn't the first time a Jew had sat out a holiday in the World Series. Hank Greenberg, the future hall of famer, sat out a Rosh Hashanah game in 1934. The Detroit Free Press even printed in HEBREW: Lshana Tova Tikatevu Hank. Jonathan Sarna, the great historian of American Judaism, reports that this was the only major paper to print a Hebrew headline until 2018.

Yet Koufax was different. Partly, media culture had changed in the intervening three decades so that stories could more easily become national news. Yet also the way Jews were seen in the United States and the world was changing. Fiddler on the Roof had come out just the year before to rave reviews and sold out houses. People were looking at Jews and Judaism in a new and more positive way than they ever had before.

The idea of an athletic Jewish hero of faith was just too good to resist. Koufax was an example of a robust athletic Judaism in the most mainstream of Americana, baseball. And we loved him.

Our identity changed further after the 6 day war in 1967. Jews around the world and in America walked with a new swagger in their step as Israel proved itself to have one of the great militaries in the world. And while that victory would later introduce additional complications into our identities, through the 60s and 70s it meant Judaism was suddenly powerful at home as a minority and power on the world stage.

We even had a Jewish secretary of State in those days, Henry Kissinger. On his first meeting with Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel, he told her that he was an American first and Jewish second. Meir quipped, "That's okay. In Israel we read right to left."

Today, we are the second generation of Jews in 2000 years to have power. No more is our story one of oppression. In America and in Israel we wrestle with the ethics of power. We are accepted and loved in the United States.

And yet, we are deeply and appropriately worried about the rise of anti-Semitism. Today we are experiencing an increase in hatred against Jews from two different places. First is what I would call classic anti-Semitism based on Nazi and white supremacist ideology. This anti-Semitism has become more frightening the last few years in part because the internet and social media give it new power to spread.

Further, the dark web and hidden hate chat groups makes it possible now to create disperse micro communities of hate. They can then inspire lone often disturbed individuals to act as if they live in a video game to find too easily obtained weaponry to then attack Synagogues and other Jewish spaces. The chat groups create a false urgency and a sense of dramatic action that inspires people to murderous intent.

We saw this nearly a year ago when a middle aged socially isolated individual immersed in hate group online decided to attack a Synagogue. He had written a screed against HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society that in an earlier generation had help resettle Jews in the US and around the world and now aids immigrants and refugees everywhere. He blamed HIAS and the Jews for immigrants coming to the United States and felt had to do something.

Showing a profound ignorance of Judaism, he went to Tree of Life Synagogue at the beginning of services. It was p'sukei d'zimra- almost no one was there. And so he murdered eleven people whose only crime was coming to Synagogue on time. Among the murdered: Irving Younger, a man of welcome and care, Cecil Rosenthal, one of two brothers with developmental issues who had been welcomed by the congregation, and 97 year old Rose Mallinger, gunned down next to her daughter.

Several months later the pattern repeated. A young man, again social isolated and on hate inspired social media, imagined himself as a some kind of evil hero in a shooter video game as he went to attack the Chabad of Poway and murdered Lori Kaye who gave her life to protect her Rabbi.

That Rabbi, Rabbi Goldstein, stared down the shooter. One of his fingers was shot off as he screened his face. Staring down this socially uncomfortable young man probably prevented dozens more murders.

At the same, there is another vector of anti-Semitism that is also rising. That is anti-Semitism 2.0 that cloaks itself in the language of boycott, divestiture and sanctions against Israel and “intersectionality” as it strives to infect the progressive left with its hate against Israel and the Jewish people.

Some progressive students at Berkeley attended the annual Students of Color Symposium and described their experience this way:

It was a prevailing sentiment that I felt at the conference and in the progressive community, that because I am Jewish, I cannot be an activist who supports Black Lives Matter or the LGBTQ community. When I heard that among my peers that “the Jews are oppressors and murderers—How can you care about students of color on campus when they’re murdering our people abroad?”—it quickly dawned on me that it wasn’t that they don’t like us because we’re pro-Israel—they don’t like us because we’re Jews. We were targeted. It’s such a shame that the SOCC solidified and supported this belief of mine.

How is it possible that in 2018 and 2019 students at both UC Berkeley and UCLA denied positions of student leadership because they are Jewish?

How can the Chicago Dyke March last year, and this year the DC Dyke march, be banning participants from rainbow flags with a Jewish star on them?

Or own Noah Krigel who recently graduated from Cal Poly. A leader on the student Government, he participating in getting an anti-discrimination measure passed that would make it harder to divest from Israel along with any other discrimination. Afterwards, a favorite professor of his in Women’s Studies turned on him and asked why he was taking the side of the Jews? Not the Israelis- the Jews.

Anti-Israel rhetoric all too often becomes the cloak for genuine anti-Semitism.

We need to combat both forms of anti-Semitism and we are fortunate to have the power to do so. Many of you are aware of the recent curricular effort in California to create an ethnic studies curriculum for High School students. Well intentioned, the writing, as so often happens, got hijacked by three people on an 18 member committee.

They erased Jews from California, never mentioned the third largest Jewish community in the United States. In their discussion of Middle Eastern Immigrants, no word of the large and thriving Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles. The few mentions of Israel were of an apartheid state with no context or explanation.

Fortunately we were able to stop this curricular draft. After protest from the Jewish community and many of our allies, we were able to get the draft discarded and a mandate to start over. It was a victory but we have to remain vigilant because there will be another draft. And we have to make sure that one has a more balanced look at Judaism and Israel.

In this confusing, frightening moment we are about to move into our new building. How can our new building imbue in its walls the wholeness of our identity? What’s going to really keep us safe?

Curiously, we have two problems: most love us and some, a far fewer vocal number, hate us. We are both invited into American society, creating challenges of assimilation, at the same moment we are seeing a minority threaten us ever more. Helpfully, the response is the similar.

A story is told of Rabbi Akiva and some of his colleagues. They were travelling the land of Israel and as they entered each city they asked to see the guardians of the city, *netorai karta*. So first they would be brought to the guard detail at the gate. Rabbi Akiva would then say, No. We want to see the guardians of the city. So they would bring them before the police force of the city. Again, they would say, no we mean the guardians of the city, *netorai karta*. Then they would go to the city council, and again say, no, we want to see the real guardians of the city. Take us to the teachers of Torah.

Rabbi Akiva understood that the true guardians of Israel are the ones who teach us values and ethics and why it matters to be Jewish. When we know the value of what we are defending, we find the resources and strength to defend it! This is why the IDF in recent years has begun educating its officers in Jewish and Zionist texts. They believe the military will be more effective when they know that which they defend.

Gates and security matter. There are crazy, scary people out there. And yet: if nothing meaningful happens inside those walls, it's an empty shell. Inside our new facility needs to be a living dynamic Judaism that invites us into the world. We are proudly Conservative Jews meaning we want to know our traditions and practices. We want the tools to explore our spiritual journeys with multiple services and modes of wrestling with the divine. We believe in a Judaism that is egalitarian and vibrant, guiding us in our lives paths

There was another moment in Jewish history in which we wrestled both with assimilation and hate. In Egypt, the Jewish community first encountered an incredibly open place. Assimilation was a real challenge. Later, it became a place of persecution and darkness with a different challenge to survival. In both moments, the same tool box kept the Jewish people.

According to Vayikra Rabbi, three acts preserved the Jewish people in Egypt. They knew their Hebrew names. Meaning: they had a sense of who they were and what it meant to be Jewish. Second: they circumcised their children. Meaning: they marked their Jewish identity physically into their bodies as a sign of the covenant. And lastly they acted ethically. Meaning: they learned and acted upon Jewish ethical teachings. This was enough to preserve them in Egypt.

In the moment of deepest Jewish darkness, they remember who they were. They taught their children. And they acted ethically towards others.

We need a list of key acts today. Here is mine:

First, we need to keep our Jewish names. Rabbi Graff last night spoke about our Jewish identity as one program of the self. Judaism can be viewed as an app on our smartphone. Alongside it are other identities, like runner or person who cares about the environment or someone who plays racquetball. (I don't, by the way...) The Jewish app needs to be opened regularly or even better be the operating system through which we see the rest of our self. That Jewish identity ought to be the moral lens through which we experience and engage the other aspects of our self.

Second, we need to keep our calendar. Jewish holidays and shared meals are where we affirm our identity and our Jewish self, where we reaffirm our connection to one another and to God. And when

you host a meal, you get to own it and decide what it will be like. I'll never know...There are wonderful Jewish rituals and tolls to enhance an experience and as host you get to pick and do what you want and add your own flavor. That meal can be a great invitation into a living personal Judaism.

And we need to enrich our actions through Jewish ethics. We need to study a 3000 year old tradition deeply invested in pursuing Justice and uncovering compassion. That study then must motivate us to bring our care beyond the walls of our building and to find ways to turn our new space into a hub of social action and volunteerism.

Sandy Koufax trusted in God and almost single handedly won the World Series. Hank Greenberg trusted in God and became the only other Jewish baseball hall of famer. I don't believe it was solely their Jewish faith, but I do believe their faith and connection to community strengthened their athletic achievements.

11 congregants at Tree of Life Synagogue trusted God and gave their lives for their faith. A Chabad Rabbi in Poway trusted in God and saved countless lives.

Our new building will keep us safe; but it also has inspire the next Sandy Koufax whose cultural identity was strong enough to sit out Yom Kippur. And it has to make room for the next Cecil Rosenthal who came early every Shabbat in Pittsburgh and welcomed for who he was, and it has to help form the next Lori Kaye who loved and supported her Synagogue.

You make that happen.

The next time you host a holiday meal, you are strengthening our people and fighting anti-semites as you inspire a community to care about a Jewish future, and maybe reach a future Sandy Koufax

Each time you come to Synagogue, you are deepening our identity and strengthening us against haters, and maybe inspiring the next Lori Kaye

The next time you make room for Shabbat, you are nourishing a powerful Jewish self ready to protect and sustain Judaism, as you create space for a future Cecil Rosenthal

May the memories of all those who have given their lives for Judaism, who have sanctified Gods name sometimes in their life and sometimes through their death inspire us to protect one another and to live the Judaism for which they lived and died. Amen.