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Goodbye Shawn Green

BY PETER DREIER

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The Los Angeles Dodgers have traded Shawn Green, the only Jew on the team, to the Arizona Diamondbacks. My 8-year-old twin

daughters are devastated. They don't know if they should continue to root for the hometown Dodgers or to switch allegiances to the Diamondbacks, so they can still root for Green, their favorite player.

I've told them they can do both, especially when the Diamondbacks come to Los Angeles to play against the Dodgers. But their disappointment is real, nonetheless.

Last fall, when Green caused a national stir while he was deciding whether to play on Yom Kippur, the issue reverberated in my family. My daughter Sarah's soccer team, which I co-coach, had a game scheduled on Yom Kippur, which fell on a Saturday. At the team's practice the previous Tuesday, I told the players that Sarah -- who was the only Jew on her team -- and I wouldn't be at the game the following Saturday, because we'd be going to synagogue for Yom Kippur services instead.

When I initially told Sarah about this, she was upset, because she loves playing soccer, and the team included several of her best friends. But when I told her that her hero, Dodger outfielder-first baseman Green, would be sitting out an important game with the San Francisco Giants in order to observe the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, she beamed with pride. Sarah and her sister, Amelia, wear Shawn Green T-shirts, have his baseball card and his poster, and when we go to Dodger Stadium, they start paying attention to the game when Green is at bat.

Since the 1870s, there have been at least 143 Jews in major league baseball, according to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., and "The Big Book of Jewish Baseball" by Peter and Joachim Horvitz (S.P.I. Books, 2001). From the 1930s through the 1950s, the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants (but not the New York Yankees), had the most Jewish players. In fact, these teams actively sought out Jewish players, knowing that their presence on the team would be popular with the large number of Jewish fans in the New York area.

At least 11 Jews are currently on big league rosters -- the largest cohort of major league Jewish players since the 1950s -- but only Green's Yom Kippur dilemma generated much attention, for several reasons.

First, the 31-year-old Green, a two-time All-Star player, is the best Jewish player currently in uniform and probably the best since Sandy Koufax's playing days in the 1960s. Second, the Dodgers were locked in a close race with the rival Giants for first place in the National League West. Third, Green, was playing in Los Angeles, second only to New York in terms of the size of its Jewish population.

Like Joe DiMaggio, Jackie Robinson, Fernando Valenzuela, Hideo Nomo and others, baseball players have long been sources of pride for racial and ethnic groups. Hank Greenberg (in my parents' generation) and Koufax (in my generation) were important symbols for the Jewish community.

On Sept. 18, 1934, when Greenberg was leading the league in RBIs and his Detroit Tigers were in a close battle for first place, he elected to attend Yom Kippur services rather than play. When he arrived at the synagogue, the congregation gave him a standing ovation.

Playing at a time when most American Jews were immigrants or the children of immigrants, and when there was widespread anti-Semitism in the United States and around the world, including Nazi Germany, Greenberg understood his symbolic importance to American Jews. During his playing career, the 6-foot-4 Greenberg -- who once hit 58 home runs in a season, second only to Babe Ruth at the time -- faced anti-Semitic slurs and occasionally challenged bigots to fight him one on one. He often said that he felt every home run he hit was a home run against Hitler.

In 1934, despite Greenberg's absence from the lineup on Yom Kippur, the Tigers went on to win the pennant, although they lost the World Series to the St. Louis Cardinals.

Koufax, perhaps the greatest pitcher of all time, was a comparable symbol for Jewish baby boomers growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. Although Jews were then gaining acceptance in America, there were still quotas and other forms of anti-Semitism in business and in admissions to college and professional

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schools, housing, country clubs and other aspects of American life.

So on Oct. 8, 1965, when Koufax decided to skip the Dodgers' first game of the World Series against the Minnesota Twins, which fell on Yom Kippur -- as well as to attend synagogue services and to fast -- his decision made headlines and sparked controversy around the country, but also became a source of great pride among American Jews. Although Koufax did not grow up in a religious home or observe many Jewish practices as an adult, he recognized that he was a role model.

In his 1966 autobiography, Koufax wrote: "There was never any decision to make ... because there was never any possibility that I would pitch ... the club knows that I don't work that day."

Koufax pitched (and lost) the second game of the series, but came back to win a four-hit shutout in the fifth game and to beat the Twins with a World Series-clinching, three-hit shutout in the decisive seventh game.

Green is the most recent Jewish superstar. When the Toronto Blue Jays traded Green to the Dodgers in 2000, Jewish fans were thrilled, in part because Green is a Southern California native. And unlike some Jewish players, Green understood his symbol role. For example, he lent his name to Jewish charities, such as a literacy program sponsored by The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles.

Last Sept. 23, Green announced that he would play that Friday night's game and sit it out Saturday.

"I'm committed to getting to the postseason and winning," Green told reporters. "At the same time, I'm committed to my religion and what I've stood for in the past. I wish there were an easy solution, but there's not."

Some rabbis criticized Green for trying to have it both ways and for failing to fully observe the Jewish holiday. But the general public, and most Jews, understood Green's decision, because his dilemma reflects the reality of American Jewish life today.

America's 6.1 million Jews, who represent only 2.2 percent of the nation's population, are more accepted today than at any time in American history. As a result, they are constantly trying to find a balance between assimilation and identity. One consequence of acceptance is that the rate of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews has increased dramatically since both Greenberg's and Koufax's heydays. (Shawn Green is in this classification, as am I.) Many mixed couples (like my wife and I) raise their children as Jews, but the Jewish proportion of the American population is inevitably declining.

Few American Jews are religiously observant. Few light Sabbath candles each week or attend synagogue regularly, and even fewer keep kosher. They pick and choose what rituals, if any, to observe.

During Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, for example, synagogue attendance is three to four times greater than on a typical Sabbath. But one can be Jewish without being religious, by identifying with various aspects of Jewish heritage, such as its long-standing commitment to social activism or by participating in the many Jewish cultural and philanthropic organizations. Most American Jews, including those of Green's generation, maintain some connection to the Jewish community.

A number of congregants at my synagogue sneaked out during Friday night's Yom Kippur services to find out the score of the Dodgers-Giants game and to see how Green was doing. Whether by divine intervention or a hanging curve ball, Green hit a home run that night that proved to be the winning margin in the Dodgers' 3-2 victory, putting them 2 1/2 games ahead of San Francisco in the National League West. The following Saturday, Green's ninth-inning single sparked the Dodgers' come-from-behind victory against the Giants to clinch the division title.

By staying out of the lineup on Yom Kippur's Saturday game, Green also hit a symbolic home run for my daughter, Sarah, and many other Jewish children and parents who take pride in his accomplishments, identify with his dilemma and try their best to find the proper balance in their lives.

We will miss Shawn Green as both a player and a symbol when we go to Dodger Stadium. We don't expect the Dodgers to actively seek a Jewish player to replace him.

There's no "Jewish seat" in the Dodgers' dugout. On the other hand, lots of Jewish fans would be thrilled if the Dodgers traded for Red Sox outfielder Gabe Kapler (an L.A. native), St. Louis Cardinals pitcher Jason Marquis, Astros catcher Brad Ausmus or Marlins reliever Justin Wayne.

It would provide one more reason to go to Dodger Stadium and one more topic for debate -- will he or won't he play? -- during the High Holidays.

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