

How Will Jewish Ballplayers Handle the Yom Kippur Quandry?

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One of American Jews' great traditions -- not found in the Bible or any other sacred book -- is fretting over whether Jewish Major Leaguers will play on the high holidays, particularly Yom Kippur, the most sacred day in the Jewish calendar. This becomes a particular concern if the holiday occurs during the play-offs or the World Series, when so much is at stake, and players may have to balance their commitments to their teammates and their religion.

The number of Jews playing professional baseball has been steadily increasing during the past decade. This season, 16 Jews played on a Major League team, and another 51 Jews donned uniforms in the minors, according to the [Jewish Baseball News](#) website. This year Yom Kippur falls at the end of the regular season, beginning tonight (Friday) and continuing until sundown on Saturday. But each player will have to decide whether to don a uniform on the holy day.

Some Jewish major leaguers may be under more pressure to play than others. The Boston Red Sox have such a big lead in the NL East that their two Jewish players -- pitchers **Craig Breslow** and catcher **Ryan Lavarnway** -- could take the day off without jeopardizing the team's standing. (Red Sox outfielder **Ryan Kalish** won't have to decide whether to suit up; he's on the disabled list for the rest of the season).

The Tampa Bay Rays, Baltimore Orioles, and New York Yankees can't win the AL East crown but they are in a close race for a wild card slot in the playoffs. That could influence Rays' outfielder **Sam Fuld's** decision whether to pray or play against the Twins over the weekend, or whether two Jewish Baltimore players -- third baseman **Danny Valencia** and pitcher **Scott Feldman** - sit out the Orioles' games with the last-place Toronto Blue Jays on Friday night and Saturday afternoon. If they do suit up, they may find Toronto outfielder **Kevin Pillar** in

uniform in the opponent's dugout, unless Pillar opts to observe Yom Kippur. Blue Jays relief pitcher **Michael Schwimer** definitely won't be in uniform this weekend. The team released him in August following a mediocre season that included time on the disabled list.

Yankees third baseman **Kevin Youkilis** has been out since June following back surgery, but recently told reporters that he hopes to be available to play this week or next week. If he doesn't show up in uniform this weekend for the Yankees' contests with the Red Sox, it could be because he's still on the disabled list or he's observing Yom Kippur.

The Oakland Athletics are currently in first place in the AL West, a few games ahead of the Texas Rangers. A's rookie first baseman **Nate Freiman** and Rangers second baseman **Ian Kinsler** will have to choose whether to suit up for one, both, or neither game when the two teams face each other this weekend.

In the NL Central division, the Pittsburgh Pirates and St. Louis Cardinals are tied for first place, but neither team has a Jew on its roster. The New York Mets are mired in a distant fourth place in the NL East, so if infielder **Josh Satin** takes the day off, it won't have any serious consequences for the team's standings. (Mets' first baseman **Ike Davis** strained his right oblique muscle last month and is on the disabled list). The Houston Astros are not only in last place in the NL West, they have the worst win-loss record in baseball, so little is on the line if rookie relief pitcher **Josh Zeid** decides to observe the Jewish holy day instead of suiting up for the games against the Angels.

Jason Marquis, the San Diego Padres starting pitcher, injured his elbow in July, ending his season, and will undergo Tommy John surgery. **Ryan Braun**, perhaps the best Jewish major leaguer since Koufax, won't be in uniform this weekend either, but the injury he suffered was to his reputation. In July, Braun -- the Milwaukee Brewers' slugging outfielder who won the Rookie of the Year award in 2007 and the Most Valuable Player award in 2011 -- was suspended without pay for the remainder of this season and playoffs (totaling 65 regular season games) for using performance enhancing drugs.

The current crop of Jewish ballplayers reflects the changing demographics and practices of the larger Jewish community. 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 in the 1930s and 1960s, respectively.

Many of today's Jewish ballplayers are the offspring of mixed marriages. Among the 16 Jews who played in the major leagues this season, only Breslow, Freiman, Satin, Marquis, and Schwimer are the sons of two Jewish-born parents. Valencia's Jewish mother married a Cuban immigrant who converted to Judaism. Similarly, Youkilis' mother converted from Catholicism to Judaism after marrying a Jew. Both Valencia and Youkilis were raised as Jews and had bar mitzvahs.

Some Jewish players married non-Jews. Some identify more closely than others with the Jewish community in terms of affiliating with Jewish organizations, seeing themselves as Jewish role models, and raising their children as Jews.

When interviewed by both Jewish and mainstream media, all of them express pride in being Jewish and sometimes acknowledge other Jewish players when they're on the same field. Youkilis once greeted Kinsler with a "Happy Passover" when they crossed paths in a game, Kinsler told the *New York Times*.

Several current and former major leagues -- including Zeid, Freiman, Satin, Shawn Green, and Adam Greenberg -- played for the Israeli team in the World Baseball Classic in 2012. Former big leaguer Brad Ausmus managed the team and ex-major leaguer Gabe Kapler served as a coach. Other Jewish major leaguers expressed interest in playing for the Israeli team but the September games conflicted with their regular season. Many other players on the Israel team roster were Jewish minor leaguers.

The current crop of Jewish major leaguers have already had to face the Yom Kippur quandary. Breslow -- a Yale graduate -- has played on the holiday but fasted while doing so. "I have participated in online Passover seders and High Holy Day services, and have fasted as best as I could, even on game days," Breslow [told](#) a Jewish newspaper in the Boston area. "Typically, I try to observe the holidays in a way that is meaningful to me and indicative of my commitment to Judaism, but also honors and acknowledges the commitment that I have made to my teammates."

Valencia and Braun (who both attended the University of Miami), Davis (Arizona State), Kinsler (Missouri), and Marquis (who didn't attend college) have played on Yom Kippur in the past. Freiman, who starred at Duke University, has told reporters he'll suit up on Yom Kippur and play if he's put in the line-up. The Mets' Josh Satin, a political science graduate at UC-Berkeley, made a similar comment. Fuld (Stanford), Zeid (Tulane) and Pillar (Cal State -Dominguez Hills) have not indicated whether they would play on Yom Kippur.

Youkilis, a multiple-year All Star who attended the University of Cincinnati, has played a few times on Yom Kippur, but most years he's sat out games on the holy day and even attended synagogue. He has [said](#), "If I can make a Jewish kid proud of playing baseball and give him more confidence, I'm very proud of that."

There have been more than 160 Jews out of the roughly 17,000 players who have played Major League baseball since the National League (NL) began in 1876. Three of the greatest Jewish players - Hank Greenberg, Sandy Koufax, and Shawn Green - faced enormous scrutiny over their decision about whether to play on Yom Kippur.

On September 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. Despite Greenberg's absence from the lineup, the Tigers went on to win the pennant, although they lost the World Series to the St. Louis Cardinals. 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-inch 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.

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 schools, housing, country clubs and other aspects of American life. So on October 8, 1965, when Koufax decided to skip the Dodgers' first game of the World Series against the Minnesota Twins, which fell on Yom Kippur -- his decision made headlines and sparked controversy around the country, but also became a source of great pride among American Jews. 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.

The following year, Koufax also refused to play on Yom Kippur. The next day, September 26, 1966, Koufax lost a 2-1 game to the Cubs' Ken Holtzman, who had also refused to pitch on the Jewish holy day. 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 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."

In 2001, Green, a Dodgers slugger, sat out a game on Yom Kippur even though his team was in the midst of a pennant race. By doing so, Green ended his streak of playing in 415 consecutive games, the longest stretch among active players at the time. Three years later, reporters badgered Green -- by then the Dodgers' leading hitter -- if he would play on Yom Kippur against the Giants, who were locked in a close race with the Dodgers for first place in the NL West. Green initially told the media that he wasn't sure what he'd do and was weighing the options, triggering a rash of headlines on the nation's sports pages and an epidemic of unsolicited advice from Jewish columnists and rabbis.

In the end, Green announced on Thursday, September 23, that he would play that Friday night's game (which fell on Yom Kippur eve), but would sit out Saturday's game (the sacred day). He hit a game-winning homer the night of Kol Nidre. 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 reflected the reality of contemporary American Jewish life. "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."

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