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“Hammerin’ Hank”: Hank Greenberg and Jewish American Identity Development During the Early and Mid-20th Century

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Abstract

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There is an inextricable link between Jewish American culture and baseball. This connection was solidified by the visibility given to Jewish Americans when Detroit Tigers' star first-baseman, Hank Greenberg, decided to play baseball on the Jewish holiday, Rosh Hashanah, in 1934. This decision came during a crucial stretch of the season's pennant race. When he sat out on Yom Kippur just a week later, he became revered as a hero willing to sacrifice his professional success for the practice of Judaism. He was in this moment truly symbolic of the compromise that was being a Jewish American, a trait that would follow him for his entire life in baseball. This thesis analyzes the career of Hank Greenberg to explain how his progression to stardom increased the visibility of Jewish Americans and can help to understand religious, racial, and cultural issues as they pertain to the identity of Jewish Americans in the Interwar period. Particularly, this thesis focuses on secular practices, the development of "racial ambiguity" as it pertains to Jewish Americans, and the various ways in which Jewish Americans became acculturated. The thesis engages with primary sources from the interwar period and scholarly commentary on the development of Jewish American identity to present a holistic picture of identity development. Chiefly, the thesis engages with the work of Eric Goldstein, Beth Wenger, Marcus Lee Hansen, Stuart Hall, William M. Simons, and Gilbert Hans to address both the baseball aspect and broader cultural implications.

By tracing the developments of Hank Greenberg's life in the 1930s and 40s and placing it alongside the greater Americanization of Jewish culture, a larger picture emerges of how Jewish-American identity developed through secularism, acculturation, and racial ambiguity during the early and mid-20th century.

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Doc, you know more about Hank Greenberg than you ever wanted to, but I can promise that conversation is over. To many more Sundays together. JCB, I hope this means I can replace Mom as the family editor. The standard has been set, kiddo. I am delighted to get to thank the man who taught me that sailboat is spelled D-A-D-A… Dad, thank you for being relentless and setting the bar high… ELEVATE. I don't have the words to express my gratitude for my best friend, LK. This would not have been possible without my book club buddy, bourbon-drinking, Kerouacing mother. I love you to pieces and bits. Finally, Mavis and Ryder, you are the best dogs a boy could ask for.

“Hammerin’ Hank”: Hank Greenberg and Jewish American Identity Development During the Early and Mid-20th Century

First Pitch

I think it's important to start our relationship on an honest note. The first dozen times I stepped into any synagogue, I wore a Little League baseball uniform. That's right; I proudly sported Yankees, Pirates, and Muckdogs jerseys to synagogues all over the Washington, DC, area. Out of fairness, a baseball uniform is about as dressed up as a ten-year-old should be, and it is not my fault that family friends did not consult my baseball schedule before picking their bar/bat mitzvah dates. Saturdays are Jewish holy days; they are also prime mornings for Little League baseball games. I grew up in a secular family and my priorities were ranked as follows: 1. Winning my baseball game, 2. Spitting as many seeds as possible, 3. Convincing my parents that we had time for ice cream before lunch. I could get to priority seven hundred before I listed making sure I was dressed appropriately for a bar mitzvah after-party. This meant that by the time my family walked in late to bar mitzvah services for a slew of family friends, I was always still in full uniform, caked in dirt, oftentimes still in cleats, my hair matted from hours under a hat. I dominated the dance floor in my stirrups and set Temple Sinai records in latkes consumed and chocolate fountains used.

I never felt out of place in synagogues wearing a baseball uniform, and it was never an issue that I wasn’t wearing dress clothes. The only problem I ever ran into was that I did not choose the numbers five, seven, or thirty-two, which were introduced to

me as good baseball numbers for a Jew. It was clear to me early that Jewish Americans and baseball were attached at the hip.

There was no grand event in which my parents sat me down to explain to me the birds and the bees as it pertained to Jewish American identity, no "Field of Dreams" moment where I was visited by the ghosts of the Jewish American baseball stars of yesteryear. Rather, the Jewish American experience for me has been cumulative. It has been the result of decisions made long before I was born, built out of an understanding of what it means to be an ethnic minority in America, and established out of actions taken by cultural champions like Hank Greenberg, decades before I began wearing baseball uniforms with a kippah to temple.

Hank Greenberg, who probably never wore a kippah at the same time as his baseball stirrups, cemented the relationship between Jewish American culture and baseball when he decided to play on Rosh Hashanah, the holiday celebrating the New Year in the Jewish faith. The decision, which polarized Jewish communities across the United States, came amid the pennant race and a time in which the Detroit Tigers needed their star first baseman in the lineup. Greenberg consulted several rabbis when deciding whether it was kosher to play on the Holy Day but Rabbi Leo Franklin, who was the spiritual leader of Temple Beth El in Detroit, Michigan, summed up Greenberg's perspective best when he, like a loyal Tigers fan, stated that "the Jewish New Year was a day of joy and therefore a good ballgame was in order."[1]

Greenberg's decision to play was a good one for the Tigers, culminating in two home runs and a win over Boston.[2] Then nine days later, Greenberg chose to sit out of

[1] Mark Kurlansky, "Prologue: The One Holy Day," in *Hank Greenberg: The Hero Who Didn't Want to Be One* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 4.
[2] "Boston Red Sox vs Detroit Tigers Box Score: September 10, 1934," *Baseball Reference*, accessed November 7, 2024.7070

the Tigers' Yom Kippur game and attended Conservative services at the Detroit synagogue, Shaarey Zedek. His entrance was met with a huge ovation, and it was clear that the congregants looked to Greenberg not merely as a ballplayer, but as a Jewish superhero who played baseball in his spare time. Yom Kippur is a day of atonement, and raucous applause is not typical in a temple during these services, yet accounts of his entrance into the synagogue that day report that "Greenberg was being applauded everywhere, as he had overnight become a hero of the Jewish people."[3] This reaction spread past the doors of Shaarey Zedek and, in the span of two weeks, Greenberg was thrust into the spotlight as a beacon of Jewish American success and pride.

Hank Greenberg was born in 1911 in New York City to a casually orthodox Jewish family. His parents, David Greenberg and Sarah Schwartz, were Romanian immigrants who arrived during the mass wave of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe that had begun in the 1880s and was still in full swing. They raised Hank and his siblings in Greenwich Village, a neighborhood in lower Manhattan that was incredibly diverse, with Jews, Italians, and Irish families living side by side, if not always in harmony. Most of Greenberg's childhood was spent in the South Bronx after his family left Manhattan and followed the Jewish migration to the outer boroughs. His Crotona Park neighborhood was firmly middle class and, importantly, firmly Jewish. Greenberg took to baseball immediately and, aided by his towering height, dominated the neighborhood. Although he grew up affluent, Greenberg saw sports as a means to a better life. Following his high school graduation, he went to New York University on a basketball scholarship. His heart was always with baseball, so when the opportunity to play Major League baseball

[3] Kurlansky 8.

presented itself, Greenberg was ready to leave his studies and pursue a career on the ball field.[4]

Opportunities were presented by the New York Yankees, Washington Senators, and Detroit Tigers. The Yankees had a future Hall of Fame first baseman, Lou Gehrig, and Greenberg declined their offer because he could not imagine replacing The Iron Horse. The Senators' offer paled in comparison to the Tigers' and, in the spring of 1930, Greenberg left the confines of New York City to begin his professional baseball career in Detroit.

The Great Wave

Between 1880 and 1924, around three million Jewish immigrants came to America's shores from Eastern Europe as part of what some historians have called the "Great Wave."[5] Settling predominantly in large cities like New York and Chicago, these Jewish immigrants formed communities that were bonded by a shared religious and cultural background and untenable living situations. Facilitated in part by this tenement-style housing, American Jews formed communal identities that were built around the close-knit values of family, a desire to rise out of their "ghetto" lives through business and higher education, and an understanding of what it meant to be an American, all with an eye on maintaining deeply rooted Jewish ideals. About half the immigrants who arrived with this wave chose to settle in New York City and its environs.

[4] Kurlansky, 8
[5] Eric L. Goldstein, "The Great Wave: Eastern European Jewish Immigration to the United States, 1880-1924," in *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America*, ed. Marc Lee Raphael (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 70-92.

The choice to stay in large cities was in part an economic decision, as it was where skilled work in the clothing industry and in other trades in which many Jews had a footing was most available. But it was also based on the communal aspect of Jewish culture; cities allowed Jewish families to live close to one another, which enabled them to rely heavily on their neighbors and local Jewish institutions for support and fellowship. The Yiddish language remained the primary means of communication among immigrant Jews, who established shops, grocery stores, newspapers, schools, and even sports leagues serving their own community. While orthodox Judaism was still widely practiced, many Jews—especially the younger generation—embraced secularism and modern ways. Yet because Jews were living in such close quarters and were surrounded by many others with whom they shared a distinctive language and culture, the sense of Jewish connection among the immigrants and their children remained strong, no matter how closely they followed religious strictures. American culture also penetrated in increasing ways, though in these early years, most young Jews learned about American customs and practices mainly through popular culture rather than through close social contact with native-born Americans, the exceptions being the teachers, librarians, and settlement house workers who helped educate them. It was in this environment that Hank Greenberg spent his early childhood, and his father established his textile business. It was this background that gave Jewish children a strong sense of belonging and cultural knowledge when they were moved by their parents to the outer boroughs, where Yiddish culture may not have been so prominent.

Interwar period

The Interwar period, spanning from 1918 to America's entry into World War II in 1941, was a period in which Jewish identity was inarguably being attacked. Because of the massive number of immigrants associated with the "Great Wave," the United States had a new, powerful minority to grapple with. The media portrayed Jewish immigrants as being a plague on American society because they did not conform culturally or racially to the Anglo standard that had been set for decades. As Eric Goldstein writes in *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity,* "*The Forum* was typical of American opinion in 1926 when it expressed the need to focus new light on the 'Jewish Problem' in America."[6] World War I brought on an increase in xenophobia in the US. Americans, a country of immigrants, came into the Interwar period scared of immigrants. This stemmed from the dominant Anglo belief that foreign powers (Jews included), concepts, religions, and races, were coming to America's beckoning shores to overthrow them. Factors contributing to this belief included the increased unrest amongst labor unions that demanded workers' rights, the rise of communism in Russia which was perceived as a threat to Western democracy, and the surge of media including movies and radio that promoted new cultural norms for which Jews were easy scapegoats due to their heavy engagement in the entertainment industry.

The Interwar period is important because it is the period in which Jewish Americans became fully acculturated. They were involved in local politics, they owned prominent businesses, and Jewish intellectuals could be found at some of the nation's most important educational institutions. In reaction to this trend, quotas were introduced nationally, which restricted Jewish business and attendance at top-tier

[6] Goldstein, 119.

universities.[7] In fact, despite the increasing embrace of American culture by immigrant Jews and their children during this period, the interwar years ironically marked the height of antisemitism in U.S. history. The visibility of celebrities like Greenberg during this period, who were proudly and unapologetically Jewish, helped establish Jewish Americans in the nation despite the obstacles put in place by competing forces.

While 1934 is a relatively late jumping-off point during the interwar period, it is relevant to this research because it coincides with Greenberg's Rosh Hashanah decision. While this thesis will address the historical importance of the lead-up to 1934, the majority of the research presented will contextualize the events of Greenberg's life from 1934 until the end of World War II. While the period spanning from 1941 to 1945 is not typically accepted as the interwar period because of the events of World War II, it is relevant to Greenberg and Jewish American culture as a whole because of the overwhelming enlistment and service of Jewish Americans in the armed forces during those years. It would be doing the sacrifice of those individuals an injustice if I neglected that time, 1941-1945, in my research.

Evaluating Identity

As Stuart Hall points out in his theoretical essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," cultural identities undergo constant changes. For that reason, my evaluation of Jewish American identity fits within and is only applicable to the interwar period. While the framework of religion, race, and belonging can be used to view identity in

[7] Gerald R. Gems, "Jews, Sport, and the Construction of an American Identity," in *Muscling in on New Worlds: Jews, Sport, and the Making of the Americas*, ed. Raanan Rein and David Sheinin (Boston: BRILL, 2014), 85-100.

most historical situations, the use of my taglines, “secularism,” “racial ambiguity,” and “acculturation tactics,” is specific to my thesis.

In his writing, Hall acknowledges the specific historical contexts in which identities are shaped, but also rejects the concept of identity as being singular and fixed. While my assessment of Jewish American identity will inevitably omit the experiences of many, I hold that it also fairly represents the experiences of the whole. Not all Jewish Americans had secularized religious beliefs, but the movement's prominence during the period makes it valuable to include. Not every Jewish American felt racially ‘buoyant’ or ambiguous, but the concept of “otherness” and the lack of racial belonging still define the attempts at acculturation. While not every Jewish American used sports and the military to fit in with the popular image of a patriot, many felt called to duty out of a sense of responsibility to their new home.

I specifically chose the term “racial ambiguity” to define the racial struggle that Jews faced during the interwar period to reflect the lack of agency that Jewish Americans had over their own portrayal and, in turn their identity during the interwar period. The phrase will help to make understandable the ways that Jewish Americans were left out of the popular image of success, beauty, and America, and further the relevance of stars like Hank Greenberg in being visible Jewish American beacons of conformity.

Why Hank?

Hank Greenberg is the vehicle of choice for my research because his life and career make him emblematic of the second generation of Jewish Americans under

Marcus Lee Hansen's model (see elaboration below).[8] Greenberg embodies the merging of Jewish and American identities that came to define the early and mid-20th century for Jewish Americans. His secular religious identity was separate from his parents' orthodoxy, which was common during the period and marks an important separation from generation to generation. Further, his service in the American military and his status as a bona fide baseball star make him a clear representation of acculturation into the greater American culture, marking an important shift in the identity of Jewish Americans during the period. Finally, a huge part of the Jewish American experience in the early and mid-20th century was grappling with racial identity. Because of the ambiguous nature of Jewish racial identification and the constant need to prove that Jewish people should be recognized as important contributors to American life and industry, figures like Greenberg helped show the American public that Jews were deserving of a place at the table. Greenberg, for one showed that Jews were not merely stereotypically, physically weak intellectuals but that they could also be towering sports stars. Having established that Jewish Americans could outshine their Anglo peers, Greenberg was able to assist other minority athletes like Jackie Robinson in navigating their athletic identity as outsiders.

The details of Greenberg's biography have already been fleshed out, so there is little to contribute to that conversation. However, connecting Greenberg to the cultural themes within the interwar period that I am introducing is new and helps to paint a clearer picture of how Greenberg's visibility as a proud Jewish American contributed to the formation of a solidified Jewish American identity.

[8] Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Historical Society, 1938).

Ethnicity vs. Cultural Identity

Generational Immigrants

In 1938, prominent American historian Marcus Lee Hansen published his analysis of generational development following immigration to America. In *The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant*, Hansen introduces the roles of each generation in becoming a part of American society.[9]The first generation of immigrants was "steeped in old-world tradition," and "strove to raise Americanized children."[10] This generation fled Europe hoping to build new lives in the United States. Overwhelmingly, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe immigrated because of economic disadvantages and antisemitic attacks on their communities. In the last decades of the

9 Hansen

10 Marc Dollinger, "Jewish Identities in 20th-Century America," *Contemporary Jewry* 24, no. 1 (2003): 9–28,

19th century, the Jews of Russia—where the great majority of Eastern European Jews lived–were increasingly impoverished, subject to worsening legal restrictions, and in some cases fell victim to pogroms, which were organized attacks on Jewish residences, synagogues, and businesses, usually by disaffected Christian peasants who themselves were experiencing economic deprivation. Because the government was glad to see the Jews, rather than its own representatives, receiving the brunt of peasant unrest, these attacks often went unchecked. Additionally, Russian officials further scapegoated Jews as a dangerous economic and cultural force in the empire and tightened restrictions on their movement, their economic freedom, and their educational opportunities. This made it increasingly difficult to make a living for Jews in Eastern Europe and made the free market economy of the United States more appealing. Word quickly spread among the Jewish populace about the "goldene medina" (golden land), America, where the streets were said to be paved with gold. America's economy was growing rapidly and, as a result, the country could support an influx of immigrants with consistent employment and social support.

The second generation of immigrant families, according to Hansen, "did all they could to divorce themselves from their parents' immigrant lifestyle."[11] This generation had been raised almost fully in America, or had at least spent their formative years as American children. They may have accepted some of their parents' religious values, but largely this generation was more interested in the American world they had been raised in than the world that their parents had abandoned. This second generation "almost prided themselves on the poor second-generation Yiddish language retention rate of 10

[11] Dollinger, 24

percent."[12] While the parents of the first generation were devoted to their religious values, the second generation would grow up to be largely a secular one. Because of their parents' hard work in establishing themselves, the second generation was predominantly middle-class and could afford to pay attention to celebrities, had spare time to participate in sports like baseball, and would identify primarily as Americans.

Within Hansen's model, the third generation "longed for a sense of distinctive identity and returned to its grandparents for the knowledge and experience it never knew."[13] This generation was committed to identifying as being Jewish American rather than just American and looked to beacons of that identity to legitimize that commitment. Additionally, this generation grappled with their religious identity by practicing a more liberal, Americanized form of religious observance, such as Conservative or Reform Judaism. They were not bound by Orthodox traditions, which were misaligned with American life, and were unfazed by intermarriage but also liked the idea of being a part of Jewish community organizations. This generation would come of age in a world where antisemitism was again a threat, this time in the form of Nazism, and would find solace in the community structures built by their grandparent's generation that sought to preserve Jewish identity in the face of erasure. The community organizations that uplifted this third-generation of Jewish Americans would help them continue to climb in their socio-economic status past the Second World War when antisemitism declined worldwide in direct response to Nazism.

Hansen's argument is contingent on the idea that the third generation would be motivated to revitalize cultural practices associated with their ethnic background. Religiously, this should be viewed as a potential return to Orthodoxy and, culturally, a

[12] Dollinger, 24
[13] Dollinger, 24

potential return to Jewish communities. Hansen also argues, in direct opposition to the commonly accepted theory, which continues to be accepted in the 21st century that lower, working-class people would more strongly identify ethnically. Instead, Hansen suggests that there is a positive correlation between a strong ethnic identity and socio-economic success.[14] Hansen's ideas which are nearly a century old were expanded by Marc Dollinger in his 2003 essay, "Jewish Identities in 20th-Century America," which addresses the several generations since the publication of *The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant*. Because Hansen passed away shortly after the release of the book, his theory ends with the third generation, which is limiting but important because Hansen writes from a perspective that was exposed to the tangible nature of his model and that importantly captures the sentiment of the period that this research addresses.[15]

Symbolic Ethnicity

In 1979, German American sociologist Herbert Gans published his thoughts on ethnic identity in the *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Studies*. In "The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," Gans makes an argument for "symbolic ethnicity." The model of symbolic ethnicity claims that because of the Americanization of Jewish immigrants and large increases in intermarriage, the idea of there being a single ethnic identity is secondary at best. Instead, Gans's concept suggests that Americans pick parts of their ethnic identities to form wholly new ones. For example, Southern Jewish Americans who were looking to conform to Christian traditions that were important to

[14] Richard D. Alba, "The Transformation of Ethnicity among Americans of European Ancestries," in *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America*, 1–36 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32bp8p.5.
[15] Dollinger, 24

the culture of the American South might have chosen to partake in both Jewish and Christian holidays. Families in this circumstance would be accepting the religious aspects of their Jewish ethnicity but also accepting aspects of their new surroundings.

Socialist Richard D. Alba, writing a few decades after Gans, adds that within Gans's model, "symbolic identification with the ethnic group allows individuals to construct personal identities that contain some ethnic 'spice'."[16] By referring to symbolic identification as "spice," Alba is able to accurately describe the choice-based nature of Gans's theory. When constructing an ethnic identity, the symbolic pieces of it, like religious practice, can become an acknowledgment of cultural origin, but these "spices" are no longer the main aspects of identification. Instead, people can choose the "spices" that comprise their identity. Both Alba and Gans specify that this is especially important within Jewish identity construction because of the ability to identify as culturally, but not religiously, Jewish.

As Gans describes, intermarriage has further blurred the ethnic lines around identity construction. In "The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," Gans explains that "as intermarriage continues, the number of people with parents from the same secular ethnic group will continue to decline."[17] When this happens, individuals might forfeit some of their past identity and adopt the practices of their new partner. In this process, ethnic identities blur, which contributes to the "gradual, albeit inevitable, withering of ethnic differences among Americans of European ancestries."[18] In theory, this would increase the importance of Jewish identification with religious practices even

[16] Alba, 29
[17] Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (1979): 1–20.
[18] Alba, 29

if those are within the parameters of the less traditional Conservative or Reform Judaism and not antiquated Orthodox practices.

An Integrated Outlook

Stuart Hall's description of identity being fluid is vital to the understanding of what Alba, Gans, Hansen, and Dollinger say about identity construction. As Alba describes, there is a hierarchy within self-identification. The term "salience," which was popularized in Sheldon Stryker's 1968 article, "Identity Salience and Role Performance: The Relevance of Symbolic Interaction Theory for Family Research," is key in Alba's exploration of this hierarchy. "Salience" refers to probability, "for a given person, of a given identity being invoked in a variety of situations."[19] This concept would explain why aspects of ethnic identity can become peripheral over time and why others might rise to prominence. Additionally, it helps explain how some Jewish Americans shed their Jewishness through generations. By allowing that aspect of their identity to fade while promoting other aspects like field of employment, racial identity, or American region, Jewish Americans could become just "New Yorkers," or "Blue collar factory workers," instead of "Jewish American New Yorkers."[20]

Dollinger addresses the "salience" by explaining that during each period of Jewish American history, identity is formed as a result of accommodation to the American culture around them, local conditions that cause differing opinions and responses, the political and social scene of the period, and the way in which Jewishness is expressed.[21] Based on these factors, Jewish Americans choose which aspects of their

[19] Alba, 23
[20] Alba, 23
[21] Dollinger, 10

identity to make most prominent. Within the period that Dollinger refers to as the "New Deal" era of the 1930s (between Hansen's second and third generation depending on when immigration occurred), common aspects of Jewish American identity were based on surviving the Great Depression, the promotion of Jewish community concepts most prominently including schools which would help solidify a firm Jewish foundation in national institutions. The second generation had sent their children to public schools where Jewish culture was replaced by an American indoctrination. At the end of the 1930's when antisemitic sentiment was rearing its ugly head, Jewish communities turned inward, deciding that promoting a proud understanding of what it meant to be Jewish would help create an impenetrable identity, one that could withstand both domestic and foreign threats.[22] Ultimately, during the rise of antisemitism associated with the New Deal era, promoting Jewishness was seen as a way to combat anti-Jewish sentiments.

The direct interaction between Gans and Hansen is limited due to the short-sighted nature of Hansen's writing. Gans interacts with Hansen mainly to point out that while the third-generation concept is generally a fair assessment, it is short-sighted and does not guide future generations. Hansen, who passed away shortly after the publication of his book, was unable to address the generations that would follow the third one. Gans contributed this thought toward the end of the fifth generation with a complete understanding of the fourth generation's experience. Gans also contends that the third generation and beyond participated more in "symbolic ethnicity" instead of a sort of ethnic revival. Nevertheless, there are inextricable

[22] Dollinger, 13

connections between their models, and integrating their theories lends itself to an importantly nuanced outlook on Jewish American identity.

Greenberg Barrels It Up

Hank Greenberg's identity illustrates the intersection between the theories of Hansen and Gans. Within Hansen's generational model, Greenberg is a case study. His parents immigrated to the United States from Romania as a part of the third and final wave of Jewish immigration to America.[23] They raised their family in the outer boroughs of New York after Hank's father, David Greenberg's textile business became profitable and they could afford to move from Manhattan's packed streets to the spacious yards of the Bronx. While Hank's parents were Orthodox and emphasized the importance of their boys having bar mitzvah ceremonies, like most second-generation children, Hank and his siblings were more interested in American ways of life than the traditions their parents had brought across the Atlantic Ocean with them.[24] Just like Hansen's model predicts, Greenberg's parents were deeply tied to their Romanian-Jewish and Orthodox traditions but were intent on Americanizing their children by integrating their lives with other ethnic groups in the Bronx.

Greenberg himself was emblematic of Hansen's second generation. He did not make a career out of taking over the family textile business, or by using his intellect to achieve as a lawyer or doctor, rather, he pursued a wholly American profession: baseball player. In doing this, Greenberg acted directly in opposition to dominant views about

[23] Robert C. Cottrell, "Anti-Semitism and a Detroit Tiger," in *Two Pioneers: How Hank Greenberg and Jackie Robinson Transformed Baseball—and America*, 20–31 (Washington, D.C.: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).
[24] Cottrell, 23.

baseball as a sport and as a career that had been held by his parents' generation. As one concerned parent wrote to the Yiddish language, *Jewish Daily Forward*:

> It makes sense to teach a child to play dominoes or chess. But what is the point of a crazy game like baseball? The children can get crippled. When I was a boy we played rabbit, chasing each other, hide and seek. Later we stopped. If a grown boy played rabbit in Russia, they would think he had lost his mind. Here in educated America adults play baseball. They run after a leather ball like children. I want my boy to grow up to be a mensch, not a wild American runner.[25]

The distaste for baseball from parents, including Greenberg's own, was clear and prominent. Like many children though, Greenberg was set on a career on the baseball diamond rather than in the diamond district. His fervor for the game was backed by Abraham Cahan, editor of the *Forward*, who in response to the previous letter, wrote:

> Let your boys play baseball and play it well, as long as it does not interfere with their education or get them into bad company. Half the parents in the Jewish quarter have this problem. Chess is good, but the body needs to develop also… Baseball develops the arms, legs, and eyesight. Kids should not grow up foreigners in their own country.[26]

Hank and his wholly American identity subscribed to this school of thought, and he was undeterred in his career aspirations. Greenberg acquiesced when his parents asked him to attend university, but the pull to the ball field was too strong, and he left New York University before graduating.

Placing Greenberg in the second generation makes him the Jewish American icon that the third generation needed to see to understand that their Jewishness was

[25] Cottrell, 24
[26] Cottrell, 24

something to be proud of, not hide. Greenberg was a beacon of proud Judaism. Sure, he was mostly secular, but even the fact that he thought about skipping a pennant race game for Rosh Hashanah made him much more relatable to Jewish Americans than the Yankees star, Lou Gehrig, Boston's slugger, Jimmie Foxx, or Cardinals ace, Dizzy Dean (who would go on to win the World Series over Greenberg's Tigers).

By analyzing Greenberg through Dollinger's framework for Jewish American identity, he becomes a visible embodiment of the third generation's hopes. Primarily, because baseball is an American game and he was at the top of the sport, he provided a clear sign that Jewish Americans had accepted American traditions and that they could elevate those traditions. Also, because the local conditions in Detroit during Greenberg's career were hostile to Jews, his proud Jewishness became more notable. Greenberg's career coincided with a rise in antisemitic sentiments in the United States and in Europe where the Nazi party took over large pieces of the continent. In Detroit, a popular radio figure, Father Charles Coughlin, spewed antisemitic rhetoric. While it would have been easy to change his last name like Benny Leonard had, Greenberg kept his "Jewish" last name and stepped into the spotlight with the publicity that came from his secular decisions.[27] Benny Leonard, born Benjamin Leiner, was a Jewish American boxer from the Lower East Side of New York City. He fought 209 times as a professional with only five losses and eighty-eight title defenses as the lightweight champion. For young Jewish boys of Greenberg's generation, Leonard was a hero who showed them that Jews were tough and could compete with anyone.[28] Greenberg's identity as a Jewish American included pride in his Jewish heritage, a patriotic streak that culminated in his military

[27]Ori Z. Soltes, "From Benny Leonard to Abi Olajuwon: Jews, Muslims, Evangelicals, and the Evolving Religious Challenges of Being an American Athlete," in *Jews in the Gym: Judaism, Sports, and Athletics*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon, 239–62 (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2012).
[28] Soltes, 241

enlistment, secular beliefs, and a reckoning that even as a star, he would always be far from the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant that dominated the commonly accepted image of American celebrity.

Pinch Hitting: Secularism As Religious Identity

Secularism

Within the context of the Jewish American experience, secularism takes on a different meaning than it does in the general American psyche. Judaism is as rooted in practice and tradition as much, if not more, as it is in its theological concepts. Because of this caveat, non-observant and secular Jews can be considered just as Jewish as observant Jews. There are practices that bring families together, such as sharing a Passover seder, that exist both as necessary cultural and religious traditions. Because many Jewish celebrations "involve family and collective participation in which the motivations and concerns of the participants may vary widely,"[29] it can be difficult to determine what is a secular tradition and what is not. Secularism within Judaism can best be described as fluid due to the description of Jews as a "people" and not just as a religious group. There are ways to present Jewishness that represent a total dedication

[29] Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, "American Jewish Secularism: Jewish Life Beyond the Synagogue," *The American Jewish Year Book,* 109/112 (2012): 5.

to strict religious, orthodox values, such as wearing a tallit (a fringed prayer garment) or having payot (side curls), and ways to represent Jewishness that are, on the other hand, completely ambiguous and discreet.

Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, principal investigators for the American Religious Identification Survey series, break Jewish secularism into three categories: Jews of no religion, "just Jewish," and secular (dis)belief. Jews of no religion represent the majority of American Jewry. These individuals have either abandoned Judaism in their adulthood or were raised in a secular household. People identifying as being "just Jewish" normally do not conform to a single religious orientation within Judaism and while they may maintain some religious feelings, they typically exist beyond the bounds of standard Judaism.

One reason that visibility is so important for Jews and why the decision Hank Greenberg made to play on Rosh Hashanah was so important was that it brought secularism into the spotlight. It signaled an increasingly pluralistic America that it was okay to be Jewish, identify as such, and have almost no interest in practicing the religious aspect of the identity.

Judaism in the Interwar plus period

The 1920s saw a boom in synagogue development due to the influx of Eastern European Jews into newer, more middle-class neighborhoods, Jews who were seeking to create houses of worship in their newly established communities. Between 1916 and 1926, the number of synagogues in America doubled from 1,619 to 3,118. The '30's saw a total bust and reversal of this advancement. Between 1926 and 1936, just 610 new

synagogues were built.[30] The rapid buildout of the 1920s had placed synagogues under heavy financial burdens and mortgage debts caused by a shrinking observant Jewish population and a generation of American Jews uninterested in Jewish spaces that were exclusively spaces of worship and did not align with the popular American world outside of their community. The synagogue was perceived as being old-fashioned and out of sync with the rest of American society. For a generation that desperately wanted to prove how American they were, spaces like this were confining and antiquated.

The Great Depression overwhelmingly affected second-generation immigrants. This is the same generation that Hansen would have claimed to have been disinterested in their cultural and ethnic pasts and increasingly interested in their American present. This generation would have been raised in similar environments to Hank Greenberg, and this same generation would have raised secular children who in the midst of acculturating, looked to visible beacons of their mixed identities as Jewish Americans to set a new direction for American Jewry.

In addition to this social change, the Great Depression "threatened both the economic health and substantive role of synagogues."[31] In addition to the economic depression, religious clergy across several denominations noted a "spiritual depression" that threatened the success of their communal and spiritual programming.[32]

In the '20's, Mordecai Kaplan pioneered the concept of shuls also being community centers, which became popular and provided "a modern setting for the practice of Judaism," that "offered a variety of social, cultural, and recreational

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[30] *Census of Religious Bodies, 1936—Jewish Congregations: Statistics, History, Doctrine and Organization* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1940), table 2, 2.
[31] Beth S. Wenger, "The Spiritual Depression," in *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise*, 166–96 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
[32] Robert T. Handy, "The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935," *Church History* 29, no. 1 (March 1960): 3.

programs,"[33] to American Jews of several generations. Shul comes from the Yiddish word for "school" but is also the Yiddish word for 'synagogue'. In the United States, shuls were hubs of Jewish life both socially and religiously. These centers were created by a generation of Jews who wanted "to maintain Jewish identification," while also Americanizing their religion and ethnic background. They wanted to fit into the popular American image of white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant wealth, while still wearing the Star of David around their neck. They were eager to secularize because they saw it as a means of acculturation and acceptance.

With the financial issues of the mid-1930s, came "a growing tendency to treat synagogue affiliation as a luxury to be enjoyed when times are good and money plentiful."[34] This meant that the first sacrifice was generally membership and in turn, religious identity. When the National Recovery Administration (NRA) was established in 1933, Jewish groups "seized upon the political terminology of the New Deal as a way to demonstrate Jewish commitment to the national recovery effort and to emulate Roosevelt's far-reaching renewal tactics within religious life."[35] The main Jewish takeaway from the NRA was that the five-day workweek would enable workers to be off on Saturdays to observe the Sabbath. They hoped that the opportunity to be observant would bring back religious fervor and decrease secularism. The NRA changed nothing about religious fervor "in fact, the NRA brought no discernible change in Sabbath observance; American Jews rarely attended synagogue or set aside the Sabbath as a day of rest."[36] A survey done by the Christian Century polled Americans on what they

[33] Wenger, 167.
[34] Mordecai M. Kaplan, "Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life" (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America and Reconstructionist Press, 1981; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1934), 293.
[35] Wenger, 179.
[36] Wenger, 179.

believed had caused the Great Depression. It found overwhelmingly that Americans believed it to be caused by "the failure of human intelligence or the blind power of entrenched privilege, or both."[37] In response, Americans looked to their peers for tangible, human solutions. They proved secular and disinterested in divine interference.

Rabbi Kaplan's idea of a "shul with a pool" became integral to expanding the Jewish American synagogue connection. Throughout the period, "the trend toward blending secular and religious functions continued unabated. That trend had begun before the 1930s, but the Depression ensured its continuation, as congregations struggled for ways to attract the Jewish public."[38] This was especially relevant during the time because "unemployment and limited working hours created more leisure time," for Americans who were used to working upwards of five days a week and whose hours did not accommodate for time to participate in literary clubs. This time away from work breathed "new life into the synagogue's secular programming,"[39] and gave Jews a reason to continue affiliating even as they secularized. The burgeoning combination of a secular identity that was still tied to a rich Jewish cultural tradition was relevant enough that ignoring it would have been naive of synagogue leaders and Reform Jewish thinkers. The headway made by Jewish community centers in acting as barriers between Secularism and abandonment was not lost on Rabbis like Eugene Kohn, who insisted that a positive image of Jewish identity was needed in the shape of "a cultural program which will develop an appreciation of Jewish achievement in the past." He felt that this would "afford the opportunity for creative Jewish activity in the present."[40] This would

[37] Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. 2: *The Noise of Conflict, 1919-1941* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 258–302.
[38] Wenger, 186.
[39] Wenger, 186.
[40] Kohn, 77.

help maintain self-respect for American Jews under antisemitic, depressionary, and wartime conditions.

While Jews responded in different ways to the challenges of the Depression, as a community they generally demonstrated a resilience that reflected their long experience of having to speedily adapt to changing social, cultural, and economic conditions. The elaborate Jewish response to the Depression and the resulting secular movement came from a blueprint developed well before the Depression, one through which "synagogues survived a decade of religious apathy and stagnation by refining the parameters of an inclusive religious agenda." Ultimately, the era laid "the groundwork for an institutional Judaism in which religion and ethnicity were inextricably intertwined,"[41] even secular expressions of religion.

Secularism within Jewish American Identity

Deep historical roots contextualize the relationship between Jewish Americans and secular thoughts. Dating back to Thomas Paine's 1795 publication, *The Age of Reason*, there has been a sentiment that religious freedom should be a requisite aspect of the rights of every American. By 1850, at a time when many Jewish immigrants were coming to America from German-speaking Central Europe, half of all American Jews belonged to no synagogue at all.[42] Jonathan Sarna refers to the group belonging to no synagogue as being "indifferent."[43] This alludes to their commitment to identifying as Jewish while being "seemingly uninterested in the practice of Judaism."[44] This group of Jewish Americans felt compelled by secularism and separation from synagogue life. In

[41] Wenger, 196.
[42] Jonathan Sarna, "The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of Secular Judaism" (adapted from a speech, University of Virginia).
[43] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
[44] Sarna, 88.

1890, Joseph Lyons of Columbia, South Carolina, skipped Yom Kippur services and wrote in his journal that he was "almost an atheist."[45] For all his disassociation with religion, Lyons was deeply committed to the study of what it meant to be Jewish. He clearly represented an emerging Jewish American identity connected to its heritage but increasingly secular and uninterested in the strict practices of the Old World.

The largest wave of Jewish immigration to the United States—the "Great Wave" from Eastern Europe ended in 1924 when Congress adopted the country's first major restrictive law against the entry of European foreigners, the Johnson-Reed Act. Of the nearly 2.5 million Jews who immigrated during this wave, nearly half of them failed to affiliate with a synagogue.[17] Secular Jewish identities did not come to prominence out of a desire to reject Jewish religious beliefs. Rather, secularism became prominent because Jewish Americans settled in closely-knit communities where just living and being a part of the communal society enabled people to identify as Jewish. There was no need to belong to a synagogue when it was inherent to one's location that you would identify with your Jewishness. Jews in the years following the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act associated themselves with Jewish life through their participation in Jewish community organizations like summer camps that united Jewish youth and instilled them with a sense of pride in their identities and through Synagogue Centers which were hubs of Jewish American life.

The weight of being the secular generation falls on the shoulders of Marcus Lee Hansen's second generation. This generation had been raised by immigrant parents who were traditional in their religious observance. As children, this generation received

[45] Sarna, 88

exposure to a mix of American and Yiddish cultures that gave them dual access to worlds that their parents could not enter. They grew up patriotic Americans surrounded by Yiddish traditions that gave this generation the ability to essentially switch between their Jewish, religiously observant, home lives and their Jewish American, secular, community lives where they rooted for American sports teams, listened to music not just in Yiddish, and separated from their parents' traditions.

Sarna proposes several ways Jewish Americans ensured that their secular culture would thrive. Primarily, secular Jews had a common language, Yiddish. This enabled them to create a distinction between Jews and their gentile counterparts. It also helped to root the new community of secular American Jews to the Ashkenazi traditions of Eastern Europe. Also, because Jewish immigrants clustered into intensely Jewish communities, sharing culture was convenient, and rejecting external forces on that same culture was easier. Importantly, these communities were not wholly secular. They were diverse in the choices that people made for their religious observance. Synagogues and religious leaders were still visibly present, which contributed to a sense that families could be Jewish just by proximity, not only by practice. The secular experience was heavily reliant on a shared experience. Because of this, "East European Jews in America succeeded in creating a secular Jewish culture—by far the most successful secular Jewish culture ever created in the United States." This culture thrived because it empowered secular Eastern European Jews to feel "intensely Jewish," despite never stepping foot in a synagogue.[46]

Kosmin and Keysar expand on this idea by adding that "there is more to the Jewish experience in America than religion." They mention that "literature, music, food,

[46] Sarna, 10

and even humor are essential aspects of what it means to be a Jew." Kosmin and Keysar note that this "adds layers of complexity," to the Jewish American experience.[47] It is because of this that Kosmin and Keysar claim that "Jewish secularism is as diverse and fractious as American Judaism."[48]

The ability to feel highly connected to Jewish culture but not Judaism as a religion speaks volumes about the separation between the separation of cultural and religious identity for Jewish Americans during this period. As mentioned, Richard D. Alba points out that religious practice is a "spice", and the decision by certain Jewish Americans, including Hank Greenberg, to be secular or at least non-observant should be regarded in the same manner. Being a secular Jew did not disqualify second and third-generation Jewish Americans from identifying as Jewish. Instead, it gave them an effective way to integrate into their surroundings and lead diverse, multicultural lives that helped them understand they could be Jewish and American. Furthermore, secular Judaism can and should be considered an expression of Herbert Gans's "symbolic ethnicity." These secular Jews "have no problem identifying themselves as Jews, and perhaps light Chanukah candles"[49] but are uncommitted to religious and community organizations.

Realities of Secular Belief and Acculturation

There is a long-standing school of thought toward secularism in Jewish American culture that suggests it is an acculturation tactic. The data presented by the American Jewish Identity Survey in 2001 in response to the question, "What branch of Judaism do

[47] Kosmin and Keysar, 4.
[48] Kosmin and Keysar, 4
[49]Samuel C. Heilman, "American Jews and Community: A Spectrum of Possibilities," *Contemporary Jewry* 24, no. 1 (2003): 51–69.

you identify with, if any?" is evidence that "America's Jews differ quite a bit on the fundamentals of religious faith from most Americans."[50] Furthermore, the data proves that secular and atheist beliefs are far from normative in American society. Because secularism is atypical, it would be, at best, a poor acculturation tactic. In fact, this "distinctive pattern of secularism and non-belief may well set them apart."[51] While the founding fathers enshrined the right to religious freedom in the First Amendment of the Constitution and the United States continues to be a pluralist haven, there is no doubt that the presence of a common religion, specifically Christianity, was an important aspect of being considered a part of the Anglo-Saxon, white, elite class. Secularism brought Jewish people closer to this standard but did not make them the same.

Finding the Sweetspot: Hank Greenberg As a Secular Hero

Hank Greenberg's thirteen-year Major League Baseball career had many shining moments. His accolades include two Most Valuable Player awards and two World Series rings, and his body of work culminated in his induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Despite these accomplishments, the event most often featured in descriptions of his career was his decision to play on Rosh Hashanah and not on Yom Kippur during the 1934 pennant race. Greenberg's decision to play or not to play was of national significance, and many rabbis wanted their voices heard on the matter. This was all ironic to Greenberg, who, despite being increasingly aware of his role as a Jewish beacon of success against American standards, was himself secular. Greenberg was Jewish by

[50] Kosmin and Keysar, 25
[51] Kosmin and Keysar, 25

association, Jewish by what he referred to as "an accident of birth,"[52] but not an adult who engaged in any meaningful religious practice.

Despite being raised in an Orthodox Jewish household, Greenberg toed the line that many of his contemporaries did in rejecting their parents' "Old World" traditions in exchange for American traditions. This meant that, for the most part, all attendance at services except for those on the high holidays went by the wayside. Greenberg was so separated from the Jewish religion that he normally did not even observe Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Despite this, Greenberg was seen, even at twenty-three years old, as "a kind of national Jew,"[53] and so he was thrust into a decision on whether or not he would play during the September holidays.

For the most part, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are irrelevant to the baseball world. Linked to the lunar calendar used to determine Jewish festivals, the two high holidays fall on different secular dates each year, typically between early September and late October. As Greenberg's biographer Mark Kurlansky explains, "This means that they may fall harmlessly before the pennant race comes down to the last few crucial games."[26] By chance, in 1934, the holidays fell right in the middle of an important stretch of games for the Detroit Tigers, which suddenly placed pressure on Greenberg, as the star slugger, to decide whether he would be in the lineup. The attention that his decision warranted significantly underscores the lack of visibility for American Jews during the interwar period. There was no common understanding of Jewish holidays among the non-Jewish public; because they were secondary to the Christian holidays, they were irrelevant.

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[52] Kurlansky, xi
[53] Kurlansky, 4

As an adult, Greenberg observed Yom Kippur just once, in 1934, though he felt that that decision "defined him for the rest of his days," which "was not at all what he had wanted."[54] For Greenberg, the religious aspect of his Jewish American identity was generally irrelevant, and it "seemed absurd to be defined by his religious observance when he was utterly unobservant."[55] The decision to sit out of competition on Yom Kippur was in part due to the seriousness of the Day of Atonement but was also a response to the condemnation by some Orthodox Jewish communities who believed that as a visible icon of Judaism, he should honor the traditions and set an example for the other Jewish Americans. In the Jewish tradition, "Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, unlike the joyous holiday Rosh Hashanah, is a solemn day of fasting and prayer that is so significant in the Jewish religion that it is often observed by secular Jews—so-called Yom Kippur Jews."[56] Greenberg was so secular that he was not even a "Yom Kippur Jew" and still because there were so few powerful beacons of Jewish American identity, Greenberg was pressed into action. Greenberg recognized that because of his role as a sort of "national Jew," and the embodiment of the "Macho Mensch," a contemporary phrase describing the combination of immense physical strength and commitment to Jewish values, that there was no appeasing both sides.

Ultimately, Greenberg was happy to have decided to play on Rosh Hashanah because his team won. Even though it took right up until the Tigers took the field for Greenberg to make up his mind, he never regretted stepping onto the field, "especially since he hit two home runs, the second to win the game in the ninth inning, and the Tigers beat Boston 2–1."[57] When he attended morning services ten days later for Yom

[54] Kurlansky 1
[55] Kurlansky 1
[56] Kurlansky, 8
[57] Kurlansky, 7

Kippur, Greenberg was met with applause as he walked into Shaarey Zedek, a synagogue in Detroit. Greenberg had heeded the advice of Jewish authorities and his father, but he never became fully comfortable with the concept of being an exemplary observant Jew. In private, "Greenberg, the secular Jew, was both embarrassed and amused by his new image."[58] The 1934 season would prove the only one in which Greenberg would have to miss competition for services, and yet his legacy remains one of a pious Jew, caught between an American game and an underlying identity.

Greenberg never sported a kippah (a dome-shaped skullcap that fulfills the Talmudic practice of covering one's head as a way of showing humility and honoring God) in his adult life, he did not raise children who had any sense of connection to a Jewish identity, and in fact never even told his children that they of were Jewish background. As his son, Stephen, describes in Greenberg's autobiography, *Hank Greenberg: The Story of My Life*, Hank raised children who never gave a second thought to celebrating Christmas, never stepped foot in a synagogue, or even observed Yom Kippur.[59] Greenberg's personal identity was that of a secular Jewish American of the second generation. His public identity was as a "mythic super-Jew."[60] It is difficult to ignore that Greenberg accepted the mantle of "super-Jew" when he attended services on Yom Kippur, but it is equally important to recognize that Greenberg was an American who rejected Orthodoxy. Moreover, Greenberg is evidence of the realization of the acculturated dream. Greenberg was able to choose to express his Jewishness when he felt that it was important and was otherwise able to lead a secularized life. Secularization was not a tool of assimilation for Greenberg, it was a manifestation of Sarna's claim that

[58] Kurlansky, 12
[59] Hank Greenberg with Ira Berkow, *Hank Greenberg: The Story of My Life* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989). 225.
[60] Kurlansky, 12

Jews in the interwar years could feel intensely Jewish without ever stepping foot in a synagogue. Owing to his last name alone, antisemitism was an issue for Greenberg, but he refused to change his name and faced the discrimination head-on. His towering figure enabled him to combat stereotypes of Jewish physicality, and his ability with a bat in his hand gave him a vehicle to a successful career. While Yom Kippur in 1934 was the last time that Greenberg stepped foot into a synagogue as a congregant, the idea of him being Jewish became an inextricable part of his identity.

Greenberg's choice is the perfect device from which we can analyze the concept of "spice" as it pertains to the Jewish American identity. Greenberg's decision around the high holidays tells us that Judaism is not absolute. Religion is an instrument that Jewish Americans have leaned on as a way to connect to one another, Greenberg saw his religious identity as nearly irrelevant and yet was still proudly Jewish and a household Jewish name at that. He embodied Judaism for the nations' Gentiles and for an entire generation of Jewish Americans who could finally look to a powerful example of themselves in the public eye. Greenberg did not make it any more acceptable to be Jewish; he did not make it any more palatable to be secular; instead, Greenberg provided an alternative outlook where you could pick and choose which parts of Jewish tradition would move with you into your American identity. Because of this, he is the consummate vehicle to understand the importance of "symbolic ethnicity" to second and third-generation Jewish Americans.

Battlefields and Ballfields: Methods of Jewish American Acculturation and Integration

Baseball and Belonging

For an ethnic outsider during the early and mid-20th century, one certain way to show the American public just how patriotic you were was to participate in the tradition called the "national pastime," baseball. The game was considered as "American as apple pie," and before the pro ranks integrated in 1947, it was a segregated sport where the Major League rosters were populated by white, American men. The owners and fans reflected the racial makeup of the on-field talent because "professional baseball's ideology spoke directly to white Anglo-Saxon Americans," which spoke to their desire to actualize their belief that devotion to American pastimes would help them to "secure order."[61] The most real desire of white Americans was that baseball would "teach children 'traditional' American values and to help newcomers assimilate into the dominant WASP culture through their participation in the sport and its rituals."[62] In doing this, they hoped to eliminate otherness. By instilling these traditional values into the game, baseball became a game curated to reflect the purest parts of American society. Into the early 20th century, fans cared greatly about keeping the game "American" and effectively bullied ethnic minorities out of it. Indeed, the attempts to

[61] Steven A. Riess, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 7.
[62] Reiss, 7

ensure baseball aligned with “American” values were successful, and it was a solidly grounded method of proving one's devotion to American traditions as a minority.

While the first generation of Eastern European Jewish immigrants were concerned with establishing themselves in the United States, moving their families out of tenement-style housing, and giving their children opportunities to further their educations, those same children were deeply concerned with belonging in America. They overwhelmingly accepted American culture, and baseball came right along with it. The parents that comprised the first generation thought of baseball players as being, in the words of the comedian Eddie Cantor, “the king of loafers.”[63] In his book, *World of Our Fathers*, Irving Howe describes the tension between a young boy, who felt that baseball made him a “real” American, and the boy's father, who was a “greenhorn.” The anxiety shown by the first generation was not mirrored by the second generation because they recognized baseball as being “a meritocratic and democratic institution,” which they felt would “gain them personal acceptance,” and importantly, “respect for their ethnic group [Jews] from the broader society.”[64]

The desire to belong within American institutions was not exclusive to baseball. Jewish Americans like Louis Brandeis and Henry Morgenthau Jr. had earned their way into the highest ranks of the American judiciary and government, and Irving Berlin and the Marx brothers broke into mainstream entertainment. Jews had created space for themselves in important American areas, and sport was just another area in which Jewish Americans felt they could prove their belonging. By hitting towering home runs, knocking out their opposing boxer, and winning, they could prove that Jews were contributing members of American society.

[63] Reiss, 189
[64] Reiss, 189-190

Battlefields and Belonging

An even more certain way of proving one's allegiance to the American flag is to risk life and limb while serving in the American military. About 550,000 Jewish Americans served during World War II. This was equivalent to a little over four percent of the soldiers in the U.S. military forces, despite Jews representing just two percent of the total American population. Of these Jewish American soldiers, 26,000 received citations for valor and merit, and three were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.[65] Such service was a significant way for Jewish Americans to tell the nation that their allegiance was to the United States. The demonstrated patriotism launched Jewish Americans' integration into greater American society, something that was of significant importance to most American Jews. Ethnicity mattered less in foxholes than it did most anywhere else, and the military was not a place organized by background. The American military was mostly meritocratic, and like the baseball players who thought they could gain respect within broader society through their athletic ability, Jewish American soldiers hoped their valor would earn Jews a legitimate place at the Anglo-American table. In response to the growing Jewish enlistment, the military included a significant number of rabbis on their list of active-duty chaplains. In building this new life as military men (and women), many Jewish Americans found comfort in their ability to identify both as Jews and as loyal American citizens.

Significantly, a positive change that emerged from World War II was the transformation of the social position of Jews in American society. There was nothing

[65]"Statistics on Jewish American Soldiers in World War II," *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed March 20, 2025, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/statistics-on-jewish-american-soldiers-in-world-war-ii.

assured to minority groups regarding belonging, but as a result of post-war programs like the G.I. Bill, which gave Jewish Americans increased opportunities to attend college, social mobility was a legitimate reality. Following the war, definitions of nationalism encompassed Jews and other white, ethnic minorities. These developments were not automatic, and Jewish Americans worked incredibly hard to cement themselves within American culture and industry. The military had not been any different. The concept was simple, "donning an American uniform made Jews both more American and more Jewish."[66] The concept of being "more American" was integral to the Jewish American desire to belong.

Additionally, the United States was demonstrably committed to the Four Freedoms as articulated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, "freedom of speech and worship" and "freedom from want and fear," which were enticing to Jewish servicemen because those freedoms accompanied the promise of "a future of dignity, as individuals and as a community, at home and abroad."[67] Jewish American soldiers were under the impression that by serving and potentially sacrificing their lives for the freedoms of others, they would in turn be granted freedoms of their own. This belief was actualized by the postwar growth in the use of the phrase "Judeo-Christian tradition." President Dwight D. Eisenhower cemented the term into the American psyche when he used "Judeo-Christian" in a December 1952 speech. He alluded to the idea that the concept of all men being created equally was a core tenet of both belief systems, and thus one could

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[66]Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), x.

[67] Moore, 19

not take the sole credit for the ideal.[68] The phrase refers to the idea that Christianity is not solely responsible for the foundations of the American value system and that American values were instead built upon Judeo-Christian values. As the Jewish scholar Will Herberg argued in *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology,* American pluralism was "an essential aspect of the American way of life."[69] To the extent that Jewish Americans agreed with him, this sentiment was earned by Jews in foxholes and in cockpits, on operating tables, and in command centers. As a people, Jewish Americans fought to be recognized as a part of the whole and not just as a vocal minority.

Acculturation and Integration

By definition, "acculturation is the process by which members of a new minority culture take on aspects of their host culture, but at the same time seek to maintain a continuing identification and involvement in their original culture."[70] Within Jewish American history, "acculturation refers to the acquisition by Jews of the habits, values, and behaviors of the dominant non- Jewish group."[71] Acculturation during the American early and mid-20th century was not much different than it had been for other instances of Jewish acculturation.

Acculturation is generally a process, unlike integration and assimilation, that moves at the pace of the acculturating group. This meant that Jewish Americans were

[68] Warren Zev Harver, "The Judeo-Christian Tradition's Five Others," in *Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition?: A European Perspective*, ed. Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski, 1st ed., 211–24 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 213.
[69] Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 85.
[70] Bernard Reisman, "An Alternative Perspective: The Acculturation of American Jews," *Contemporary Jewry* 18, no. 1 (1997): 135.
[71] Todd M. Endelman, "Assimilation and Assimilationism," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. Mitchell B. Hart and Tony Michels, 291–311 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 313.

accepting Christian and American traditions faster than Christian America was accepting Jewish Americans. While there were internal debates about the extent to which Jews should try to fit into the larger American culture, "acculturation went forward largely unhindered by traditionalist opposition."[72]

The end goal of Jewish Americans was not just to be an acculturated group but to be an integrated one. Integration "refers to the entry of Jews into non-Jewish social circles, institutions, and spheres of activity."[73] In order to integrate, Jewish Americans first had to acculturate. Despite the desire to integrate, Jewish Americans proved unwilling as a whole to change their comportment so that it mirrored their WASP counterparts. They preferred to not amend their dress by leaving their kippahs at the door. Importantly, integration meant abandoning Yiddish in public settings. These forfeitures would have given Jewish Americans a chance at integration but would have also been accompanied by a total erasure of some traditions. Integration, which is an evolution from acculturation gave room for Jewish Americans to take part in important aspects of American life like military service and professional baseball. Integratory practices are reliant on the majority group, allowing the minority group entrance. The military is a prime example because the admittance of Jewish Americans was reliant on the willingness of larger white society to accept Jews into their battalions, whereas Black Americans and Asian Americans were not accepted or integrated within the US military. Baseball is a similar example because again Jews were reliant on the willingness of white owners to sign and promote Jewish ballplayers, whom they could have chosen to exclude just as they did Black ballplayers.

[72] Endelman, 319.
[73] Endelman, 313.

Navin Field to The Battle Field: Greenberg and Acculturation

If playing professional baseball and serving in the military are guaranteed ways to be recognized as wholly American, then Hank Greenberg was as American as anyone. Across parts of thirteen Major League seasons, Greenberg was a superstar. While escaping his Jewish background was impossible, due to the widespread narrative about his identity, his unwillingness to change his last name, and the way he was seen publicly, he transcended the expectations of ethnic minorities in the sport and supported the stardom of others like the Italian American star, Joe DiMaggio, and eventually, the first Black MLB player, Jackie Robinson. Importantly, Greenberg became "an attractive face of Jewry to a sports-obsessed Christian America,"[74] who also became a model for the hundreds of thousands of impressionable Jewish boys who aspired to be successful on the baseball diamond, in academia, or in business. These impressionable Jewish boys would certainly need to acknowledge their Jewish background at some point in their lives. Greenberg had provided them with a blueprint for "how to balance the obligations of their Judaism with those of their sports-playing hopes and desires."[75] The customs of Judaism did not have to be at odds with those belonging to American culture; they could coexist. While Greenberg demonstrated that one might have to briefly sacrifice one for another, he also demonstrated that a balance was attainable.

Sports were largely a world in which Jewish Americans observed from front offices and the grandstands, and now, by having an acculturated beacon of Jewish

[74] Soltes, 245.
[75] Soltes, 245.

American life on the game's biggest stages, Jewish Americans could project themselves into society at large. Even just "the presence of Jewish ballplayers in the country's only true national sport provided American Jews comfort and hope that they too would make it through hard times and succeed."[76] Jewish Americans did not suddenly become better baseball players because of Greenberg, but they were empowered to fight for recognition. They could understand that despite antisemitism, economic depression, and their lack of belonging, they could still contribute to American society.

The term "macho-mensch"[77] most aptly describes Greenberg's contributions to Jewish American acculturation. Macho describes a form of masculinity that is prideful and conforms to the hegemonic aspects of manliness. Mensch is a Yiddish term that refers to a person of high integrity and honor. "The macho-mensch displays three main characteristics: he is an outstanding athlete; he is an ethical human being who displays his virtues through gentility and kindness; and he is demonstrably connected to his Jewish identity, marking his menschlichkeit [humaneness] through the attributes of loyalty and bravery."[78] Regarding his high holiday decisions in September 1934, "Greenberg was the 'macho' hero, winning the game for the Tigers by hitting two home runs, baseball's ultimate indicator of strength and power."[79] Simultaneously, he was a mensch because of "his willingness to play when needed," and "his synagogue attendance despite his lack of interest in religious Judaism."[80] Greenberg was familiarizing the American public with Jewish traditions while also single-handedly

[76] Peter Levine, "'Mantle, Schmantle, We Got Abie:' Jews and Major League Baseball Between the Wars," in *To Ebbets Field: Sport and the American-Jewish Experience*, 117–43 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 119.
[77] Rebecca T. Alpert, "The Macho-Mensch: Modeling American Jewish Masculinity and the Heroes of Baseball," in *Muscling in on New Worlds: Jews, Sport, and the Making of the Americas*, ed. Raanan Rein and David Sheinin, 101–20 (Boston: BRILL, 2014).
[78] Alpert, 109.
[79] Alpert, 111.
[80] Alpert, 111.

leading his baseball team to victory in important games in which the entire nation took an interest.

In the middle of his Big League time, explains Soltes, "Greenberg chose to sacrifice the best years of his playing career."[81] This was not for some cushy, promotional position off the frontline; he wanted to serve his country on the battlefield. He enlisted in the United States military out of a responsibility to service that combined "his American with his Jewish sensibilities."[82] Celebrities were renowned for finding alternate ways to serve their country or finding ways out of service altogether, but Greenberg "was the first Major League star to elect to give up baseball for battle, asserting the primacy of responsibility to his country over his personal baseball ambitions."[83] The story goes that despite being classified as not fit for military service due to his flat feet, Greenberg bribed the enlistment board to retest him. Coincidentally, his flat feet turned out to be a non-issue. Furthermore, "when after having missed most of the 1941 season he was honorably discharged (the army was discharging everyone over age twenty-eight), he re-enlisted after Pearl Harbor."[84]

Most Jewish Americans who served in the Second World War did so out of a mixed obligation to American patriotism and to their Jewish identity, which was under siege during the Nazi occupation of Europe. The burden of service fell overwhelmingly onto the second generation of immigrants, which meant that Jewish American soldiers understood their obligation to the United States as being of primary importance. Greenberg is perfectly representative of this because he never mentioned the obligation to his cultural heritage as being a reason he felt compelled to enlist. He did so out of a

[81] Soltes, 249.
[82] Soltes, 249.
[83] Soltes, 247.
[84] Soltes, 247.

patriotic and dutiful belief that he could help his nation. He requested to be deployed and not to be tied to a desk for the same beliefs.

Until he served in the U.S. Army, Greenberg was a "Jewish American baseball star," defined by his ethnic background and not by his actual decisions as a secular American citizen. During his domestic military service, "the two-time Most Valuable Player of the American League and star of the recent World Series was cheered by crowds as his division moved through the Midwest, including Cincinnati and Detroit, where the Series had been played only months earlier." He declared his American identity by putting on a military uniform and in doing so, hushed his antisemitic critics who "did not jeer at a man in military uniform."[85]

Greenberg was raised Orthodox but took his secular identity with him into the world. He was primarily an American, secondarily a baseball player, and still proud of Jewishness. Working within the definition of acculturation, Greenberg is a prime example because, as a part of the Jewish minority in America, he took on important aspects of American culture like patriotic pride and participation in baseball, but also made decisions that acknowledged his identity as a minority in the nation. He kept his identifiably Jewish last name, he publicly observed Jewish traditions when he felt that it mattered most, and never lost track of the price of belonging in America, evidenced by his friendship and support of Black stars, Jackie Robinson and Curt Flood.

Following his military service, where he stayed in military uniform far longer than any other Major League baseball player, Greenberg returned from the South Pacific to the Detroit batting lineup. On his first day back, he hit a home run and eventually "brought the Tigers back to the World Series with a grand slam on the last day of the

[85] Kurlansky, 99.

season."[86] The Tigers would go on to defeat the Chicago Cubs in seven games to win the World Series, and Greenberg again homered twice in the effort.

[86] Soltes, 247.

Double Play: Racial Ambiguity and Jewish American Identity

Racial Ambiguity

Because the conversation around race and Jewish Americans is evolving, associating a term with the racial struggle of Jewish Americans is complicated. Most terms suggest that there are only two racial categories, white and black, but as we know, racial categories are significantly more complex than that. Most ethnic minorities directly challenge the categorization of a single racial background. Racial ambiguity is essentially a placeholder in this conversation, and it is not the intention of this thesis to declare any term to be absolute.

I [for this thesis] use the term 'racial ambiguity' to refer to the idea that Jewish Americans did/do not fit neatly into one racial category. Other scholars have used this term to describe bi-racial identities or the identities of those who feel that they are "passing." Ambiguous things can take on multiple meanings and can be confusing. The racial identity of Jews is no different. Jewish people have taken on and been assigned varying identities and have been put into racial categorizations based on arbitrary decisions like the lack of association with Christian ideals, the color of their skin, or their economic status. These are factors that contribute to the idea of race being a "socially constructed" concept. In the American context, with its history of colonial conquest and slavery, race was constructed as a social system that mainly categorizes people based on skin color rather than by other distinctions that may have held more importance in other contexts. The concept of "whiteness" as being something admirable and superior and "blackness" as being something to avoid comes out of this construction. It has

empowered white people for centuries to rise to the highest parts of their respective societies, on the shoulders of those who do not represent the same "white" ideals. Race is a way of imagining someone's differences based on a set of social factors. Jews did not fit into either of the primary categories (white or Black) that Americans used in racial conversations, and thus presented a unique issue of racial categorization. There was no convenient way to categorize Jewish Americans because they were of European descent and had white skin, but were still representative of otherness and a delineation from the norm.

Jews were in part excluded from whiteness due to their position as a potential threat to the American tradition of capitalism. Jews were adept at rising into the economic middle class from severe levels of poverty and were also not averse to supporting socialist policies. As stated by Jerry Z. Muller, "Jews moved quickly out of manual labor, in which many first-generation immigrants had been engaged, and into proprietorship, management, and professional and technical fields."[87] American Jews understood the value of social safety nets and thus, as they rose through the economic ranks of the nation, they did so without the typical aversion to socialist policies that other successful capitalist groups held.

Ambiguity applies to the Jewish American identity of the early and mid-20th century because it is the culmination of secularism and acculturation. Because of the rise in secularism during the Great Depression, Jewish Americans could no longer claim to be guided by a purely Jewish set of ideals built from the historical foundation of shared experiences, cultural values, and economic growth. Because Jews were largely an acculturated group during this period, they became an easy scapegoat for "otherness."

[87]Jerry Z. Muller, "The Jewish Response to Capitalism: Milton Friedman's Paradox Reconsidered," in *Capitalism and the Jews*, 91 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

They had achieved economic success by becoming a solidly middle-class group of people and their movement into areas that were outside of their original settlements. The influence of their new home had permeated every corner of their lives and the second generation had cemented a fluid nature between Jewish religious and American cultural values. A large aspect of this was the acceptance of portions of the common American identity, which through various acculturation tactics like participation in sport and military service, Jewish Americans had adopted.

There had not been an abandonment of Jewish identity but there was a significant shift toward a pluralistic Jewish American one. This lack of grounding in either Jewish identity or American identity contributes to an ambiguous nature, which is a fair and accurate way of describing the identity of Jewish Americans during the early and mid-20th century. Jewish Americans were largely acculturated but not largely integrated. The closer that Jewish Americans got to being a part of the larger society, the more they were pushed toward the fringes. As a method of controlling their social growth, white society increasingly pushed views of Jews as being different than white people. This was completely out of Jewish American control and contributed to the ambiguity of their racial identity. The phrase “racial ambiguity” is meant to reflect the overlapping conceptions of race and identity during the period and the lack of one neat category in which one could place Jewish Americans.

Getting On Base: Finding Jewish Place in The Racial Hierarchy

In the essay, "On Being White… and Other Lies," James Baldwin writes, "No one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country."[88] Baldwin continues by describing the decision made by Jewish immigrants to become white. While Baldwin sees this as a decision, which is an unfair generalization of the Jewish experience in America, it does aptly describe whiteness as something that is a development of society and as something that belongs to those in power.

Whiteness and a sense of belonging are generally inextricable when talking about American societal structure. It was not something that came without cost. As Baldwin wrote, the price of a ticket to America was the price of becoming white.[89] The whiteness of Jewish immigrants was constantly being questioned. Being of European origin was not enough to secure "white" status in America. The 1924 Immigration Act, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, according to critic Michael Rogin, "bound together Jews, Asians, and blacks under the Orientalist umbrella."[90] Restrictive actions like the Johnson-Reed Act were meant to reinforce white, Anglo-Protestant hegemony and suppress the groups that they felt could obscure the clear lines within the American social hierarchy. These measures fortified whiteness as being something desirable. Further, when groups like Jews, Irish, and Italians threatened the hierarchy, with their ambiguity, these measures helped suffocate their social and political power purely by limiting their strength in numbers.

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[88]James Baldwin, "On Being White… and Other Lies," *Essence*, April 1984.
[89] Baldwin
[90] Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 101.

During the Interwar, New Deal, and World War II eras, white racial identification was under revision. Because of the evolving roles of ethnic minorities in mainstream American life, American society at large was forced to begin addressing where its Italian, Irish, and Jewish contributors fit in. Sure, they had white skin, but because of a variety of reason,s including their religious beliefs, which differed from the Anglo-Protestant ones that dominated the upper echelons of American society, they did not fit comfortably into the image of an American that the Anglo-Protestants sought to promote. During the transformation of racial identity in America following the Second World War, there was a positive correlation between Jewish acculturation tactics and acceptance into white America. This was due to "the thorough integration of Jews and Catholics into the American military," which "helped cement the public's view of these groups as unambiguously white."[91] Furthermore, the economic success of Jewish Americans during the early and mid-20th century enabled the Eastern European immigrants to suburbanize. The participation of Jewish Americans in the cultural integration of suburban communities helped them to be seen as white by Anglo standards. They had proved their worth to society during the war and their economic value over nearly half a century and thus had earned recognition.

Touch 'Em All: Jewish American Racial Ambiguity

The location of Jewish Americans in the racial fabric of the United States was a distinct problem through the end of World War II, when Jewish Americans went through a significant period of social and economic growth. Before that development,

[91]Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 193.

"the intense social pressures of the period pushed Jews into a web of irresolvable contradictions regarding their place in American life."[92] Because of the intensifying efforts to acculturate made by Jewish Americans primarily of Hansen's second generation, Jewish Americans "increasingly found themselves entering arenas that placed people within the categories of "black" and "white."[93] As this generation became "enmeshed in American culture, more aware of its codes and values and more anxious to find acceptance within its ranks, they began to understand—often intuitively—the social significance of whiteness and its relevance to their own lives."[94] This generation of American-born Jews absorbed American culture. They worshipped the ballplayers on their favorite American League baseball teams, listened to music in English, not in Yiddish, and laid their lives on the line for their home nation as American soldiers. This generation wanted nothing more than to belong in "white" America.

In the early 20th century, Jewish American communities largely accepted that the ambiguous nature of their racial standing in America afforded them the ability to be distinctively Jewish. This notion was replaced during the 1920s and 1930s by the assertion that "there were more and less severe kinds of racial difference, and that Jewish difference was of the latter, more benign type."[95] Jewish Americans were forced to play down the aspects of Jewishness that distinguished them from other groups. They narrowed their cultural identity and the parts of themselves that inhibited their ability to be accepted by larger, white society. The white society they looked to be accepted by had a vested interest in Jews being white because it sharpened the racial divide. In other words, the racial ambiguity of Jewish Americans made it seem like there was room for

[92] Goldstein, 137.
[93] Goldstein, 139.
[94] Goldstein, 138.
[95] Goldstein, 175.

otherness, and white Americans felt that space for otherness diminished the power of whiteness in the constructed racial hierarchy.

This was meant to stress the idea that Jewish Americans recognized themselves as being something other than white, but also were not the "oriental" enemy they had been painted as by the Johnson-Reed Act. The idea was further perpetuated by Jewish American writers who "attempted to reassure non-Jews that the physical distinction between blacks and whites was still the most basic racial fault line in American society."[96] This helped Jews further their argument that they were not the racial enemy; they were merely a variety of white. This also directly contrasted with the 1924 belief that conflated "racial minorities into a single, orientalist alien."[97]

The entire concept of using "discrete categories such as race or religion" to define oneself was foreign to Jewish immigrants who "had only recently emerged from an atmosphere where Jewishness was an all-encompassing identity."[98] Despite this naivety, the Eastern European Jewish experiences in their native countries with pogroms, the ghettoizing of Jewish communities, and the limiting of economic opportunities, made them eager to pursue acceptance in America. "Identification with whiteness, Jews came to find, not only gave them greater chances for advancement but also allowed them to experience what it was like not to be the focus of national hostility and resentment."[99] As these immigrants acculturated to American life, there was a continual understanding that while there might not be a consensus on where Jews should fit into the racial hierarchy (even among Jews themselves), "whatever chance they did have for social

[96] Goldstein, 175.
[97] Rogin, 101.
[98] Goldstein, 96.
[99] Goldstein, 145.

acceptance rested on their conformity to the dominant racial paradigm."[100] This compliance with the white American conventions was a significant way that Jewish Americans positioned themselves in relation to Americans of color. By accentuating their differences from non-white Americans and demonstrating their similarities to white Americans, Jews were able to establish their whiteness.

This was not without discomfort, as many Jewish Americans saw the plight of African Americans as being similar to their struggle with antisemitic attacks and felt that separating themselves from that struggle was morally wrong. As Goldstein states, "for Jewish radicals who usually restricted their activities to Jewish arenas, black rights was one of the major issues that could draw them out to participate in political agitation in the non-Jewish world."[101] Ultimately, this combined with the desire to belong to the mainstream complicated the lines around racial etiquette for Jewish Americans.

The Jewish American scholars who sought to "find a stable middle ground between racial distinctiveness and white Americanism," eventually settled on referring to Jews as being an ethnic group rather than a race. Jewish Americans had relied on their racial background for their group identity since the latter half of the 19th century "to stabilize what it meant to be Jewish amidst shifting social boundaries, as well as to assure their standing in the national culture by underscoring their contributions to civilization."[102] The move toward ethnic identification rather than racial stemmed from the importance of Jewish culture in defining Jewish American life and the lack of any real definition of what could or would make a group of people "white," beyond just their skin color, which had proven to be not enough. Even with this progressive definition of

[100] Goldstein, 138.
[101] Goldstein, 158.
[102] Goldstein, 87.

Jews as a people rather than a race, nothing could fix the uncertainty that stemmed from remaining uncertain of when Jewish Americans should be prideful of their racial identity and when they should "retreat into a more defensive position."[103] Even through the end of World War II, when Jewish Americans were generally being accepted as white Americans, "Jews would continue to hold a problematic place as potential whites who were never willing to give up their renegade ways."[104]

Finding The Gap: Greenberg and Racial Buoyancy

For a group to feel like they belong within the greater world, they must be able to look around and feel represented. By being proud of his Jewish identity, Greenberg filled this role for many Jewish Americans. In a time of great uncertainty about the Jewish place in the nation and the world, Greenberg made it clear that it did not ultimately matter whether Jews fit into a single racial category. The convenience of racial belonging was sought after by many, but icons, like Greenberg, who remained buoyant, did not allow categories to define him. He was not just Jewish, he was not white, and he was not, other. He was not just a ballplayer or just the son of Orthodox Jews. In a society suited for the categorization of its citizens, Greenberg remained buoyant, floating above the fray.

Buoys in the ocean are tethered to the surface. They do not submerge or fly into the sky; they remain between the two. This analogy aptly describes the Jewish American experience during the early and mid-20th century. In the analogy, the sky is American identity, and the ocean is Jewish cultural identity. The buoy is the Jewish Americans of

[103] Goldstein, 176.
[104] Goldstein, 133.

the period. When Hansen's second generation moved toward secularism, accepting American values around religious practice and shedding Jewish ones rooted in orthodoxy, they became more culturally ambiguous. This shift marked their emergence from the "ocean." By beginning to acculturate and accept American traditions as their own, Jewish Americans moved toward the "sky." Because they were tethered to Judaism, like a buoy, Jewish Americans never fully rose out of the tradition from which they came and also never fully shed that tradition for wholly new ones. Figure 1 represents this analogy.

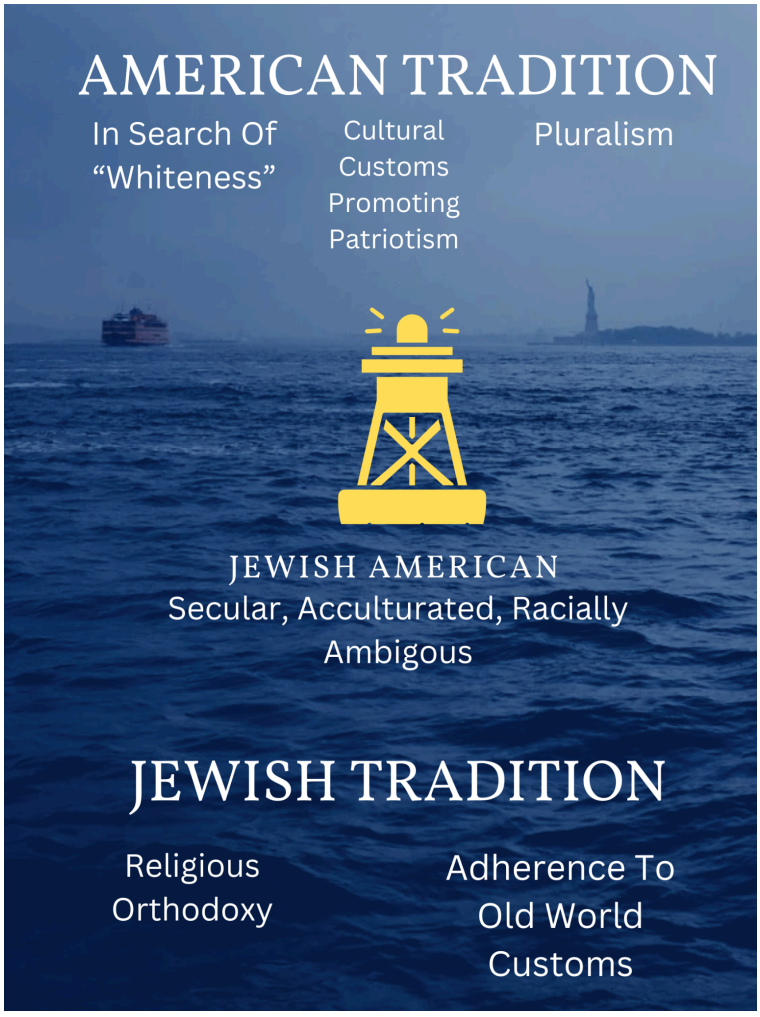

Fig.1

Toeing the "Foul Line"

Greenberg was a sparkplug when it came to promoting Jewish American whiteness because of his accultured position as a war hero, Most Valuable Player, and World Series champion. In baseball, a sparkplug is someone that a team can always rely on to get the game moving. Take Jewish American identity as the team, and "getting the game moving" as defining the racial standing of Jews within American society. Greenberg was the symbol you wanted at the plate. He had asserted his patriotism on the battlefields of the South Pacific, his stardom on the ballfields of American cities, and his whiteness was earned as a result of both. When Major League Baseball integrated in 1947, Jackie Robinson, the first Black player, needed the support of important voices around the league. Greenberg did not hesitate to support Robinson. Greenberg understood that "Jewish activists were distinctively allied with African Americans in the struggle for racial equality."[105] Greenberg had pushed through antisemitic rhetoric in his ascent to the top of baseball, but as a reserve catcher for the Tigers, Birdie Tebbets described, "Jackie had no place to go after a ball game and Greenberg could go anyplace in the world."[106] Where Greenberg could conceal himself behind the guise of whiteness, Robinson could not hide behind his blackness. Hank and Jackie collided both literally and figuratively after Greenberg was traded to the Pittsburgh Pirates. The Pirates played in the National League, which meant they matched up with Robinson's Brooklyn Dodgers. During their first meeting, Jackie ran full speed into Hank, who was covering first base. Innings late,r when Robinson returned to the bag, Greenberg made sure he

[105] Rogin, 17.
[106] Greenberg, 98.

was alright and told him to keep his chin up.[107] Greenberg encouraged Robinson because he identified with Jackie based on the fact that he had faced a similar prejudice. Greenberg understood better than most that because of his status and the whiteness it afforded him, he could reach out a valuable hand to players like Jackie. Part of the racial ambiguity of Jewish Americans is reconciling with the price paid for whiteness and the neglect of the cultural beliefs that made them "other" to begin with. Greenberg reconciled with this by becoming a powerful white voice in support of his Black peers. Like many Jews in the public eye, Greenberg was not fully comfortable with the claims whiteness made on him because it largely meant joining the same society that had been persecuting Jews and Blacks. The coercion toward whiteness that was mentioned by Baldwin pulled Jews like Greenberg into white society even when they remained hesitant. Greenberg's empathy towards Black ballplayers was clearly a way he could navigate his acceptance in white America.

In addition to his support as a player, Greenberg continued to be a voice of reason when he retired from the field and became an executive with the Cleveland Indians. During his tenure, Greenberg discovered that the Black players in his ballclub had to stay in hotels other than the white ones. This baffled him. It had never occurred to him that with the advancements that people of color had made in the sport, they would still be treated as "other." Where his talent afforded him "whiteness," their talent afforded them more "blackness." Just like he had been a Jewish American star and not just an American one, these ballplayers were always defined by their skin color, which was made out to be primary, and their skills were said to be secondary. After discovering the hotel segregation, Greenberg demanded that his travel secretary, Spud Goldstein,

[107] Greenberg, 181.

write to every hotel they intended on staying in and let them know that they would have to accommodate the black players or they would risk losing the business of the team.

In addition to his support of Jackie Robinson, Greenberg backed Curt Flood. Flood was a star baseball player for the St.Louis Cardinals and was Black. After a contract dispute resulted in him being traded from St. Louis to Philadelphia, Flood sued Major League Baseball. While he was ruled against at every level including by the Supreme Court, Flood's battle resulted in a new agreement between the Players Association and Major League Baseball owners that brought arbitration into the mix and helped bring about the 10/5 rule, colloquially referred to as the "Curt Flood Rule" which gives players with ten years of big league service and five with their current team, the power to veto a trade. Ultimately, in 1998, Congress passed the "Curt Flood Act," which eliminated baseball's antitrust exemption regarding labor issues. While most professional players stayed away from Flood, understanding that backing him from afar was enough to make them pariahs in the game, Greenberg was a vocal and adamant supporter of Flood's. He was one of two people to testify on Flood's behalf in front of the Supreme Court. Greenberg understood baseball and the business better than most. Greenberg had "been a ballplayer, a club farm director, and a general manager as well as a club owner,"[108] and felt that these positions helped him understand Flood's argument, and he had no trouble putting the weight of his power behind it.

Greenberg was unwilling to sign onto the aspects of white racial standing that were discriminatory and prohibited progress. Even though Greenberg and Jewish Americans as a whole came to be seen as white, their history as a discriminated-against group made them unwilling to compromise their social values. The way Greenberg had

[108] Greenberg, 253.

been treated ensured that he did not think of race as something worth noting as a reason to support a peer. Greenberg saw race as unexacting and merely a cosmetic difference. Personally, Greenberg refused to buy into the rhetoric that his whiteness made him different or better. He never lost sight of his Jewish identity and the difficulties that had resulted from it during his career.

In her writing on Greenberg as a Macho-Mensch, Rebecca Alpert refers to Hank as a standard bearer, a sentiment echoed by many. As a standard bearer, Greenberg represented Jewishness to the greater American public. His military service made him an exemplary patriot and helped him appear more "macho." His ability to understand his identity and the subsequent power that came with that understanding made him a "mensch." He was unwavering in his support of ballplayers who were the second-generation embodiment of their ethnicities, just like he had been. He never attained the celebrity of the Italian American star, Joe DiMaggio, and his plight was not as public as integrators like Jackie Robinson, but Greenberg had their backs.

Call to the bullpen

On Thursday, October 4th, 1934, less than a month after Greenberg walked into Yom Kippur services at Shaarey Zedek, Edgar A. Guest published a poem in the *Detroit Free Press* that read:

> The Irish didn't like it when they heard of Greenberg's fame,
> For they thought a good first baseman should possess an Irish name;
> And the Murphys and Mulrooneys said they never dreamed they'd see
> A Jewish boy from Bronxville out where Casey used to be.
> In the early days of April not a Dugan tipped his hat
> Or prayed to see a "double" when Hank Greenberg came to bat.
> In July the Irish wondered where he'd ever learned to play.
> "He makes me think of Casey!" Old man Murphy dared to say;
> And with fifty-seven doubles and a score of homers made,
> The respect they had for Greenberg was being openly displayed.
> But on the Jewish New Year, when Hank Greenberg came to bat
> And made two home runs off Pitcher Rhodes — they cheered like mad for that.
> Came Yom Kippur — holy fast day world wide over to the Jew —
> And Hank Greenberg to his teaching and the old tradition true
> Spent the day among his people and he didn't come to play.
> Said Murphy to Mulrooney, "We shall lose the game today!
> We shall miss him on the infield and shall miss him at the bat
> But he's true to his religion — and I honor him for that!"[109]

Guest's poem paints Greenberg's impact clearly. As a visible Jewish American, he helped make Jews palatable to the rest of the nation. Based on their ability, they could diminish the impact of the barriers set up by American society and rise to a level of recognition that bordered on admiration. Greenberg charted a path for Jewish Americans of all

[109] Edgar A. Guest, "Speaking of Greenberg," *Detroit Free Press*, October 4, 1934.

backgrounds to become a part of the fabric of America. Greenberg had indisputably proven that he belonged in baseball and inarguably proven that being Jewish did not make you any less able to be successful, while being undeniably Jewish and proud.

His time in the spotlight was clear evidence for the second generation of Great Wave immigrants that they belonged on every field. That impact irradiated through generation to follow who grew up hearing stories about how Greenberg hit towering homeruns and sat out of play on Yom Kippur. His ability to display his Jewishness publicly and simultaneously be hailed as an American hero is a representative of a core desire of the group as a whole. Secular or otherwise, being Jewish was acceptable and being devoted to that identity was honorable. Baseball is an obvious means of acculturation, but being featured in conversations amongst the American games' biggest stars like Mickey Mantle, Jackie Robinson, and Joe DiMaggio, moves the needle past acculturated to accepted.

In the ninth inning of the Jewish American story of the early and mid-20th century, the name of the game is acceptance, and Jewish American identity during that period should be looked at as the pursuit of that embrace. Jewish American identity is the story of making difficult decisions to eliminate or prioritize certain aspects of oneself. It is the story of seeking belonging and the sacrifices associated with that endeavor. I am a proud product of those decisions, a result of generations of grappling with what it means to be Jewish in America, and a ballplayer forever indebted to the identity forged by Hank Greenberg.

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