

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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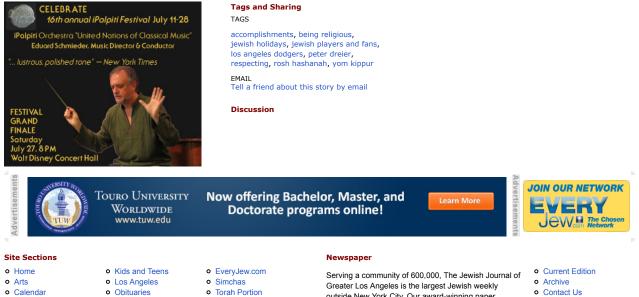
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