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Thank You, Shawn Green

Sports

By **Peter Dreier**

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My 7-year old daughter Sarah's soccer team, which I co-coach, plays every Saturday during the fall. At the team's Tuesday night practice two weeks ago, I told the players that Sarah — who is the only Jew on her team — and I wouldn't be at the game the following Saturday because we'd be going to synagogue for Yom Kippur services instead.

When I initially told Sarah about this, she was upset because she loves playing soccer and the team includes several of her best friends. But when I told her that her hero, Dodger outfielder-first baseman Shawn Green (the lone Jew on *his* team), would be sitting out an important game with the San Francisco Giants in order to observe the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, she beamed with pride. Sarah wears a Shawn Green T-shirt and has his baseball card and his poster, and when we go to Dodger Stadium, she starts paying attention to the game when Green is at bat.

Early that week, I had every reason to believe that Green wouldn't play on Yom Kippur because he had done so before in 2001, at some personal sacrifice: To observe Yom Kippur, he had to end his streak of playing in 415 consecutive games — at the time the longest streak among active major leaguers.

Then, midweek, I got nervous when the press reported that Green was considering his options: Play against the Giants both Friday night (when Yom Kippur began) and Saturday afternoon (when it continued through sundown); remove himself from the lineup for both games, or play in only one game. What if Green took the first option? How would I explain this to Sarah?

Like Hank Greenberg (in my parents' generation), and Sandy Koufax (in my generation), Green has become a symbol of Jewish pride. On September 18, 1934, when Greenberg was leading the league in RBIs and his Detroit Tigers were in a close battle for first place, he elected to attend Yom Kippur services rather than play. When he arrived at the synagogue, the congregation gave him a standing ovation. Playing at a time when most American Jews were immigrants or the children of immigrants, and when there was widespread antisemitism in the United States and around the world, including Nazi Germany, Greenberg understood his symbolic importance to American Jews. During his playing career, the 6-foot-4-inch Greenberg — who once hit 58 home runs in a season, second only to Babe Ruth at the time — faced antisemitic slurs and occasionally challenged bigots to fight him one-on-one. He often said that he felt every home run he hit was a home run against Hitler.

Koufax, perhaps the greatest pitcher of all time, was a comparable symbol for Jewish baby boomers growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. Although Jews were then gaining acceptance in America, there were still quotas and other forms of antisemitism in business and in admissions to college and professional schools, housing, country clubs and other aspects of American life. So on October 8, 1965, when Koufax decided to skip the Dodgers' first game of the World Series against the Minnesota Twins, which fell on Yom Kippur — as well as to attend synagogue services and to fast — his decision made headlines and sparked controversy around the country, but also became a source of great pride among American Jews. Although Koufax did not grow up in a religious home or observe many Jewish practices as an adult, he recognized that he was a role model. In his 1966 autobiography, Koufax wrote: "There was never any decision to make... because there was never any possibility that I would pitch... the club knows that I don't work that day."

Since the 1870s, there have been at least 143 Jews in major league baseball, according to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., and "The Big Book of Jewish Baseball" by Peter S. Horvitz and Joachim Horvitz. Few of them had to face this decision, because Yom Kippur typically fell after the regular season, usually during the World Series. However, since the expansion of the baseball season, the creation of intra-league divisions and the introduction of play-offs, Yom Kippur is more likely to fall before the World Series, forcing more Jewish players to make a choice whether or not to play.

At least 11 Jews are currently on big league rosters, but only Green's dilemma has generated much attention, for several reasons. First, the 31-year-old Green, a two-time All-Star player, is the best Jewish player currently in uniform and probably the best since Koufax's day. Second, the Dodgers are locked in a close race with the rival Giants for first place in the NL West. Third, Green plays in Los Angeles, second only to New York in terms of the size of its Jewish population.

Green announced on Thursday, September 23, 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% 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. Green, for example, lends his name to Jewish charities, such as a literacy program sponsored by The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles.

In 1934, despite Greenberg's absence from the lineup on Yom Kippur, the Tigers went on to win the pennant, although they lost the World Series to the St. Louis Cardinals. In 1965, 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.

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-to-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.

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