Constant Challenge

Sports and American Judaism

Jeffrey S. Gurock

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In memory of

Bernard "Red" Sarachek

who taught Jewish pride to generations of Yeshiva University athletes

Yeshiva University

Bernard "Red " Sarachek

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Foreword

In a review of my first written foray into examining the challenge of sports to American Judaism and the varied responses of the US community toward accommodating that secular force and integrating it into religious life, my friend, the late Professor Lloyd Gartner of Tel Aviv University – a senior scholar in the field of American Jewish history – opined that through these labors I have integrated my multiple identities as "Professor Gurock, Yeshiva University historian, and Jeff, coach and advocate for religious observant Jewish athletes." I heartily agree with this characterization. Through the years, my love for and participation in sports and my professional skill and vocation as an American Jewish historian have worked well for me, on and off the court or track and in and out of the lecture hall. Most importantly, as a scholar and educator, I found that one of the best ways of explaining how Jews in America in the twentieth–twenty-first centuries became enamored with, and came to grips with, the incursions of cultural phenomena that historically had been foreign to them is through focusing on the games that they played and attended in this country. In other words, the sports metaphor is a powerful teaching

device for instructing students about the constant challenges that American society has posed to Judaism in America.

The nine essays that appear in this volume – all republished with the kind permission of their original outlets – are presented here in the expectation that student athletes, their fans, families, and friends, within and without the Yeshiva University community, will find the sports stories intriguing. But more essentially, that they and their teachers will use this volume as a text for examining the larger American Jewish experience.

I have a teammate in producing this work under the imprint of the Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University – a sterling ornament of our school with which I have been associated for more than a quarter century. Michael Scharf is unquestionably a lover of good books, a supporter of Jewish scholarship of all genres, and an avid sportsperson himself. I am also grateful to the staff of The Toby Press, especially Tomi Mager, Nechama Unterman, and Shoshana Rotem, who have teamed up with Scharf Publications in producing this book. As with all my endeavors at my home institution, I have been heartened through the support granted me over the decades by our leaders, Presidents Norman Lamm and Richard M. Joel, Provosts Mort Lowengrub and Selma Botman, and my dean at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies, David Berger.

Finally, I am gratified by the support that my family gives to my vocation and avocation. And I am pleased that all of my children and their spouses have their own athletic profiles whether in the gym, as marathon runners, or in the case of Michael Gurock, as an outstanding yeshiva high school basketball coach. And recently, three of my granddaughters have taken up competitive swimming, lacrosse, and gymnastics. As always, Pamela keeps our team together.

Jeffrey S. Gurock
August 2016

Introduction

The Study of American Judaism Through Sports

I. ORTHODOX JEWS AT PLAY

In the 1920s, the leaders of Mesifta Torah Vodaath (MTV), situated in staunchly Orthodox Williamsburg, Brooklyn, dedicated their yeshiva to raising up a new generation of young men who would, in America, adhere to the values of the religious civilization that their elders recalled from Eastern Europe. These students, it was prayed, would certainly stand apart from the vast majority of second-generation American Jews who had broken with the traditions of the past as they embraced Americanization. As important, they would be in proud and confident counterpoise to others who also considered themselves devoutly Orthodox but who had made some telling accommodations to the secular worlds around them. However, the reconstitution at these Brooklyn schools of what these leaders remembered as untempered old-world Orthodoxy proved ultimately unachievable. The reality was that despite all efforts to create a cloistered environment on Bedford Avenue, as their students peered from the windows of their yeshiva and walked the streets of their community, they became aware of, and were attracted to, some of the lures of American social

and cultural life. In the end, the scene on inter-war streets interested these young men. And while committed to maintaining their core religious postures, they also wanted to stand as neighborhood boys – to behave in many ways like those around them. Facing facts on the ground, school officials made careful but nonetheless meaningful adjustments to institutional policies. One area where accommodations were made was in the arena of sports.

That the Torah Vodaath community was not totally untouched by the streams of acculturation was readily apparent to Rabbi Shimon Shkop when, in the late 1920s, this head of Shaarei Torah Yeshiva in Grodno visited the Brooklyn school. He was very troubled to see MTV students taking part in a very American activity – a game of baseball – during recess in the schoolyard. As the story goes, he was upset that "students of the yeshiva, who study God's Torah, could spend their time in such folly."

It is not known if Rabbi Shkop angrily raised his objections with the school's head, Rabbi Shraga Faivel Mendlowitz, nor if Mendlowitz offered a red-faced apology. But it is entirely conceivable that the Brooklyn yeshiva official might have evoked the teaching of Maimonides, the twelfth-century sage, that physical fitness helps a Jew become closer to God. Or to put it another way, his point of defense might have been that recreational activity helps produce more upstanding students who have the requisite physical stamina to spend the rest of the day in productive textual talmudic study – the school's ultimate objective. Mendlowitz could also have cited comparable opinions – albeit minority views – in the more recent European past to support his position. He might have whispered to his associates that the culture of the Polish and Lithuanian yeshiva world was also in flux. It is also possible that the MTV leader might have calmly admitted to his visitor that while he was deeply committed to honor the European past – indeed such was how his school's *raison d'être* was projected to the community – in the end, Williamsburg was in America and the students, punctilious as they were (today the word *frum* rather than punctilious is instead almost universally used), they liked the games that were common fare in the neighborhood. Thus, the undeniable fact of life was that to prohibit informal recreation

would not enhance his institution's rarefied goals. Besides, there were far worse types of neighborhood pursuits around them – like going to the movies or listening to secular music or dating – that might entice those with spare time on their hands. The trick was to keep a close watch on students when they were not in the house of study but rather were within the friendly confines of the sports area.

In the early 1940s, amid the most calamitous era in modern Jewish history – the *Shoah* – sports played a memorable, if momentary, additional role in the life of the yeshiva. During that time, a basketball game was played in Brooklyn between MTV and its brother school in Brownsville, Yeshiva Chaim Berlin (YCB), to raise money for the Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee that was struggling to garner community support to save the doomed Jews of Europe. Like MTV, Chaim Berlin attempted to imbue in its students the educational and social values of the old-world religious past. Still, its Brooklyn boys were also sporting enough to be able to field a team. Although organizing a "varsity" – as it were – was not the game plan rabbis like Mendlowitz, and for that matter Rabbi Isaac Hutner of YCB, had in mind when they countenanced recreational activities in their schools, this fundraising event was but a temporary formalization of athleticism in these extraordinary and horrible times. Indeed, heads of their own yeshivas had themselves seemingly violated the Sabbath when, in 1941, they drove around Brooklyn on the Sabbath to solicit money in synagogues of all sorts to save Jews then under the heel of Hitler. Of course, the overriding mitzva (that the saving of life takes precedence over rabbinic ordinances about traveling on holy days) motivated and permitted the ride through Jewish neighborhoods on Saturday.

After the war, the question of countenancing ongoing varsities representing the strictly Orthodox schools became a point of controversy and of differentiation at both MTV and YCB. The debates were activated in the spring of 1951 when Yeshiva University invited basketball players from the two Brooklyn schools to participate in an inaugural "Jewish High School Invitational Tournament." By that time, the more modern yeshiva, located in Washington Heights in Upper Manhattan, already had a long tradition – dating back to the

1930s – of permitting its athletes to compete against other Jewish and non-Jewish clubs both on the high school and college levels. Implicit in this approbation was the sense that such activities were in line with the school's explicit commitment to raising up all-American Orthodox youngsters, comfortable and proficient in the world of the Torah and well-adjusted and competitive in the American civilization within which they lived. But back in Williamsburg and Brownsville, for the leaders of MTV and YCB this sports opportunity – and soon thereafter, the offer to join the Metropolitan Jewish High School League (MJHSL) that had its first full schedule of games during the 1951–52 campaign – posed a twofold challenge.

First, while it was one thing to allow Torah scholars-in-training to step away from their desks for a while to recreate, it was another matter entirely to have athletes possibly projected as standard-bearers to the outside world when they wore school colors on uniforms in formalized sports. After all, since their yeshivas were supposed to hallow the student of the Torah above everything else – and, in theory at least, to the exclusion of American culture – the fear was that athletes would come to replace those students who studied extra-long and did not waste too much time in the gym as the classmates to be emulated.

Second, school administrators were very uncomfortable with the prospect of the mixed-gender social scene that inevitably would be part of interscholastic competition. By the 1950s, in addition to Yeshiva University's modern yeshiva high schools – two in Manhattan and two in Brooklyn, two for boys alone and two for girls – there were modern Jewish day schools in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Long Island that offered co-equal intensive Jewish and secular education. (Some of these schools dated back to the late 1920s–mid 1930s as elementary schools; now they had come of age with growing high school programs.) Three of these coeducational institutions would also be charter members of the league. Explicit in the most modern schools' missions was that not only physical education but also sports for boys and girls had to be part of a well-rounded youngster's education. Otherwise, it was reasoned, not only would students from Americanized Orthodox families stay away from these schools, but

boys and girls from less observant homes, whom these day schools hoped to recruit, would never consider attending a Jewish all-day educational institution. Indeed, one of these schools initially referred to itself as an "academy" and not as a yeshiva or even a day school as it trumpeted how its educational and social protocols were similar to those of the private schools in the neighborhood against whom it competed for the allegiance of prospective families.

MTV and YCB leaders were fundamentally opposed to the loose, unchaperoned mixing of boys and girls at the games and most definitely to the post-match dances – akin to private school "socials" – that sometimes followed the athletic activity. Many of the students in the Williamsburg and Brownsville schools strongly supported their rabbis' position. But the athletes and their fans within the student body wanted to see how well these players stacked up in varsity competition. And perhaps a few of these players saw no reason why they should not hang out with the opposite sex after the games. They had bought into the American ideal that sports should be good, clean fun.

YCB and MTV leaders responded to this challenge in different ways. Their decisions underscored a subtle difference in attitude between and within the two very devout Orthodox schools. YCB's Rabbi Hutner acceded to his athletes joining the league so long as they agreed to stay clear of the post-game activities. In the end, he trusted the religious values and behavior of his disciples. It should also be said that it is not known how rigorously the requirement to exit from the social scene was monitored in the early 1950s. On the other hand, the rabbinical authorities at MTV would not hear of a varsity at their school. However, undeterred by the yeshiva's decision, for two years (1951–53) a subterranean student-run sports operation signed the school up with the league. This rogue varsity played against the modern schools until school officials got wind of the malefactors and forced MTV to stand down. Four years later – after the 1956–57 campaign – YCB ended its relationship with the "day school" league. Its departure had much to do with another gender issue. The modern Jewish schools, that again in many ways took their cultural cues from the private schools around them, not only sponsored organized girls'

games as preliminaries to the varsity games, but female cheerleaders performing gymnastic stunts led the coeducational crowds in support of their clubs. To an outside observer, these boosters were dressed appropriately according to the styles of the day. But for Hutner, the opposition had unquestionably crossed the foul lines of immodesty. YCB's era in the MJHSL ended.

Some years later, YCB and MTV accommodated those students who still wanted to play sports. Clearly, notwithstanding the schools' mission statements and public profiles, the reality within and without their houses of study was that their students were a heterogeneous bunch. To partially mollify their athletes – who, by the way, might also be good and devoted students – their high schools joined a short-lived Inter-Mesifta League. This loop brought together similar-minded yeshivas, primarily in the ever-growing Orthodox communities in Brooklyn, for games that had many of the trappings of the MJHSL. In the public school venues that were rented, there were scoreboards, the players wore school uniforms, and there were certified officials on hand to referee the matches. However, critically, no female spectators were allowed on the premises. Even the mothers and sisters of the players were barred from the events to punctuate the opposition to any sort of post-game social scene.

In the late 1960s, the most traditionally minded charter member of the MJHSL – the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School – began to express its unhappiness with the league's gender policies. Although this school was for boys only, until that time most of its rabbis were blithely unaware of the goings-on at the games. But now, in a move to align the school with YCB, MTV, and the ever-growing number of even more separatist Orthodox educational institutions in the New York-New Jersey area, a decision was made to leave the MJHSL and to affiliate with the callow Inter-Mesifta League. The majority of students who did not share their rabbis' point of view were outraged and protested the move, but to no avail. However, after reluctantly playing and winning in the weakly competitive no-women-allowed league for two years, the students successfully pressured the school to return to the coed loop.

In the years that followed, the MJHSL – eventually renamed the Metropolitan Yeshiva High School Athletic League – experienced substantial expansion as well as geographical change, consistent with the burgeoning Orthodox communities in Gotham and its suburbs and the decline of long-standing inner-city enclaves. By the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, there were nineteen schools playing boys' and girls' basketball under the league's auspices, the majority on Long Island and in northern and central New Jersey. Only four of the original member clubs were still in the league. The Rabbi Jacob Joseph School of downtown Manhattan closed its secondary school in 1976. Interestingly, within the four Brooklyn schools – only one of which was an original league affiliate – the majority of the players were of Sephardic, or to be more precise of Syrian, extraction. Decades earlier those with Ashkenazic roots had predominated. The Orthodox Jewish ethnic population of Flatbush and Midwood, Brooklyn, had changed. And the league also sponsored soccer, volleyball, baseball, and softball as well as a sport of Modern Orthodox creation: their own form of hockey. This game, that is played nowhere else in North America, generally uses a redesigned basketball court and not an ice rink. The players run up and down on a wooden surface, but they do use the paraphernalia – sticks, gloves, helmets, goalie gear – of the regular game. This sport started out a generation ago at a Catskill Mountains Orthodox summer camp and had been created by a concerned athletic director in the hope of inducing sedentary youngsters who were not interested in baseball or basketball or any other sort of physical activity to get out of their bunks and exercise. Presently, floor hockey is as popular as basketball, with many schools' best athletes opting to participate in that made-up sport.

Thus, sports within the Modern Orthodox community are still very much in play. However, the players "look" different than they did generations ago. First, most schools mandate that the boys wear *kippot* during games, and there is no pushback from the athletes. In the 1950s–1960s, few fellows kept their heads covered while engaged in sports. Such were the social and religious mores of the day school culture of that prior era when day in and night

out, many of the boys did not wear yarmulkes or hats except when they were in school or in *shul*. While day school student cohorts are still heterogeneous in religious values and practices – many boys today keep their heads uncovered while on their own or in their homes – schools have become stricter in their enforcement of traditional religious practices, even in the gym. Second and similarly, all girls on the courts are dressed in baggy sweatpants and long-sleeved tops. Back in the day, Orthodox female hoopsters wore short shorts and no one in day school leadership spoke of these uniforms as immodest. Perhaps here too the desire and school selling point was for students not to look all that different from those in private schools – even when they recreated. Significantly, when a dress code for athletic outfits was promulgated in the 1980s, there was some opposition expressed within the most religiously liberal member school. To punctuate its members' dissent and likewise to indicate that they stood apart as a minority from the others, its girls' team referred to itself as "Renegades." At this time, female cheerleaders also became passé. The end of the line for this former part of the Modern Orthodox sports scene was accepted more readily across the board. For some schools it reflected a more rigorous religious disposition. For others, it grew out of an incipient feminist consciousness as many young women saw prancing in front of men as a sexist objectification of their gender.

Soon thereafter, the issue of whether it was religiously appropriate for even modestly dressed female players to play before coed fans splintered the league. Remember, fifty years earlier one of the concerns that gave rise to the Inter-Mesifta League was its schools' "no women at the games" sensibilities. Now, the policy question was whether males – even fathers, grandfathers, and brothers – should be permitted to watch their female family members at play. Jewish law does not prohibit family members from witnessing their daughters and sisters in athletic gear. The strict constriction here of halakha within contemporary Orthodoxy has everything to do with watching other women dressed and moving around in play as athletes. Presently, to avoid contretemps, the Yeshiva League has both a fourteen-team Girls A loop where the doors are open to all

and a six-club closed B division. One school has teams in each of the two conferences.[1]

At approximately the same time that the issue of who might watch the games arose, the league was roiled over a league membership dispute. It is axiomatic that the question of who might be allowed or welcomed to participate in an athletic association is a community-defining situation. Decisions in this arena speak loudly of minority group status in the larger society outside the arena. In American history, one sure sign of the segregation that African Americans faced was typified by their exclusion from big-league baseball until Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier. For Jews, the US Olympic teams officials' decision in 1936 to keep elite runners Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller from competing in, and likely winning, the Berlin games so as not to potentially embarrass Adolf Hitler was proof positive of where Jews stood in the mind of America and of the world in the years before the Holocaust. And in contemporary times, the willingness of some international sports bodies to countenance the refusal of athletes from Muslim countries to compete against Israelis underscores the marginal position the Jewish state occupies within the family of nations.

In any event, in the mid-1990s and within the expanding day school community in the metropolitan area – that then included institutions under Conservative auspices – the question of the right to play arose over whether Orthodox day schools were willing to admit Solomon Schecter Schools into a yeshiva league. In some quarters, a pass into the loop suggested an impermissible religious recognition of the liberal Jewish denomination. Others saw the admission as no threat to Orthodoxy but rather as a way for Jewish kids of all stripes and uniforms to compete in a community-wide league. Ultimately, after much debate within segments of the Modern Orthodox community, non-Orthodox schools were admitted to the league. In the twenty-first century, Manhattan's Abraham Joshua Heschel School,

1. For more information on recreational and athletic activities at these schools and their different approaches to the social sense that is part of sports activities, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, *Judaism's Encounter with American Sports* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 10–53.

which defines itself as an "independent" educational institution, is a member of long standing in the MYHSAL.[2]

The dilemmas of non-acceptance have never plagued Yeshiva University's men's and women's teams. None of the Christian denominational colleges or secular universities against whom they compete has questioned this Jewish school's right to play with them. If anything, Yeshiva's presence in their league affords their athletic associations more publicity than ordinarily accorded small-time programs, since the media are always intrigued – if not mystified – when a Jewish school engages in sports. Newspaper editors and television producers have not moved totally beyond long-standing stereotypes about the "unathletic" Jew, that still have currency in some circles. The teams' nicknames, Maccabees and Lady Maccabees, evocative of the Ḥanukka story known to most Americans, also make for good copy for sports scribes. However, over the years – and much like the Orthodox Jewish high schools that most of their sportspeople had attended – changes have taken place within Yeshiva in the way its players dress when engaged in sports activities. And interestingly enough, when students have decided to be garbed in more traditional ways, outsiders have generally seconded their religious choices.

As a legally non-sectarian university founded under Orthodox Jewish auspices, Yeshiva College – the men's undergraduate school – cannot force students to keep their heads covered when they play. Presently some do and others choose not to. In many cases those who recreate bare-headed are youngsters who came into the Orthodox educational environment from more secular backgrounds and/or from Israel and other foreign countries. Truth be told, over the years, success on the hardwood or field has had much to do with the presence on campus of players possessing more robust sports pedigrees. As high schoolers, they gained invaluable athletic experience through facing off against stronger American and international opponents than those who grew up and competed only in their own day school system.

2. For additional details about the controversy involving admitting non-Orthodox schools into the Orthodox league, see Gurock, *Judaism's Encounter*, 177–81.

Similarly, at Stern College for Women, whatever their players' religious values and backgrounds, it is left up to the basketball, softball, and volleyball enthusiasts, fencers, and track athletes to decide how long their uniforms should be. As fate would have it, in the twenty-first century, most basketball players – men and women at most schools – wear long baggy shorts. Thus, in that sartorial context, Stern players do not look much different than their opponents. And some of the married female players wear kerchiefs when they play, in keeping with their sense of appropriate modest behavior.

Those Yeshiva University men and women who choose to keep their heads covered when they compete have found that they have an ally in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Within this sports authority's massive book of rules lies a prohibition against basketball players wearing any sort of "head decorations, head wear, or jewelry" during games. But there is an oral tradition extending back generations, that is sometimes codified in writing, that allows Orthodox Jewish – and for that matter, observant Muslim – women to play with their heads and other parts of their bodies fully covered. Sometimes, game officials have to be reminded that this accommodation has the force of NCAA legislation.

Tolerance toward the religious values and practices of minority groups in contemporary America also extends to NCAA postseason scheduling policies. During the regular season, the aforementioned local conferences that have welcomed the teams of Yeshiva's men and women have organized their games with the understanding that these Jewish players will not compete on the Sabbath or on their holidays. Projecting ahead to the possible postseason national tournaments, Yeshiva's athletic department submits annually an NCAA-initiated form that indicates the days when they cannot compete – since ultimately they answer to a higher authority. This exemption does not apply to observant Jewish athletes who play for non-Jewish schools. Indeed, in the last decade and a half there have been several cases that attracted national media attention when a conflicted Orthodox sportsperson at a big-time school has attempted to navigate his or her way through traditional Judaism's strictures and a desire to compete on a larger sport stage.

NCAA legislation – like the head-covering allowance that accommodates Muslims too – is in no way a "Jew Bill." Back in 2003, the NCAA's scheduling committee ended up red-faced when it seeded Brigham Young University in a bracket that would have required the Cougars to play a second-round game on Sunday, the Mormon day of rest. Conveniently for all concerned, the University of Connecticut knocked out BYU in the first round. But that incident, and the willingness of the national college sports authority to rectify its error, shows that the college's establishment policies have changed fundamentally from the late 1950s, when a BYU baseball team dropped out of the College World Series rather than play on Sunday.

Yeshiva has had a problem with the NCAA, not with scheduling but rather with qualifying for its championships. In 2014, the campus was agog when the Maccabees men's tennis squad won its local Skyline Conference championship, garnering an automatic bid to the NCAA's Division III competition. It was the first time in the school's eighty-plus year sports history that one of its clubs earned a national postseason tournament berth. Predictably, the first-round match was moved away from Saturday and in the end the newcomers to the postseason were defeated on the court. (The netmen returned to the NCAA in 2015 and 2016 and faced no religious problem, but again did not advance beyond the opening contest.)

The almost insurmountable barrier to Maccabee and Lady Maccabee athletic success – no matter the intrinsic abilities of its performers – is firmly rooted in the school's educational culture and even its religious calendar. Yeshiva subjects its students to what is widely referred to as "the burdens of a dual curriculum." Remember, the institution's long-standing and enduring mission is to cultivate generations of all-American Orthodox young men and women who are both comfortable and proficient in the world of the Torah and well-adjusted and competitive in the American world within which they live. To fulfill this objective, the practical reality is that the Yeshiva student-athlete is in class, labs, the house of Torah study, etc. more hours weekly than any opponent he or she may face after the long school day is done. Given these barriers, Yeshiva's athletes do not have the precious commodity of time on their hands to achieve

peak physical shape. It is no surprise that the men's wrestling team, which requires a high level of conditioning to win a bout, had over the years the worst win-loss record among Yeshiva's eight men's teams. (Financial cutbacks at the school led to the closing of the program in 2015.) The obverse of the conditioning conundrum may also explain in part the ability of the tennis team to succeed. In a school that recruits students from all over the country – including Sun Belt states like Florida and California – there are those who arrive on campus with the sport "in their background" and they are proficient shotmakers even if they may not be in as fine-tuned condition as their opponents. With that mixed pedigree, they can get by in Division III tennis. And if they are truly committed to excellence – a duo or two – some might steal some time beyond allotted practice time. The calculi of background over conditioning may also explain the success of Yeshiva golfers, even if they have yet to make it to an NCAA berth.

Meanwhile, for the men's basketball team in particular, scheduling dilemmas, even with their conference respecting the Jewish holy days, hamper their competitiveness. This club plays a robust schedule of evening games during the late autumn-winter season. Given the time that the Sabbath starts and ends during that time of year, it is, of course, impossible to have games on Friday, and in January and February, the day of rest concludes too late for a Saturday night game. And frankly, many opponents prefer not to play on Sunday, and their need to take time off must be countenanced too. That leaves just four days during the week for games and limited time for practice. Moreover, given the string of Jewish holidays in September or October, when classes are frequently not in session for close to a month, the fall semester at Yeshiva runs into late December, with final exams early in January. Simply put, Yeshiva is "on exams" and "on break" while other schools are well into the spring semester. Accordingly, given the arduous academic week plus the multiplicity of February games – not to mention that players on intersession often do not stay in their best-conditioned shape – victories in February are difficult. And the end of that month is precisely the time when the conference championship tournament takes place.

Finally, if at Yeshiva University, and among the modern day schools, the sports issue revolves around whether they will win or lose, among hasidic and other Orthodox groups that resist American culture the question is whether they will play games at all. The youngsters in these communities may live in great religious strongholds in Brooklyn, but they are not like the Orthodox Brooklyn boys of the prior century or even a half-century ago. Rather, recreation is widely seen as a waste of time – notwithstanding Maimonides' millennium-old point of view about a sound body complementing a devoted mind. If some boys and men are attuned to the world of sports, they often keep their interests to themselves and do not seek approval for their attendance at sporting events, including – of all activities – professional wrestling. Certainly, in this insular world, there is no fear among religious authorities that a sportsman might rise in the esteem of his classmates as the student to be emulated.

II. ANALYZING ATHLETICS

While these introductory vignettes about games, competitors, tournaments, athletic regulations, and admissions requirements for teams offer valuable insights into how, over the past century, a foreign cultural phenomenon called athletics entered into the life of a particular group of Jews in America – in this case specifically the variegated Orthodox community – ultimately this anthology is out for bigger game. As will be evident throughout this volume, the metaphor of sports assists in telling and interpreting the larger history of Judaism in America, starting but not ending with Orthodoxy's life in this country. Communal and personal struggles over the meaning and value of athleticism symbolize the complexities of the American Jewish experience and highlight how Jews who are concerned with religious identification have come to grips in a variety ways with America's constant challenges to their traditions.

For example, as the essays that follow will further detail, Judaism-sports stories indicate – to begin with – that before World War II, the goal of an uncompromised transplantation of the religious values of the East European yeshiva world to even the most devout communities in America was never achieved. Furthermore, these US-based

yeshivas were far from monolithic in countenancing even modest deviations from established norms. When leaders did back down, they may have rationalized their accommodations by noting that changes were also afoot in the old world. Meanwhile, as schools contemplated how to respond to the seeping in of American mores, students were of several minds about the challenges posed by the worlds around them. They disagreed over whether and how they could take in secular values without stepping outside of their community's straight and narrow. And when rabbis attempted to push back against cultures that were new and foreign to them, students did not uniformly fall into line. Some dealt with their desires surreptitiously and others openly protested. Such was tenor of the variegated devout community of the inter-war and early post-war period.

Needless to say, that today's Orthodox "Brooklyn boys" do not relish the outside world of sports, and even physical fitness, to any degree comparable to prior generations bespeaks how more successfully resistant their communities have been in creating and maintaining a world within America but not of America. While there are deviants too within these communities, to date community leaders have not had to field questions about any formalized relationship with this foreign phenomenon.

The Judaism-sports experience also points up how, over several generations, those within the Orthodox community who have accepted – if not embraced – American cultural values and deemed them harmonious with Jewish tradition have shifted in their determination of how deeply they wish to immerse themselves in secular mores. Here too, differing decisions among institutions expose how varied their attitudes are, not only to what constitutes appropriate behavior but, as important, whom they respect and with whom they wish to associate within the larger Jewish community.

The relationship between Yeshiva University athletics and both the NCAA and local sports authorities underscores another fundamental aspect of American Jewish life. Though anti-Semites have frequently conspired to undermine Jewish integration, for the most part economic and social advancement has been available to aspiring American Jews. But that mobility has often come at a price.

The rhythms of the American clock and calendar do not comport with the rhythm of Judaism. After all, America is a predominately Christian country, and historically Jews have felt much pressure to surrender commitment to their own religion's strictures in order to move up in this society and culture. But times and attitudes have changed. Indeed, the willingness of the NCAA – notorious for its hidebound regulations of all sorts – to accommodate Jewish holidays and traditional sartorial strictures reflects the triumph of cultural pluralism in America, as this welcoming viewpoint applies to Jews, Mormons, and perhaps even Muslims. In the majority of quarters in America, diversity is tolerated, if not honored.

Yet, even as Yeshiva athletes are allowed a level playing field, their own self-imposed limitations inhibit their ability to succeed in a highly competitive environment. Here the Judaism-sports story offers its own way of explaining the challenges of living harmoniously within two cultures, a prime objective of Modern Orthodox Jews.

For me, this sensitivity to the complexity of the athleticism-Judaism challenge has not only deepened my understanding of the social history of American Jewry but has helped me carve a unique niche among those who have written seriously about American Jews and sports. Until very recently, amateur authors in this area have been apologists and hero worshipers. These well-meaning chroniclers were committed to identifying and glorifying Jewish champions of all sorts to answer those who in the United States alleged that Jews were not true Americans – and were decidedly un-manly – because they did not engage in this country's pastimes. The worst among these critics expressed the anti-Semitic canard that Jews do not play sports but conspire to control and ultimately corrupt the pastimes that real Americans love. Given the tenor, tone, and the many inaccuracies in such early defensive works, these volumes and encyclopedias were of no interest to professional historians. But they made great bar mitzva gifts. This remained until the 1980s when a small group of intrepid scholars – who risked their reputations in the academic world by writing about the American Jewish sports experience – argued that the processes of immigrant and second-generation Jewish integration in American society and engagement

with this country's culture could be examined seriously and productively by looking at when, how, and why Jewish men and women discovered and took part in this country's physical activities and competitive games.

The career and personal challenge that these brave historians faced was twofold. Those involved in the slowly evolving field of American Jewish history disdained works on sports as frivolous. Even those who demonstrated their own academic audacity by trying to jump-start the general, academic examination of sports in America had yet to focus on the Jews' experience as important or exemplary.

In 2005, I entered the lists with my *Judaism's Encounter with American Sports*. As the title of that volume indicates, there I jousted with the idea that had informed so much of my other work over the prior twenty-five years, namely that how the Jewish faith and its adherents of all streams and varieties have dealt with the social and cultural influences around them is a crucial subject for scholars to consider. Thus, the Judaism-sports conceptualization is a natural continuation of my scholarly interests. I suppose that another historian or sociologist could just as likely use how Jews who were enamored with, and conflicted by the demands of, American art, music, theater, or other aspects of this country's popular culture as the springboard for consideration and elucidation. But sports is my passion.

In the more than a decade that has followed the appearance of my "sports book," I have continued to think about the subject and have been invited to speak and to write about this religious and social-cultural encounter all over the world. These efforts have deepened my understanding of the subject even as I have had the opportunity to cite and discuss other intriguing examples of the constant challenges that have been part of American Judaism's sports experience. This anthology brings together these contributions in one volume – edited and updated to summer 2016 – in the hope that a new generation of readers will learn from my efforts and that other scholars might be inspired to continue explorations into the sports-Judaism relationship.

III. THE LINEUP

The volume opens with "Gyms and the Academy," an exploration of when and how my work on Judaism and sports entered the field of writing on American Jewish history and began to contribute to studies of sports in this country. It emphasizes that although one of the first scholars to write seriously about Jewish life in America asserted – in an outline of the areas that the discipline might pursue as it grew and matured – that the "transformation of the 'pale ghetto Jew' into the sportsman, athlete, 'sport,' and sports enthusiast" was a legitimate subject for scholarly exploration, almost all his colleagues shied away from considering that aspect of first- and second-generation Jewish life in this country. What chance, it was thought back in the 1950s–1960s, did aspiring academicians have of garnering the respect of peers and senior scholars if they wrote about games and gyms? In this piece, I made clear that American Jewish historical writing was then struggling to reach its professional majority against critics who disparaged that entire discipline as unsophisticated because – among other liabilities – its academicians rarely utilized traditional Jewish sources and ancient languages. Works about Jews and sports, it was felt, would only set the field back.

"Gyms and the Academy" also points out that those who were just beginning to seriously chronicle the American sports experience – and incidentally they also faced the charge that what they were writing was inconsequential – had little to say about the participation of Jews in this nation's pastimes. It was only in the late 1970s that pioneer Jewish sports historian Steven A. Riess intrepidly integrated that immigrant group's encounter with American athleticism within an examination of race and ethnicity in early twentieth-century baseball for readers of the *Journal of Ethnic Studies*. The appearance of that article in a respected academic journal that ordinarily did not focus on sports helped legitimize the academic study of American athleticism.

Sports scholars and American Jewish historians began to communicate with each other earnestly in 1985, when *American Jewish History*, the leading journal in that discipline, published a special edition on Jews and American sports. Riess was the logical person

to organize that issue and he recruited a lineup of his colleagues to write for this quarterly of the American Jewish Historical Society. As associate editor of the journal, I will take partial credit for enlisting Riess. Our many amateur readers applauded that edition and professionals in my field accorded it their grudging respect. Ten years later, Riess returned to our journal as guest editor of a second exposition on Jews and sports. Given this backdrop, "Gyms and the Academy" also honestly chronicles how I moved beyond a persistent personal reticence to be exposed to criticism for writing a "sports book" to my present stance. I now believe as an article of academic faith that the challenge that the popular cultural phenomenon called sports has posed to Jews and Judaism is an important aspect of that community's interaction with modernity. It is thus a valuable subject for scholarly consideration. The conceit that I had something special to say to American Jewish and sports historians first found full exposition in *Judaism's Encounter with American Sports.*

Up second, "Baseball, the High Holy Days, and American Jewish Status and Survival" addresses the annual conflicts confronting American Jewish ballplayers and many fans over the years when their teams are in the midst of a pennant race or postseason on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. The weighty question that they have faced is should they compete or be in the stands or bleachers on their faith's holiest days? This essay emphasizes that today, in a tolerant American society, sports owners generally do not want any part of – or even to be asked any questions about – their Jewish athletes' dilemmas over participating on their faith's central holidays. Sometimes, conflicted players and fans come up with their own idiosyncratic solutions to the seasonal problems that perplex when they do not amuse rabbis. Not only that, but occasionally staunchly empowered and ticket-holding Jewish fans have requested or even demanded that these games not take place on Jewish holidays. Though these calls to alter times and days of athletic competition have rarely been countenanced, in some very special ways, team officials have shown sensitivity to Jewish religious traditions at their ballparks through opening kosher hot dog stands. I also note that such culinary availabilities must not be seen as solely a Jewish story.

In a multicultural America, all sorts of ethnic foods are for sale to others who would like to eat their special foods while watching this country's national pastimes. And in some places, anxious to court customers to their sports businesses, stadiums even provide designated spaces for Jews who wish to conduct their evening services with one eye still riveted on the game. Such atmospherics, I point out, obviously were not in play some eighty years ago when Detroit Tigers slugger Hank Greenberg was pressured to play for his hometown community or even when Sandy Koufax decided to stay away from the first game of the 1965 World Series. Using the sports metaphor, the implicit message of "Baseball, the High Holy Days" is that a Jew's ability to maintain traditions in America while being part of this country's culture has much to do with the levels of religious tolerance accorded the minority group in society.

"Jews as Outsiders," which looks at the marginal status of Jews in inter-war America, evidences the idea that the right to play sports is an excellent barometer of minority group acceptance in host communities. This essay was prepared originally for a conference at a Holocaust museum in Paris, France, that dealt primarily with how totalitarian societies – be they Italian or Spanish fascist, Communist, or Nazi – used athleticism to promote their nefarious ideologies and to objectify those whom they hated. I pointed out that though fortunately anti-Semitism in the United States did not victimize Jews to the degree that it did in Europe, even before the calamity of the *Shoah*, there was a "shadowy side" to the Jewish inter-war sports experience in America that parallels the high degree of social exclusion that undermined their status in the United States before World War II. Much as Jews were then kept out of hotels, resorts, jobs, and some neighborhoods, Jewish sports enthusiasts – even champions – were shown the door at elite private athletic clubs. These associations prided themselves on asserting their right to choose – based on race, religion, and other such determinants – with whom they would compete. As a similar disposition of discrimination, I found and pointed out that a year after Marty Glickman was humiliated in Berlin, he was summarily denied the opportunity to just work out at the New York Athletic Club. He most certainly had no chance

to be a member. My study also emphasizes, importantly, that the troubles Jews faced in gaining acceptance within and without the arena paled in comparison to the barriers facing African Americans.

"Jews as Outsiders" points out additionally that uncompromising ideological anti-Semites, like the notorious Henry Ford, used sports to promote conspiracy theories about Jews. The famous carmaker who infamously brought the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to America contended that Jews were undermining Christian civilization with a view to its ultimate takeover and corruption. He alleged that in the athletic realm, therefore, Jews, who he said did not play sports like real Americans did, were instead intent on controlling sports with the endgame of ultimately perverting pastimes in the United States – just another weapon in their well-conceived plan to dominate society.

"Hakoah Vienna's USA Tour" also employs the sports experience to emphasize the problem of acceptance that challenged American Jews during the inter-war period. Additionally, this essay shows how the effort to make a prideful public statement through on-the-field achievement posed clock and calendar problems for religious leaders. In the mid-1920s, the Hakoah Vienna soccer team was unquestionably the best all-Jewish team in the entire world. In 1925, it won the Austrian equivalent of what we would call in the US today the "Super Bowl" when it captured the national professional football championship. A year later, these high-profile Jewish athletes embarked on a triumphant tour of the United States. These players' presence, and the honors they were accorded, heartened the American Jewish community during a period when – as just noted – social anti-Semitism and allegations that Jews were non-athletic and thus were un-American were beginning to undermine their status in America. However, when the schedule of matches was announced, religious leaders of all Jewish movements were very troubled. Games were to be played on the Sabbath. What sort of religious identity role models, a few critics wailed, were these Jewish sports heroes? Significantly, not only did Hakoah refuse to adjust its athletic timetables, but the Jewish public blithely ignored the protests of its rabbis and denominational lay leaders as they turned out en masse to places like New York's Polo

Grounds and Ebbets Field to cheer on their champions. Clearly, in the calculus of what was most important to the American Jewish community, making a statement on the field was more important than observance of religious tradition. This study emphasizes that this popular decision about sports events coheres with general patterns of non-observance of the Sabbath in many quarters and for many reasons before World War II.

"Team Torah u-Madda" asserts that, unlike the vast majority of their second-generation American Jewish contemporaries, most of the young men who attended the early Talmudical Academy and Yeshiva College – the high school and undergraduate branches respectively that eventually became part of Yeshiva University – would not violate Sabbath observance to play organized sports. But notwithstanding their evident fidelity to tradition, as so-declared "regular guys" they were enamored of athletics, and wished to do more than to just recreate. They wanted to see how well they stacked up as athletes against non-Orthodox and non-Jewish foes. Born in Eastern Europe and educated in its renowned yeshiva world, Dr. Bernard Revel, the institution's first permanent president, had no sports background. But implicit in his own novel understanding of an Americanized yeshiva mission was the belief that the school's ideal product should be not only a man of the Torah and trained to compete in the marketplaces of the United States but an individual "harmoniously" possessed of "*physical*, mental, and spiritual faculties." And he was clued into an incipient Religious Zionist (Mizrachi) idea, at that time promoted by Rabbi A. I. Kook, chief rabbi of Palestine, that there was surely a place in the Orthodox world for a man of physicality, so long as he adhered to the faith's core traditions. Rabbi Kook's teachings on many subjects swirled around the school during this inter-war era. Thus, sports teams had a place at this modern yeshiva.

Predictably, the public vision of religious youngsters running around in uniforms attracted more than a modicum of attention from bemused or intrigued media outlets. For generations to follow, this low-key program received more than its share of attention from those who wanted to see young men who could "pray and play."

However, as the teams developed and as their performances increasingly encouraged the manifestation of an aggressive athletic school spirit, a palpable fear emerged that the yeshiva might cross into the foul territory of overzealousness for winning at a secular activity. A balance between desiring to win at all costs as opposed to just enjoying good clean fun had to be found and emphasized. "Team Torah u-Madda" uses the sports analogy to underscore the challenging reality that in sports, as in so many other aspects of modern life, once Orthodox Jews have embraced the cultures of the world around them, they have had to determine and to follow appropriate guidelines for their ongoing participation.

Along comparable lines – as our investigations move close to the present day – "Orthodoxy on Display in the Arena of Sports" tackles how different segments of the Orthodox Jewish community addressed, in a changing religious atmosphere, the question of athletic and fan base deportment during and after contests. It details the decision-making processes of yeshiva and day school officials of varying stripes and ideological commitments in determining what constituted proper – as opposed to inappropriate – behavior in the sporting realm. This study also follows how the values of those who were committed to limiting gender interaction within and without the arenas' actual fields of play became increasingly the standards of behavior. In so doing, the shifts and variances in Orthodox Jewish attitudes toward American practices and mores are once again highlighted through the prism of athleticism.

The ability of American Jews to practice what they please – and doing so often at variance with the way their fellow citizens conduct their lives – unquestionably tests in many venues the majority Christian society's tolerance toward a religious minority. "The Clothes They Wear and the Time They Keep" uses the policy accommodations that American sports authorities have in contemporary times granted – or in some cases denied – Jewish athletes, especially Orthodox ones, to enable them to compete without abandoning their faith teachings, as a means of examining this country's levels of commitment to a pluralistic society. This study also notes significantly, in comparison, how inhospitable international sports federations have generally been

toward Israeli athletes who are mindful of their religion's own clock and calendar. Its findings underscore both the large-scale acceptance of Jews and Judaism in the United States of the twenty-first century and the marginality if not outright hatred the Jewish state faces on the world scene. It argues that if, indeed, the right to play in an unfettered fashion is a community-defining situation, contemporary American Jews have been chosen to come into society, while Israel and its Jewish citizens are relegated as the consummate outsiders.

However, "Coach Halpert and the Limits of Yeshiva's Athletic Success" details why and how – notwithstanding American sports associations' significant recognition of and accommodation to Jewish religious requirements – over the past four decades, Yeshiva University's flagship team, its basketball squad, has had to struggle to prevail in conference championship play. In closely analyzing Coach Jonathan Halpert's more than four hundred wins – and more than an equal number of defeats – at the team's helm, this study points out that his club has been most successful against opponents whose athletes are similarly burdened with stiff, extensive academic requirements that limit practice time. Furthermore, in suggesting – beyond scheduling conundrums – why Halpert's teams never reached the highest pinnacles of competitive success, the work also takes an unflinching, if still sympathetic, look at the athletic pedigrees of Yeshiva's top players. It compares their sports background with that of the men against whom they have competed and points out that, in most seasons, the fellows who matched up strongest against the opposition were the competitor-players who came into Yeshiva from outside the Orthodox day school world. In the 1950s–1960s, many of these athletes came from American public school leagues. In contemporary times, generally the most proficient performers have come to the school from Israeli sports leagues. Still it is noteworthy that notwithstanding his frustration at never having won a championship, Halpert has submitted that one of the most gratifying artifacts of his coaching career was a sign taped to a visitors' locker room door before a playoff game stating that because of the yeshiva players' "class commitments" the contest was delayed beyond its usual starting time. Arguably, this sports story too places in high relief that even in an accepting

American society, Orthodox Jews faced difficulties in becoming part of a social and cultural world that is inherently not akin to theirs.

Finally, "A 'Jewish Jordan'" probes the saga of an Orthodox athlete who became legendary as the personification of a fantasy that many observant Jewish youngsters have harbored: a religious player could be so great that the sports world would change its own longstanding schedules to accommodate his individual religious needs. Truth be told, it has long been possible for a skilled and noteworthy athlete in an individual sport to avoid having to compete on a Jewish holy day. And there are indeed today a number of boxers and promoters who have been able to schedule bouts on Saturday nights or weekdays instead of on a Friday evening. But in the case of this basketball player, it was actually suggested, for example, that a multimillion-dollar sports event – like the generations-old Atlantic Coast Conference hoops tournament – might change its date to permit an allegedly uncommon star performer to participate. This shift in scheduling would have gone way beyond the NCAA's allowances for religious schools like Yeshiva and Brigham Young University.

As the story unfolded, it contained in real time many of the elements that would have made for a fine Chaim Potok novel. In his *The Chosen*, Potok used a baseball game to begin telling a tale of a hasidic young man's engagement with secular culture and education and his relationship with an Orthodox Jew after he struck his future friend with a line drive. In any event, in the Tamir Goodman case, the central protagonist was a young man attempting to deal with his God-given, secular abilities. At one point in his high school career, this Baltimore yeshiva student enrolled in a Seventh-Day Adventist school to compete at a high secondary school level without having to play on Saturday. Central characters included naïve parents and an ambitious high school coach who hoped to see this player's name – and his too – up in the limelight. Then there was a sports world intrigued with this unusual character without truly vetting his abilities. And through much of the narrative, there was a Modern Orthodox community captivated by the excitement that surrounded Goodman. Indeed, at the height of the young man's popularity, within some Orthodox basketball circles it was almost

heretical to suggest that Goodman was not really a "Jewish Jordan," and even some non-Orthodox rabbis projected him as a consummate religious role model.

Ultimately, however, the Goodman case did not truly test whether that Orthodox fantasy could come true because, upon further review, the college coaches who first considered him judged him to be less than a standout recruit. In the end, Goodman found a spot on a lower level Division I squad and indeed scored a coup for his unquestioned religious values when the Colonial Athletic Conference altered its schedule. His team did not play its games on Saturday. However, after a season and a half of less than stellar performances, a combination of injuries and his not seeing eye to eye with a new coach who did not greatly esteem his basketball abilities, Goodman's college career was over. In the years that followed – and after a brief stint in an Israeli professional league – Goodman has been a very present figure at Orthodox-run camps and clinics, preaching the gospel of the compatibility of Judaism and athleticism. He continues to attract audiences eager to find ways in their own lives to harmonize the clashes and clamors of Judaism with American sports.

For readers of this anthology, this last essay offers a fitting final teaching moment in exploring how Judaism in America has coped with, and related to, a multifaceted cultural phenomenon that became so much a part of the Jews' lives in the United States.