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The Pastime Past Time: The Uniqueness of Baseball as an American Sport - A Psycho-Biblical Analysis*

Paul CANTZ[1], Daniel L. KAPLAN[2], Kalman J. KAPLAN[3]
[1]PsyD, ABPP, University - Chicago, Department of Psychology; Chicago, USA
[2]PhD, Independent Practice, USA
[3] University of Illinois at Chicago College of Medicine Department of Psychiatry; Chicago,USA
Email: pcantz@adler.edu

Abstract

The essence of what makes baseball unique amongst sporting competitions can be difficult to articulate. In this paper we suggest that what links baseball and American culture is a shared reliance, often implicit, on a biblical as opposed to a more Graeco-European way of appreciating life. Devoid of a cross-cultural perspective, however, baseball's biblical substrate is initially difficult to discern, and therefore it is instructive to provide contrast by comparing the modern game of baseball to Ancient Greek sports and motifs. This might seem like a curious comparison except for the fact that the Ancient Greeks are credited with inaugurating the very enterprise of organized athletic competition through the Olympic games, and in so doing establishing a distinctly Graeco-Roman undercurrent that permeates most other modern sports, with notable exception, we argue, to the most Hebraic of sports: Baseball.

Keywords: Baseball, Bible, American Culture, Greek Mythology

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Introduction

Although the majority of baseball fans may be intimately familiar with the rules of America's favorite pastime, the essence of what makes baseball unique – what qualitatively distinguishes it from every other major athletic competition – can be difficult to articulate. In this paper we suggest that what links baseball and American culture is a shared reliance, often implicit, on a biblical as opposed to a more Graeco-European way of appreciating life. Sacvan Bercovitch, in his influential book, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*[i] (1976), offers a fruitful entry-points for exploring the intersection of baseball, American culture, and the Bible. Bercovitch emphasized an understanding of the origins in New England Puritanism of a particular manner of belief and expression that led to a distinctive "American" identity. Whereas other colonists – in New France, New Spain, New Amsterdam – understood themselves to be emissaries of European empires, the New England Puritans repudiated the "Old World", instead centering their imperial enterprise on the meaning that they invented into their "New World": America. America was seen as their new Promised Land, the New Jerusalem, as it were – which is to say, the promised land of the modern world. No American institution expresses these values better than the game of baseball, embodying a pattern of biblical motifs which are embedded into its very structure, ethos, rituals, and culture.

Devoid of a cross-cultural perspective, however, baseball's biblical substrate is initially difficult to discern, and therefore it is instructive to provide contrast by comparing the modern game of baseball to Ancient Greek sports and motifs. This might seem like a curious comparison except for the fact that the Ancient Greeks are credited with inaugurating the very enterprise of organized athletic competition through the Olympic games, and in so doing establishing a distinctly Graeco-Roman undercurrent that permeates most other modern sports, with notable exception, we argue, to the most Hebraic of sports: Baseball.

In his celebrated and oft quoted essay on baseball, The French ex-Patriot sociologist, historian and cultural critic Jacques Barzun[ii] inaccurately categorized baseball as a "Greek" sport insomuch as it is, "…national, heroic, and broken up in the rivalries of city-states".. Even while certain Ancient Greek influences on the façade, so to speak, of baseball are apparent (e.g. grand stadiums complete with statues of former players, larger-than-life personalities, legendary tales, etc.), the ancient Greeks did not possess a monopoly on the enterprise of nationalism nor of athletic prowess, although they had a tendency of lending it a rather uncouth, cut-throat quality that by contemporary standards would be deemed decidedly unsportsmanlike[iii]. In stark contrast, the biblical style of nationalism is not arbitrarily based on the immutable accident of one's geographic origin of birth, but rather is universally open to all who choose to join the Hebrew nation. In effect, one can choose to become Chosen. This provides an apt template for the American immigration experience; although one can be born an American, one can likewise choose to become a naturalized citizen. This phenomenon can also be discerned through the accessibility of baseball to those not born to the aristocratic leisurely class, as were the ancient Olympians, but to those from even working class families across a multitude of ethnicities and backgrounds. The fact that so many second generation Americans rose to baseball stardom and came to exemplify the model of "Americanism" bespeaks a biblical, rather than Greek value system. Former President William Jefferson Clinton (2001), in a speech delivered the day after the passing of New York Yankee's great Joe DiMaggio, underscored this sentiment by explaining that, "[t]his son of Italian immigrants… became the symbol of American grace, power and skill."

Baseball, like the American spirit and the biblical worldview, presents a paradox of sorts; it is at once, literal and allegorical, contemporary and classic, and particular and universal. The essayist Earl R. Wasserman[iv] has further characterized baseball as having its finger on the pulse of American culture, as it were, writing that America's national pastime represents, "…the ritual whereby we express the psychological nature of American life and its moral predicament"[v] Baseball has indeed acted as a reliable barometer of the social, political, and economic spheres of American culture, to the point where some have argued for its pedagogical integration into the social studies and history curricula of America's secondary education system[vi].

Baseball: A Pastime Past Time

Perhaps the most prominent feature distinguishing baseball from other sports is the manner in which baseball treats the concept of time. In baseball, time is not metered by an external clock as in football, basketball, hockey, soccer or other major sports, but instead by a metric organic to the game itself: an 'out'. Thus baseball does not follow the Greek idea of time as expressed either in *cronos* (outer time) or *kairos* (inner time), but rather more fittingly aligns with the Hebraic, content-determined nature of time. Therefore, this construct of time becomes determined primarily by man, albeit in concert with the dynamics of nature.

The seminal work on the characteristic qualities of Greek and Hebraic worldviews advanced by the linguist Thorleif Boman[vii] masterfully highlighted the static, recurring linearity of time promoted by the Greeks in contradistinction to the dynamic, rhythmic, and teleological quality of time endorsed in biblical thought. Therefore, another way of looking at this is that baseball follows a biblical rather than a Greek conception of time. Although sequential, rhythmic and relatively linear, the flow of baseball curiously exists outside the geometrically constrained view of time promulgated by the Greeks wherein time results as merely the accident of motion. It is in this way that the Hebraic sense of "boundless time"[viii] permeates baseball, making it qualitatively distinctive from other major sports that are constrained by an objective, abstract and an ultimately cold and technical sense of time. A baseball game will continue in perpetuity in extra innings until closure is reached without any deviation of game-play. This stands in contrast to other various tie-breaking methods utilized in other major sports such as sudden-death scenarios (ice hockey & football), shoot-outs (ice hockey & soccer) abbreviated periods of overtime (ice-hockey & basketball). Other sports, such as cricket, horse racing, rugby, and even ice-hockey will sometimes end in an unsatisfying tie or a draw.

Given the ancient Greeks' sense of time and emphasis on physical strength, we are not surprised to find that most of the original Olympic trials are configured as races of speed from 'point A" to 'Point B', typically with athletes finishing exactly where they began (e.g. sprinting, long distance running, swimming, rowing, chariot racing, etc.) or of strength (wrestling, weight-lifting, etc.). As we will discuss later in this essay, the Hebraic, content-determined sense of time intractably relies on a distinct sense of human dignity; the preferred metric of time in baseball – the 'out' – for example, depends on the human element more than any other variable.

Another feature of this cross-cultural conception of time that distinguishes both America and baseball from Ancient Greece and the Olympics is the historicity of these two former enterprises. Eliade[ix] and Priestly[x] both emphasized how the introduction of the Judeo-

Christian worldview pried humankind's default paradigm of time from that of a cyclical, eternally recurring myth to that of a series of sequentially unfolding events that chronicled real people, doing real things in real places at specific moments in history. "In the beginning" (Gen. 1:1) meant just that. The universe had a definite beginning and will have a definite ending point, and was not, as Aristotle preached, based on an eternal metaphysics (cf. Maimonides' (1190) Guide for the Perplexed[xi] for an in-depth exploration of the metaphysical differences between the Hebraic and Aristotelian understanding of the origins of the universe). Although the trend to mythologize athletes has likewise waned in other modern sports, we feel that baseball remains the exemplar *par excellence* in this regard. Bridging these ideas back to the establishment of America, the Puritan Founders framed America in a redemptive light – as a promise awaiting fulfillment, whether in terms of enjoying the God-given right to religious freedom or the more secular pursuits of economic opportunity. A few generations later, the founding fathers of the United States were undoubtedly impacted by this Puritan sense of divine redemption, and while celebrating the divine providence inherent in the bold experiment of establishing a democratic republic, generally discouraged any efforts of mythologizing the events that let up to America's independence. George Washington famously underscored this sentiment by rejecting the title of "King of America", and in there so doing eschewing the divine entitlement with which royalty had historically been associated. After voluntarily relinquishing the Presidency after two terms King George III, evidently impressed with his humility, proclaimed him to have, "the greatest character of the age", for peacefully relinquishing his station as commander and chief and supporting the democratic process that would choose his successor.

In contrast, ancient Olympic champions, many of whose names have been reliably recorded, were deified and mythologized, often in their lifetimes, and were consequently placed on an abstract pedestal outside of space and time, and therefore outside of history. Many of the statues erected in their honor were considered to possess curative powers, such as the numerous sculptures of the early fifth century Olympic champion Theogenes of Thasos, who fancied himself a demi-god (*Theogenes* meaning "god-born") and who likewise inspired a small cult following based on these healing rites[xii]. To be sure, Theogenes was not the only ancient Graeco-Roman athlete to claim divine lineage. Nearly identical examples are also found in the figures of Euthymus of Locri and Cleomedes of Astypalaea, whose physical feats outside the Olympic games were of the supernatural variety. While baseball certainly venerates, celebrates, and memorializes its stars, it stops short of placing them on a supernatural pedestal, unlike other modern sports such as what basketball has done with Michael Jordan or Hockey with "The Great One" Wayne Gretzky – two prominent celebrity athletes who the sports world has christened as beyond question "the best ever". On the contrary, professional commentators and fans alike passionately debate through statistical comparisons contemporary players with those of the past to determine, despite the intergenerational gap, which player is 'best'. In addition, baseball is renowned for attending to players' personalities and foibles, thereby personalizing and in turn humanizing these athletes.

The dynamic, rhythmic, and patently Hebraic sense of time rebels against what the anarchist thinker and poet George Woodcock[xiii] termed the, "tyranny of the clock." Since baseball is not time-regulated, the game must continue for a minimum of nine innings, with the first inning and the last being qualitatively indistinct in their potential for allowing teams to score since it is impossible for one team to "run out the clock" by stalling, as we commonly see in basketball or football, where the final moments of the game are by-and-large insignificant. In contrast, the potential "Late Inning Rally" captures the imagination of players and fans alike

as well as fittingly aligns with the hopeful message communicated throughout the Bible, which commands one to, "choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19) (i.e. not defeat), and firmly discourages one from abandoning hope – a value captured in the Talmudic maxim that, "Even when a sharp knife is resting on one's neck, he should not despair from Heavenly mercy"[xiv]. For example, in what has since been coined 'The Sandberg Game', Chicago Cubs Hall of Fame Second baseman Ryne Sandberg, in a June 23, 1984 nationally televised event against the St. Louis Cardinals, fended-off an all but assured defeat by astounding the national audience by twice homering off of the then indomitable closing pitcher Bruce Sutter – the first blast occurring in the bottom of the 9th inning and then the second in the 10th, prompting Bob Costas, who was calling that game, to excitedly exclaim, "Do you believe it?!". Baseball did not give Sutter the option of running-down the clock or in any way evading throwing the ball to Sandberg. A confrontation between a pitcher and batter *must* occur, and therefore hope, for whichever side, is never completely lost. Although statistical averages saturate the enterprise of baseball, averages alone can never fully accommodate for a hanging curveball or a timely hitting streak. As the sagacious Yogi Berra put it: "It ain't over 'til it's over."[xv]

While the import of strength and speed in baseball cannot be denied, baseball transcends this chronological constraint by also accommodating for other, equally valuable technical domains. For instance, A 55mph wobbly knuckleball pitch may be equally as effective as a 102 mph blazing fastball, and in many cases more so. The knuckleball mocks speed (and some hitters would also argue that it flouts Newtonian physics!)[xvi] by defying the concept of quickness as an athletic ideal. Fluctuating the speed, location and trajectory of pitches renders them effective – speediness is but one variable, but not the most important. The authors are also reminded of the infamous, but effective, "Eephus pitch" – essentially a slow, objectionably high-arced (20-25 ft.) 'junk pitch', whose origins are usually ascribed to Rip Sewell of the Pittsburgh Pirates in the 1940s[xvii]. According to manager Frankie Frisch, the pitch was named by outfielder Maurice Van Robays. When asked what it meant, Van Robays replied, "Eephus ain't nothing, and that's a nothing pitch."

To many players, the eephus pitch is considered even more challenging than the knuckleball. This 55-mile-per-hour-or-slower pitch has been called the 'fossum flip', the 'folly floater', the 'LaLob' and the 'dead fish'. It has also been called the 'bloop curve', the 'space ball' and the 'Bugs Bunny curve'. Of course, legendary Dodgers broadcaster Vin Scully had the best nickname for this meatball, declaring it a 'soap bubble'. It has even been described as a, "monstrosity which defies manhood[xviii]," insomuch as it challenges the proto-masculine athletic ideal that champions strength and speed. Although the biblical exegetics are curiously silent on this topic, we believe that there can be little doubt that the shepherd David's slingshot threw a knuckler, or even an eephus, to bring down the brute Goliath.

A final thought regarding the intersection between baseball, American culture, and the biblical sense of time: Baseball, like America and biblical history, protests against this cyclical, deterministic notion of time by expanding its horizons and valuing the New and appreciating the Possible, while simultaneously, if not paradoxically, reinforcing the merits of tradition. These enterprises move on a teleological trajectory that transcends the limitations of an a-chronistic mythology, taking-on the character of an unfolding narrative that is underwritten by a hopeful sense of promise and destiny rather than a predetermined, stagnate, and typically accursed notion of fate. It is for this reason, *and this reason only*, that "next year", will be the Cubs' year.

The Trans-Dimensionalism of Baseball

The absence of standard dimensions for stadiums is likewise unique among modern sports and aligns with both the aforementioned Puritan ethics of communal self-definition and creative expression.[xix] To begin with, there are separate batting boxes for right-handed and left-handed hitters. Although there are some uniform dimensions, (e.g. angle of foul lines, height of pitcher's mound, etc.), other dimensions vary from stadium to stadium (e.g. distance to outfield walls, height of outfield walls and indeed walls throughout the stadium, distance between the foul lines - MLB parks vary between 302' to 355' on the foul line and 390' to 436' at center field). Indeed this is why each stadium has its own "ground-rules," explained by the chief umpire before each game, primarily for the benefit of visiting team. The most extreme examples of this phenomenon can be found at leftfield in Boston's Fenway Park where the "Green Monster" towers thirty-seven foot, two-inch (11.33 m) high over the left-field wall, the wall itself only 310–315 feet from home plate, and is a popular target for right-handed hitters, and the centerfield at Houston's Minute Maid Park, which is 436 feet away from home plate and includes a hill and flagpole.

Other idiosyncratic, non-standardized aspects of the sport include changing the nature of the baseball (i.e. varying the tightness of its inner winding), the physical parameters of the bat, the height of the pitcher's mound, and the actual color of the baseball (orange baseballs were pioneered by Charles Finley, owner of the Oakland Athletics, in a 1970 exhibition game).

The Physical Democracy of Baseball: Greek vs. Hebraic Athletic Ideals

The trans-dimensionalism of the baseball field extends to the athletic make-up of the players themselves. From a psychological vantage point, the physically democratic nature of baseball underscores the ability to transcend what the first community psychologist Alfred Adler[xx] referred to as "organ inferiority", which can oftentimes lead to an inferiority complex. Baseball is accessible to everyone, and therefore even those who don't meet the Greek aesthetic ideal of athleticism and symmetry have a chance to achieve the highest level of play in baseball. The Ancient Olympic motto *citius*, *altius*, and *forties*: "faster, higher, and stronger", does not necessarily carry the same amount of currency in baseball. Although not to minimize the considerable strength and conditioning that the average professional baseball player possesses, the proto-athletic physique promulgated by Ancient Greek Olympians (e.g. strength and speed) is not a prerequisite for success on the ball field – baseball is equally, if not more so, a game of skill (for a more in-depth exploration on the Greek athletic ideal, the interested reader should reference the meticulous scholarship of H.A. Harris[xxi]) An exemplar par excellence can be found in the notable and eminently quotable Yankees catcher (played 1946-1965) Yogi Berra, who was by all accounts a squat, ungainly, awkward looking man whose 5'8, 185lb appearance was characterized as ape-like, yet he possessed an uncanny agility and was, according to the legendary manager of the Yankees Casey Stengel, "as natural an all-around ballplayer as ever played the game."[xxii]

A number of players with physical disabilities which would probably make them unable to play other sports, were able to play baseball. The most famous example naturally comes from the most iconic of all club owners, Bill Veeck (who, among his many quirks, had built an ashtray into his wooden leg) inserted a bona-fide dwarf, Edward Carl "Eddie" Gaedel) into a game for the St. Louis Browns in 1951. Gaedel, standing 3 feet 7 inches turned his lack of height into an advantage. In his single plate appearance on August 19, 1951 in which he was

walked with four consecutive balls before being replaced by a pinch-runner at first base. His jersey, bearing the uniform number "⅛", is displayed in the Baseball Hall of Fame. In Bill Veeck's 1962 autobiography *Veeck –As in Wreck*[xxiii], he said of that Gaedel, "He was, by golly, the best darn midget who ever played big-league ball. He was also the only one."

Two one-armed players played in the major leagues, including Pete Gray, outfielder for the 1945 St. Louis Browns until opposing pitchers discovered that Gray could not hit breaking pitches. Once he started his swing, he could not change his timing because he had no second hand to check the swing. The second player was pitcher James "Jim" Abbott who, despite having been born without a right hand, enjoyed a celebrated career from 1989 to 1999. Hall of Fame pitcher Mordecai Peter Centennial Brown, better known as Mordecai 'Three Finger Brown' brown (career 1903-1916), who was best known for his nasty curveball, achieved stardom despite sustaining two separate injuries to his right hand while working on his family's farm which led to the loss of his index finger and permanent disfigurement to his hand in general.

The physical diversity of baseball players, whether in height, weight, ethnicity, etc., more closely mirrors the demographics of the average American, therefore making players eminently identifiable and encouraging adults everywhere to entertain fantasies of: "that guy kind of looks like me… maybe that *could* be me". Unlike football players and hockey players who are armored from head to toe like faceless Roman gladiators, or basketball players whose average height is approximately 6'7[xxiv]while the average American man is 5'9½[xxv]. The fact that former pitchers Billy Wagner (5'10, 180lbs.) and Randy Johnson (6'10, 225lbs.) were both able to throw a baseball over 100mph, despite their substantially disparate physical make-up, is a feat unparalleled in any other sports. In the domain of batting, we likewise find similar dynamics. For instance, although since Babe Ruth there has continued to be an admiration of power hitters, talented batters have achieved success without the same physical ability to knock a ball 500ft. In recent history, Hall-of-Famers Tony Gwynn and Ozzie Smith illustrate the value of the 'contact' or even 'slap' hitters.

Returning to the most idiosyncratic of pitches: the knuckleball – the knuckleballer, that is the individual who hurls this erratic pitch, is equally unique. Many knuckleball pitchers typically do not hit their 'prime' until later in their careers, and often play well past the ages when other, more conventional pitcher, retire. That baseball supports the knuckleballer promotes the Hebraic sense that older adults – 'seasoned veterans', if you will – remain viable, productive members of society. Some prominent examples of older knuckleball pitchers include Hoyt Wilhem (49 yrs. Old), Phil Niekro (48 yrs. old), his younger brother Joe Niekro (43 yrs. old) and Charlie Hough (46 yrs. old). A contemporary exemplar of the journeyman knuckleballer can be found in R.A. Dickey, who, after spending 12 years in the minor leagues and being written-off as a 'has been' or, worse, a 'never was', perfected his knuckleball pitch and who at the age of 38 was awarded the 2012 National League Cy Young award – the first knuckleballer in history to accomplish such a feat, and the third oldest pitcher ever).

Biblical Motifs in Baseball

There exists an uncanny correlation between biblical culture and baseball. The pursuit of the league and national championships fittingly compares to the messianic striving endorsed by many religionists. This rolls into the American fascination with the underdog and how that expresses itself in the cultural preoccupation with certain baseball teams – most notably the

Chicago Cubs and Boston Red Sox, whose respective fan bases are renowned for their religious-like zeal to which they commit their loyalty to their teams. We also "anoint" the seasonal messiah as the MVP, and most every generation had their own "messiahs" - Ruth, DiMaggio, Mantle, Griffey Jr., Maddux, A. Rodriquez, etc. Some have turned-out to be false Messiahs (Mo Sanford, Andy Cohen, Cameron Drew, Jeff Kunkel, Todd Van Poppel, etc.).

Baseball, like the Bible, is also renowned for its rich repository of legends, curses, and rituals – apocryphal and otherwise. From the raging debate regarding whether Babe Ruth 'called his shot' in Game 3 of the 1932 World Series,[xxvi] Satchel Paige's quizzical "hesitation pitch", Lawrence Thayer's "Casey at the Bat", the Boston Red Sox's "Curse of the Bambino", the Chicago Cubs' "Curse of the Billy Goat", etc. One of baseball's most interesting rituals is the "infield fly rule," where a batter is declared out if he hits a pop-up or short fly ball to typically an infielder with less than two outs and with two or three-men on base. This is to prevent a double-play or even a triple-play. This can be seen as a divine intervention to prevent injustice emerging from taking advantage of a loophole in the gameplay.

Another less formalized cultural attribute involves umpires, especially in the major leagues, showing a great deal of leeway in their judgments as to whether an infielder has actually touched second base at the start of a double-play. Being "in the area" is often enough to register an out. The generosity of major league umpires aligns with the Hebraic ethos of rewarding individuals for their sincere efforts, and not necessarily only for their actions, as the Talmudic maxim indicates: *L'fum tzara agra* – "according to the effort is the reward"[xxvii].

Managers and Uniforms

Baseball is also the only major sport where the wardrobe of managers and coaches matches that of their players (with the notable exceptions of Connie Mack and Burton Shotton). This relatively small idiosyncrasy potentially likely carries substantial significance, particularly since it is not, as many believe, mandated in the official rules of baseball. For instance, this equivalent style of garb promotes a sense of unity and shared purpose in the team's mission. The managers and coaches, unlike other sports, also enter the field from time-to-time, and therefore the donning of a uniform can be understood as a public expression of fraternity.

Baseball is, of course, also a team sport, but a team sport unlike any other. The literally dozens of individual duels that occur every baseball game between pitchers and batters epitomizes this dynamic and has been likened to a battle of wits not unlike that exercised by chess masters. Whereas basketball, football, soccer, and hockey typically have 'plays' in which there is a pre-planned coordinated, offensive or defensive tactic, baseball players essentially execute their actions independent of each other, albeit in artful synchrony. Nevertheless, as several authors have pointed-out, in any given play numerous fielders may remain inert[xxviii]. This inherent paradox of community-based individualism is both patently biblical and distinctly American, and therefore, not surprisingly, is built into the fabric of baseball. Describing this unique feature, Michael Mandelbaum writes:

> It is impossible to isolate and objectively assess the contribution each [football] team member makes to the outcome of the play.... [E]very basketball player is interacting with all of his teammates all the time. In baseball, by contrast, every player is more or less on his own... Baseball is therefore a realm of complete transparency and total responsibility. A baseball player lives in a glass house, and in a stark moral universe...

> Everything that every player does is accounted for and everything accounted for is either good or bad, right or wrong.[xxix]

Whereas athletes in other sports are subject to incurring 'fouls' that typically result from interpersonal transgressions, baseball players are charged with 'errors' should they be deemed to commit an intrapersonal blunder. In the event that a fielding error occurs, the pitcher is relieved of any statistical responsibility for the batter safely reaching base. The option for a batter to 'sacrifice' themselves for the sake of the team, by limiting their chances of safely reaching a base for the sake of advancing the scoring chances of a fellow teammate likewise represents a uniquely individualistic and altruistic action. This act of individual sacrifice, in fact, determines whether one is considered a "team player". To this end, the contemporary philosopher Eric Bronson[xxx] draws upon Søren Kierkegaard's[xxxi] analysis of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac in (Genesis 22) as the precursor to the ethical virtue of sacrificing oneself in baseball, regardless of the 'greatness' of the individual player. Similar to the biblical structure of the intergenerational covenant between father and son, it is the trusted manager to whom the decision is deferred with regards to who, where and when a sacrifice is executed. A player, even with the best intentions, who rebels against the manager by refusing to negate their glory for the sake of their team's general welfare are portrayed as committing *avodah zara* – a strange service –and risk social alienation, harsh disciplinary action and almost guaranteed social marginalization.

The Player is More Important than the Ball

In every other major team sport that uses a ball or puck, the placement of the ball determines scoring (the basketball in the hoop, the puck in the net, the soccer ball in goal, the football crossing the goal line, etc.). But in baseball the human being *must* touch home plate to score – any part of the person, no matter how small or how fleeting. Even an out of the park home run is incomplete without the act of touching home; although the ball may be objectively hit fairly out of the stadium, if a runner fails to touch any base while sequencing back to the home plate, they may be called-out upon appeal (see Approved Ruling (2) of Rule 7.10(b)[xxxii]. Furthermore, an 'out' requires a defensive player to possess the ball, so the 'out' also resides in the personal agency of the human, either in catching a fly ball or the baseman catching a ball, and either tagging the base or the runner if there is no force-out. Case-in-point: take the requirement that a third strike be caught by the catcher – why should it logically necessitate the catcher (or first baseman if the catcher misses) to catch the ball on a third strike? It is a requirement not because it's logical, *per se*, but because it's psychological. The ball alone cannot determine anything! The ball *must* be in controlled possession of the defensive player. In this way the human being is uniquely respected and distinguished from the inanimate ball in baseball.

These idiosyncrasies in the rules of baseball do not intuitively explain why there exists an underlying emphasis on the person over the ball. This returns us to the centrality of the human element in baseball. The person is living and dynamic while the ball is inanimate and derivative. To give the ball determination for the play would run counter to biblical notion of the sanctity of life, free-will and personal responsibility. Once re-framed in these terms the absurdity of an inanimate ball trumping the agency of a living, breathing man who was created in the image and likeness of God becomes obvious.

For those sports who worship the ball over the person, a direct line can be traced to the ancient Greeks. The mythopoeic (pre-philosophic) world was governed by an impersonal fate that implicitly externalizes man's locus of control. Even the Greek gods are ultimately powerless in the face of nature. In Aeschylus' play, *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus, chained to a rock, realizes that, Zeus - the chief god of the Greek pantheon - is ultimately powerless before the impersonal forces of fate and necessity. Zeus is more like a superhero than an all-powerful deity. The human being is merely the vehicle of fate:

> Chorus: Who is the steersman of necessity?
>
> Prometheus; The triple-formed fates and the remembering furies.
>
> Chorus: Is Zeus weaker than these?
>
> Prometheus: Yes, for he, too, cannot escape what is fate.[xxxiii]

Aeschylus emphasizes the importance of necessity and fate and its relation to time. Human beings are referred to as "creatures of a day," and so clearly inferior to the immortal gods. But while Zeus is immortal, he is not therefore an eternal ruler. Zeus's father Chronus overthrew his own father Uranus, and Zeus in turn overthrew Chronus. Chronus, like Prometheus, was one of the Titans and belonged to the older ruling class. Zeus is one of the younger gods, and the fact that he is a "new" ruler is mentioned repeatedly. The newness of Zeus's reign suggests that his position is not as stable as he would like to believe. Prometheus reveals that he has knowledge of the future and can see the extent of Zeus's power through time. As Prometheus tells us, the ultimate power is not Zeus, but Necessity. Even the gods must live out their fate, and all they do is preordained. The important message here is that the passage of time is governed by Necessity, by which both the mortals and the immortals are trapped. The gods may be superior to human beings, but the gap between them is not as wide as Zeus believes.

And the Greek use of potions to try to overcome fate, an inhuman response to an inhuman situation. Achilles' mother, Thetis, for example, holding her son in the River Styx to protect him from injury or death by weapons. But she holds him by his heels, thus leaving the 'Achilles Heel' vulnerable, and Achilles is slain by an arrow shot into his heel, the one unprotected part of his body.

In other major sports, the abstract ball or puck is ultimately the protagonist, with the person simply acts as the shooter or the carrier of the ball. In baseball the offensive player is the figure of importance. He represents the 'run', which is refreshingly disconnected from the ball. It is the defensive player who must connect with the ball to stop the offensive free spirit (either by catching it or by throwing to first base or another base in a force-out situation, or by tagging the offensive player while holding the ball.

In all the other team sports, it is the puck/ball that is of importance. The offensive player only shoots or passes the ball or puck or catches it (in football especially to score). It is the defensive player who tries to stop this from happening. In football, the player must be connected to the ball to score. This does not hold true for baseball where it is the player who is of pre-eminent importance.

Scoring as Homecoming vs. Scoring as Conquest

The way that points are earned in baseball dramatically differs from other sports. For example, while in baseball you come home to score, in football, soccer, basketball and

hockey, you score by putting the ball or puck into your opponent's goal. Like Alexander the Great, in ancient Greece, players score via invading the goal of their opponent, i.e. via conquest.

In baseball, unlike all other major sports, teams take turns scoring and there is only one goal (home plate) that is shared by both teams. In contrast to the view of scoring as a result of a "conquest", scoring in baseball is always done via a homecoming. Thought offensive players still move through hostile territory, the journey must conclude with a safe return home in order to score. Players don't simply score points by their actions alone (e.g. shooting a basketball/puck, throwing a football, etc.), but it is often attained through an incremental process whereby batters brings home their teammate. Hits are good, but ultimately meaningless unless they actualize into a 'run batted in' (RBI). While navigating by sprinting through enemy territory, a runner may seek asylum at the safe havens of first, second, or third base.

Alternatively, the feat of bringing oneself home to score – the 'home run' – is known to all Americans as a great measure of personal success, while stealing home represents the ultimate act of courage. However, as glorified, romanticized, and even populist as the home run has become, most fans will be quick to retort that a solo home run denotes little significance unless it represents an 'important' run, e.g. a game-tying or game winning point.

So what are we to make of these differences in scoring? In football, baseball, hockey, basketball and soccer have rules of scoring that are based on conquest. The player is a warrior with the goal of invasion, as Alexander the Great invaded Egypt some three hundred years BCE. By contrast in baseball, and to a lesser extent cricket, scoring begs comparisons between the Jewish exodus from Egypt – wandering the desert for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. Perhaps each base can be thought of as representing 10 years of wandering until finally the homeland is reached. Yet the return to home plate is not the endless cycle of return which in endemic to Greek thinking.

Conclusion

One may achieve success and recognition in the Homeric world only by means of heroism and competition, but the heroic life typically ends in miserable destruction. A good example of the potentially suicidal aspect of this exaggerated heroism lies in the legend that the coach of the first American Olympic team told his athletes in Athens in 1896 upon resumption of the ancient Olympic games. The legend he recounted was that of the already spent runner Pheidippides, who ran twenty-six miles from the battlefield of Marathon to the city of Athens to give the news of the Athenian victory and to warn the Athenians of a possible Persian attack directly on the city[xxxiv]. One must wonder why Pheidippides ran himself to death, rather than stop to rest, or even take a horse as did Paul Revere in a similar situation 2,300 years later. And furthermore, why such a physical exertion with possible lethal consequences is held up as a standard for modern athletes. The very leisureliness of baseball seems to offer a non-heroic alternative to this exaggerated action. In this sense, baseball is in its very essence a human, anti-heroic game, though of course it has had its heroes. But baseball's heroes are human, with foibles, and thus fit into the biblical rather than the Greek definition of courage, the latter always flirting with exaggeration, violence and self-destruction. Baseball is uniquely American because America is uniquely biblical in modern times.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have not declared any conflicts of interest.

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[iii] For instance, ancient Olympic boxing increasingly became more violent; initially the pugilists wound straps of soft leather over their fingers (ox-hide thongs known as *himantes*) as a means of softening the punches, however this practice gradually transformed into wrapping the knuckles with hard leather, sometimes even weighted-down with metal inserts. Another notable instance comes from a story emanating from the realm of training at Olympia. As the story goes, an unidentified trainer stabbed his trainee with a strigil (An instrument used in ancient Greece and Rome for scraping the skin after bathing) and killed him for not performing up to expectations. The Greek sophist Phalostratus (ca. 170/172-247/250) approved of the trainer's actions, exclaiming that, "Let the strigil be used as a sword on worthless athletes and let the trainer at Olympia have greater power than the Hellanoikai" (In Harris, 1966 p. 175). One cannot help but to be reminded of the relatively recent torture sessions committed by Iraq's former President of the Olympic Committee, Uday Hussein, who mercilessly punished Olympians who failed to medal.

[iv] Wasserman ER (1968). The natural: Malamud's word ceres. *The Centennial Review, 9*, 438-560, pp. 439-40.

[v] Consequently, it is no accident that Americans draw upon an ever-flowing wellspring of baseball metaphors and idioms to describe nearly every facet of the human condition (e.g. 'a new ballgame', 'threw me a curveball', 'dropped the ball', 'getting to first base', 'in a league of their own', 'playing hardball', 'struck out', 'step-up to the plate', 'watching from the bleachers', etc.). If a baseball metaphor can't be found to capture a human experience, one begins to wonder whether the experience can rightly be considered human.

[vi] Cf: Briley R (1992). Baseball and American cultural values. *OAH Magazine of History, 7*, 61-63.

[vii] Boman T (1960). *Hebrew thought compared with Greek*. (J.L. Moreau, Trans.). New York: Norton.

[viii] *Ibid*, p. 151

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[xiii] Woodcock G (1944). The tyranny of the clock. *War Commentary – For Anarchism*.

[xiv] Talmud, Babylonian. (no date). 20 Vols. Jerusalem. Tractate Berachot 10a.

[xv] It is unlikely that Yogi Berra was aware of the similar Latin proverb *Dum vita est, spes est*.

[xvi] Five-time All-Star Bobby Murcer has been quoted saying that "Trying to hit [Phil Niekro – a formidable knuckleballer] is like trying to eat Jell-O with chopsticks."

[xvii] The New Dickson Baseball Dictionary, 1999, p. 284

[xviii] Morisette J (May 6, 2012). MLB: Why fans love Rip Sewell manhood-defying eephus pitch. (http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1174179-mlb-why-fans-love-rip-sewells-manhood-defying-eephus-pitch)

[xix] Although historically professional hockey rink dimensions varied slightly, these differences typically did not translate into any meaningful differences in gameplay. Currently the National Hockey League (NHL), does in fact offer official dimensional specifications (200' x 85'), although provides that caveat that variations are acceptable if authorized by the league (NHL Official Rules, Rules 1.2 & 1.3, from http://www.nhl.com/ice/page.htm?id=26458, retrieved 2/26/13). Of note, however, the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) mandates a larger rink as their standard (200' x 100').

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[xxiv] NBA.com 2007-2008 Player Survey.

[xxv] National Health Statistics Reports, Number 10, (October 22, 2008)

[xxvi] On the veracity of this legend we can perhaps rely on the recent testimony of the honorable John Paul Stevens, Associate Justice to the United States Supreme Court, who in an interview in the *New Yorker* published March 22, 2010 was quoted as saying, "My dad took me to see the World Series, and we were sitting behind third base, not too far back... Ruth did point to the center-field scoreboard. And he did hit the ball out of the park after he pointed with his bat. So it really happened."

[xxvii] Ethics of our Fathers, 5:26

[xxviii] Cf. White EG (1996). *Creating the national pastime*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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[xxxi] Kierkegaard S, *Fear and Trembling*.

[xxxii] Perhaps the most famous example of this actually occurring in a game was in the 1999 NLCS when Robin Ventura hit his infamous "Grand Slam Single". In the bottom of the 15th inning, the New York Mets tied the score against the Atlanta Braves at 3–3. With the bases loaded, Ventura hit what should have been a game-winning grand slam to deep right field. Base runners Roger Cedeño scored from third and John Olerud appeared to score from second, but Todd Pratt, who was on first base, en route to second base, turned-around and hugged Ventura as the rest of the team rushed onto the field in celebration. The official ruling was that since Ventura neglected to advance past first base, it was not a home run but a single, and thus only Cedeño's run counted, making the official final score 4–3.

[xxxiii] Prometheus Bound, ll. 516-519.

[xxxiv] It is worth noting that the legend of Pheidippedes first appeared about six centuries after the Battle of Marathon and the story may be entirely fictitious (see Finley Hooper, *Greek Realities*, New York: Chatles Scribner's Sons, 1967, p. 159.