



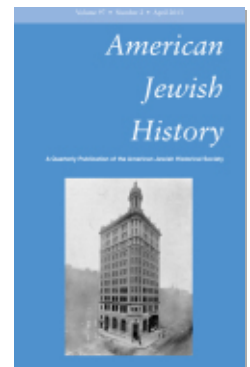
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Out of Left Field: Jews and Black Baseball by Rebecca T. Alpert (review)

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Book Reviews

Out of Left Field: Jews and Black Baseball. By Rebecca T. Alpert. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. ix + 236 pp.

Coming of age, Rebecca Alpert heard from her family and Reform temple that the major league baseball debut of Jackie Robinson in 1947 represented a validation of American democracy, a victory facilitated by Judaism's commitment to social justice. She later recognized, however, that continued inequality muted black celebration of Robinson's achievement. As Jews evolved from race to white ethnic group in the national culture, they failed to fully comprehend that anti-black racism would prove far more intractable than American anti-Semitism. The common trajectory of Jewish assimilation and economic upward mobility did not prove normative for African Americans. Alpert argues that blacks, like Jews, accepted stereotypes of the other that impacted interaction between the two groups in America and its national pastime. For centuries, restrictions and prejudice had relegated European Jews to circumscribed spheres, sometimes as rent collectors, moneylenders, and traders, positioned precariously between dominant elites and resentful workers. In the United States, numbers of Jewish shopkeepers and landlords appeared to retain attributes of that uncomfortable middleman status in black neighborhoods. Unfavorable perceptions of the Jewish economic presence in their communities, according to Alpert, impacted the African-American view of Jews in black baseball.

Out of Left Field chronicles the intersection between Jews and black baseball in the years before and after Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers. Just as blacks and Jews gave divergent meaning to Robinson, the two groups viewed their shared baseball experience from sharply different perspectives. Documenting a substantial Jewish presence in black baseball, Alpert rejects facile generalizations that fail to capture the complexity and nuance of the phenomenon. *Out of Left Field* posits three distinct roles played by the Jewish outsider in black baseball: players, entrepreneurs, and reformers.

Black Jewish ballplayers found their most notable representation in the Belleville Grays, a team sponsored by Temple Beth El in Belleville, Virginia. Alpert presents a seminal account of the Grays, a team that reflected the permeable boundaries between league and independent play

in black baseball. With roots in the Hebrew Israelite movement, Temple Beth El observed Jewish customs and rituals despite an eclecticism that also reflected African and Christian elements. Through the baseball prowess of the Grays, Temple Beth El sought respect and revenue for its black Jewish community.

As booking agents, promoters, league officials, and team owners, Jewish businessmen occupied a central role in black baseball. Alpert focuses on three of those Jewish entrepreneurs, Ed Gottlieb, Syd Pollock, and Abe Saperstein. These Jewish businessmen effectively promoted black baseball, but their scheduling of barnstorming games ran counter to the establishment of stable Negro Leagues. With little commitment to ending Jim Crow baseball, Jewish businessmen recognized that integration would ultimately destroy their income from black baseball. The contrast between the lucrative profits of Jewish middlemen and the modest remuneration of Negro league owners and players created resentment. Although generous to individual players, Jewish businessmen contributed little to the creation of a strong infrastructure for black baseball. The profits garnered by Jewish businessmen, augmented by their encouragement of stereotypical minstrel clowning by players, perpetuated negative Shylock imagery in the black press.

Attuned to the disparate motivations and goals of Jewish involvement in black baseball, *Out of Left Field* also discusses those Jews who responded to racism in baseball from the vantage point of social justice. William Benswanger, an anomaly as the Jewish owner of a major league franchise during his tenure as president of the Pittsburgh Pirates, employed a black trainer, rented Forbes Field to the Homestead Grays, and expressed rhetorical support for baseball integration. In Boston, Isadore Muchnick, a Jewish city councilman, threatened the Red Sox with denial of permits for Sunday baseball, forcing the franchise to grant an April 1945 tryout to three black ballplayers, though the exercise did not result in a signing. Hank Greenberg, baseball's first great Jewish player, finished his career with the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1947, Jackie Robinson's first season in the major leagues. After an inadvertent early season collision with the rookie Robinson at first base, Greenberg, the recipient of virulent anti-Semitic barbs during the 1930s, offered encouragement to Robinson. Subsequently as general manager and part-owner of the Cleveland franchise, Greenberg, notes Alpert, aggressively recruited black players for the Indians.

Significant support for baseball integration also came from three Jewish sportswriters employed by *The Daily Worker*, Lester Rodney, Nat Low, and Bill Mardo. *The Daily Worker*, published by the American Communist Party, campaigned tirelessly for baseball integration through articles and editorials, petition drives, coalition building, and strong pressure on

officials. Although a coterie of earlier scholars acknowledged the role of Rodney, Low, and Mardo, Alpert's emphasis on the centrality of the three to the deconstruction of Jim Crow baseball challenges the standard chronicle. Within the context of the Cold War, Dodgers president Branch Rickey, an ardent anti-Communist, found crediting *The Daily Worker* anathema. Alpert considers Rickey proprietary concerning his reputation, framing an account to "counter any idea that he was influenced by pressure from the outside" (155). In addition, to burnish their own reputations, some black sportswriters wrote accounts that neglected the contributions of Rodney, Low, and Mardo.

Out of Left Field represents a major scholarly achievement. For years to come, Alpert's examination of Jewish involvement in black baseball will remain the definitive account. Impressive research, particularly original interviews and content analysis of black newspapers, provides depth and detail to the commentary. Observant social and historical contextualization animates *Out of Left Field*. Despite some minor repetition, Alpert renders the material interesting, significant, and accessible. Although Alpert relates a number of affirmative episodes, including Jackie Robinson's own battles against black anti-Semitism, she tells hard truths about the interaction of Jews and African Americans that remain relevant. Specialists and students of race, ethnicity, and sport will find *Out of Left Field* a compelling read.

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George Bornstein, *The Colors of Zion: Blacks, Jews, and Irish, from 1845 to 1945*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. xii + 254 pp.

The search for a lost moment of cross-racial solidarity is the "grail quest" of American history, shaped more by contemporary myth and fantasy about a better past than by the literature's oversight of material remains. At moments where the present day circumstance of race relations seems just plain awful, it can be soothing to look for evidence of a moment when things were different, neither mean nor untrusting. But, despite its wide-eyed ethos, this is also a productive quest because it exists in tension with its exact opposite, a serious, dour, historical cynicism, which offers only the story of the bloody struggle *not* to be at the bottom of the social ladder. And that tension, in turn, has more clearly revealed a series of great turning points and consistent plotlines.