Tablet

A Different Ball Game

Jewish athletes have long made all-or-nothing decisions about playing on holy days. An Orthodox basketball star's proposed compromise could change that.

by Zev Eleff March 30, 2022

Ryan Turell COURTESY JOE BEDNARSH AND ADENA STEVENS

Yeshiva University basketball star Ryan Turell announced this month that he will enter the NBA draft in June. A Division III standout, Turell was, in his final season, college basketball's leading scorer across all NCAA divisions. If selected, the 6-foot-7 shooting guard will be the NBA's first Orthodox Jewish player. One major obstacle to playing professional sports for Orthodox Jews is how to negotiate Shabbat observance. Turell told ESPN that, if drafted, he "plans on playing on Shabbat and walking to the gym." Turell will not interrupt Shabbat by driving in a car or flying on an airplane.

In the past, celebrated Jewish athletes who were not necessarily observant took a strict stand by sitting out of competition altogether on Judaism's holiest days. Now, as the discussion has turned from the expectations of major Jewish sports figures to the specific needs of Orthodox Jewish athletes, the issue has shifted from once-a-year Yom Kippur observance to weekly Shabbat practice.

Turell's intention to play basketball on Shabbat is emblematic of a reorientation in American Jewish life. In the past, American Jews comfortably compartmentalized their dual identities, sometimes compelled to choose one over the other. The new emphasis focuses on a coalescence into a single identity, to find a compromise that allows Jewish athletes to embrace both sides of themselves. It suggests that America's Jews ought to eliminate barriers, within reason, to demonstrate the agreement between their faith and American life.

The best-known encounters between sports and religious observance center on Yom Kippur. In 1934, when his team was trying to capture the pennant, Detroit Tigers first baseman Hank Greenberg sat out on Yom Kippur. The slugger had long since abandoned strict Jewish observance but fans, rabbis, and his parents had cajoled the future Hall of Famer to take the day off, and Greenberg relented to the pressure. It likely helped that the Tigers had several more wins than the Yankees and had the pennant locked up.

Hall of Famer Sandy Koufax is the other larger-than-life example of Yom Kippur observance. In 1965, the Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher swapped starts with fellow star pitcher Don Drysdale to open the World Series. Drysdale was a worthy replacement, and the switch still gave Koufax three opportunities to pitch in a seven-game series against the Minnesota Twins. Drysdale and Koufax lost the first two games. But Koufax rebounded and held the Twins scoreless in his two subsequent starts. The Dodgers won the World Series and Koufax was named Most Valuable Player.

The pressure on Koufax to sit out on the holy day was self-imposed; even though he was not Orthodox, Koufax understood that Yom Kippur is Judaism's most sacred annual occasion. "I'm Jewish," Koufax explained to a Los Angeles rabbi. "I'm a role model." It was for him an all-or-nothing decision, an effort to compartmentalize his relationship to American sports and his Jewish identity.

Greenberg and Koufax sat out on Yom Kippur to publicly demonstrate that they held onto two distinct identities. American baseball conflicted with Yom Kippur, so Greenberg and Koufax had to choose one over the other.

Their reluctance to find a middle ground highlighted both identities even though one was surrendered for the other. They have remained a symbol of what Jews in the United States do on their holy days. They do not compromise. They withdraw from the public scene. They sit.

This all-or-nothing approach that Greenberg and Koufax made famous has persisted. But the Orthodox stance on observing Shabbat—something neither Greenberg nor Koufax did—has expanded the number of potential calendar conflicts 50-fold. It's one thing to sit out one or two games in your career; it's quite another to navigate weekly religious observance.

It's an issue that came to public light more than 50 years ago, in a 1971 episode of *The Bill Cosby Show* on TV called "The Saturday Game," which centered on an Orthodox baseball player wrestling with whether to play on Shabbat. (Cosby, as the coach, advises the young athlete to sit out the Saturday contest.) It became a real-life issue more recently: In 1999, the University of Maryland offered Tamir Goodman, the so-called "Jewish Jordan," an athletic scholarship to play for the basketball team. Back then, the Terrapins were a top-tier program and would win the NCAA championship in 2002. The school had tried to accommodate Goodman's religious practices by removing as many Saturday games as possible from their schedule but could not make it work. Instead, Goodman accepted an offer from nearby Towson University, which allowed him to play basketball six days a week and stay off the court on Saturdays.

Other examples grabbed headlines. In February 2001, the Illinois High School Association told Ida Crown Jewish Academy that it would not reschedule the regional final playoff game should the 22-1 Aces defeat their opponents in the basketball tournament's semifinal round. The championship was slated for Friday evening, directly after sunset, the onset of Shabbat. In the end, Holy Trinity defeated Ida Crown and the scheduling conflict became a nonissue. However, it is telling that during the commotion the school did not weigh a middle-ground option: Ida Crown's principal did not suggest staying at a nearby hotel and walking to the gym, even though that would have obviated the major hurdles for Shabbat observance. (While there is rabbinic debate over the extent to which sports themselves are proscribed on Shabbat, there is no debate among the Orthodox over the traditional prohibitions against "work," which includes the use of electricity and driving.)

On some occasions, Orthodox Jews have pulled political and legal levers to ensure that their programs do not conflict with Shabbat observance. These examples

represent the other side of the all-or-nothing perspective on Shabbat competition: urging others to rearrange the schedule to permit Orthodox Jews' full participation.

Extracurricular debate teams have also entered this political arena. In 2005, the heads of Teaneck, New Jersey's Torah Academy of Bergen County protested that the National High School Mock Trial Championship in Charlotte, North Carolina, would not accommodate its students' Shabbat needs. The school successfully lobbied its case, with support from the New Jersey and North Carolina bar associations. But four years later, the same championship told Maimonides School in Brookline, Massachusetts, that it could not avoid scheduling debates on Shabbat; organizers, furious that the bar associations had intervened, would not make accommodations. The Maimonides students protested: "Shabbat is not at all voluntary and not something you can compromise on," explained co-captain Leah Sarna. The students' parents enlisted noted civil rights attorneys Nathan and Alyza Lewin, who petitioned the U.S. Justice Department to issue a letter to the competition administrators that since their agency received federal funds, forcing debaters to compete on Shabbat was discriminatory on the basis of religion. The letter applied the needed pressure to convince state judicial leaders to intervene.

In 2012, the Houston-based Robert M. Beren Academy basketball team challenged the Texas private school athletic league to change a semifinal match from Saturday to Friday. The organizers initially denied the request. The school made it clear to *The New York Times* that there was no room to compromise: "The sacred mission [of Shabbat observance] will trump excellence in the secular world." An 11th-hour legal challenge by the Lewins compelled the league to change its mind, based on a precedent by the league to accommodate a Seventh Day Adventist school. Being on the winning side reconfirmed the Houston school's all-or-nothing position. "The experience gave us the opportunity to show how much we care about religion," said a team member. "The way you make something special is to sacrifice something that is much greater for it."

Turell's decision, then, to find a way to compromise and compete on Shabbat reverses a longstanding trend. Of course, the financial stakes for Turell, even if he must settle for a semi-pro basketball career, are significantly higher than any of the episodes rehearsed above. The heightened perspective of Shabbat as an occasion to "unplug" rather than fully withdraw from public attention offers room to find a workaround.

Yet, there's more to this than money and sparkplugs: more than ever, the desire of Jews (and Orthodox Jews, in particular) to prove to themselves and others that

their faith and culture are fully compatible with American norms. One of the more effective ways to demonstrate this is through symbolic exemplars whose actions are more visible than the rank and file.

Turell is one of two recent examples. In 2021, Jacob Steinmetz, a graduate of an Orthodox high school in Long Island, told reporters after being selected by the Arizona Diamondbacks in the third round of the Major League Baseball draft that he intends to pitch on Shabbat. Steinmetz intends to stay close to the ballpark so he can remain "unplugged" and walk rather than drive on Saturdays. His plan anticipated Turell's.

Steinmetz's father is Elliot Steinmetz, the current coach of Yeshiva University's men's basketball team.

Journalists contrast Steinmetz's decision with the stance adopted by another Orthodox Jew selected in the same baseball draft. Elie Kligman, a Las Vegas native, was chosen by the Washington Nationals but opted instead to attend Wake Forest University. Kligman has repeated on several occasions that he will not pitch on Shabbat. Still, the distinction has not raised questions about Steinmetz's Shabbat observance, nor has it halted the Jewish press from feting his athletic accomplishments.

Turell's very public collegiate career has placed him in the spotlight. Fans have watched him on the bleachers and through live telecasts. They know Turell dunks with power and shoots with extraordinary range. His sudden rise to basketball stardom has collapsed several unfair stereotypes about Jews and sports.

By finding a way to honor his religious traditions while also remaining a fully participating member of his team, Turell has also compelled American Jews to reconsider the worthwhileness of maintaining two distinct identities. In the past, Jews had celebrated the right to choose one identity over the other, or fought so they didn't have to compromise. Now, perhaps with a workaround, they figure, being "American" and "Jewish" can be one and the same.