

BOOK PROFILE

THE GREAT JEWISH AMERICAN PASTIME

By Joshua Platt

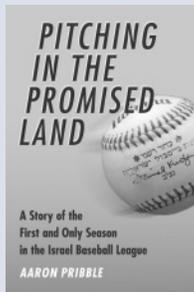
Two new baseball books offer Jewish seamheads and casual fans insights into the esoteric topics of the Negro Leagues and Israel Baseball League.

OUT OF LEFT FIELD: JEWS AND BLACK BASEBALL

Rebecca T. Alpert

Oxford University Press, 2011. 272 pp. \$27.95

ISBN: 978-0195399004



PITCHING IN THE PROMISED LAND: A STORY OF THE FIRST AND ONLY SEASON IN THE ISRAEL BASEBALL LEAGUE

Aaron Pribble

University of Nebraska Press, 2011. 280 pp. \$27.95 [e]

ISBN: 978-0-8032-3472-7

A pair of new books with vastly differing, yet enjoyable styles, offer Jewish baseball fans insights into the esoteric topics of the Negro Leagues and Israel Baseball League.

Rebecca T. Alpert writes of Jews' involvement in the Negro Leagues from the 1930's through the 1950's in *Out of Left Field: Jews and Black Baseball*. Alpert examines three groups of Jews who "remained outsiders, intimately involved but never belonging," who nevertheless "had a profound influence on black baseball, both negative and positive."

These were the team owners and business managers; sportswriters who advocated for racial equality in the Communist newspaper, *The Daily Worker*, and the Belleville Grays, a team of "Hebrew Israelites" (black Jews).

Tim Wiles, the National Baseball Hall of Fame & Museum's director of research,

says *Out of Left Field* is "a work of highly original research." Indeed, Alpert's detailing of the Grays is a groundbreaking effort.

The Belleville Grays, the team owner and players, receive scant attention in Leslie Heaphy's *The Negro Leagues, 1860–1960* and James A. Riley's *The Biographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Baseball Leagues*, two of the most detailed books on black baseball. Likewise, when Heaphy and Riley do mention team owners Ed Gottlieb, Syd Pollack, and Abe Sapperstein, the few paragraphs the authors spend on the subjects make no references to the men's religious affiliations.

Out of Left Field is written in a scholarly fashion. Heavily footnoted, it offers an extensive bibliography and provides in-depth analysis of the "complicated history" of black-Jewish relations, in addition to discussing black baseball.

Alpert's book will likely appeal more to academics and serious baseball historians than casual fans. Despite the effort it may require, *Out of Left Field* is a both a worthy read and a valuable addition to the bookshelf of Negro League and Jewish baseball fans.

Aaron Pribble's *Pitching in the Promised Land: A Story of the First and Only Season in the Israel Baseball League*, is, conversely, a much easier read.

Based on the journals he kept during the Israel Baseball League's 2007, and only, season, Pribble details his on-the-field exploits and his off-the-field adventures in alternating chapters.

As seemingly all baseball memoirs do, Pribble's story is heavy on game details, uses salty language, and describes the sexual conquests and drinking habits of players. At times this seems excessive.

Pitching in the Promised Land is, however, more than a simple baseball diary. Pribble is both a crafty pitcher and author, and he does a nice job changing speeds. The book capably mixes Pribble's recaps of baseball games with his changing views on Middle East politics, memories of a brief but intense romance with a Yemenite Jew, and the general absurdity of playing baseball in Israel in a faltering league.

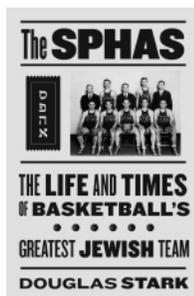
Perhaps, most interestingly, Pribble also offers a touching first-person account of how "a peculiar season, a once-in-a-lifetime summer" shaped and solidified his own Jewish identity and spirituality.

With a writing style that is approachable, warm, effective, and engrossing, *Pitching in the Promised Land* will likely appeal to both Jewish seamheads and casual fans.

Joshua Platt, an avid baseball fan and collector of Jewish baseball autographs, publishes www.JewishSportsCollectibles.com.

take his place on Capitol Hill, regaling his colleagues with "many mannerisms he had acquired in his theatrical career." It seemed as if he felt Congress was a more secure profession than the stage.

Facts and stories engage the attention. Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ 1970–) is actress Gwyneth Paltrow's first cousin. Anthony Weiner (D-NY 1965–) was one of the very first members of Congress to text and receive instant messages; Meyer London (S-NY 1871–1926) was elected as the Lower East Side's Socialist Representative no less than 3 times, and spoke to his polyglot constituency in fluent Italian, English, German and Yiddish! South Carolinian Lewis Charles Levin (A-PA 1809–1860) made his name as a leading light of the "Know-Nothing" Anti-Immigrant party. Though the connection between these biographies relies on the slender tie of some form of "Jewishness" it still makes for fascinating reading. **JHB**



THE SPHAS: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BASKETBALL'S GREATEST JEWISH TEAM

Douglas Stark

Temple University Press, 2011. 319 pp. \$29.50

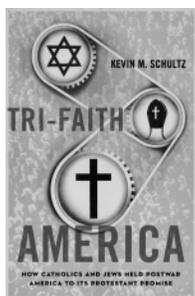
ISBN: 978-1-59213-633-9

Sports have been a major avenue of social mobility as well as an entry into the American mainstream for American ethnic groups. This was especially true for first- and second-generation Jews residing between the world wars in inner-city Jewish neighborhoods such as the West Side of Chicago, Brownsville-East New York in Brooklyn, and

South Philadelphia. Of America's games, basketball was the most popular. Basketball is the quintessential "urban game" and was the sport of choice on the playground and in Jewish community centers during the 1920's and 30's.

The most famous Jewish basketball team of this era was the SPHAS. The SPHAS were named for the South Philadelphia Hebrew Association, a social club which for a brief period provided its uniforms. American Jewish sports fans, noting the Hebrew lettering on its uniforms and its fine record, kvelled over the SPHAS, just as they kvelled over Jewish boxers and major league baseball players. During its glory years, the SPHAS won seven championships in the thirteen seasons it played in the American Basketball League, a predecessor of the National Basketball Association. By the 1950's, however, the SPHAS had degenerated into an embarrassing punching bag for the Harlem Globetrotters.

The team's interesting history, now well chronicled by Douglas Stark, the director of the museum of the International Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport, Rhode Island, stretched from its founding in 1918 until its demise in 1959. By that time upward social and economic mobility and suburbanization had diminished the appeal of basketball to young Jews. Sports fans will enjoy Stark's volume, particularly its biographies of the SPHAS players, but specialists in American Jewry will be disappointed by its failure to delve more deeply into what the history of the SPHAS says about the evolution of American Jewry. **ESS**



**TRI-FAITH AMERICA:
HOW CATHOLICS
AND JEWS HELD
POSTWAR AMERICA
TO ITS PROTESTANT
PROMISE**

Kevin M. Schultz

Oxford University Press, 2011. 256 pp. \$34.95 [e]
ISBN: 978-0-19-533176-9

In 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in a private conversation with two high-ranking members of his administration, one Catholic and one Jew, reminded them that the United States is “a Protestant country” and added that “Catholics and Jews are here under sufferance” and it was “up to you” to “go along with what I want.” This quote is taken from *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* by Kevin M. Schultz. It is a vivid illustration that Catholic and Jewish Americans, even those at the very highest levels, were not fully accepted until the mid-20th century. Through the voices of key political and religious leaders, and incisive historical analysis, Schultz takes the reader on the path leading to America's increasing acceptance of itself as a “tri-faith” country that fully accepts the traditions of its Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish countrymen.

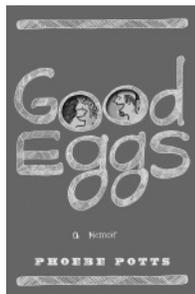
According to Schultz, this “tri-faith” pluralist perspective laid the foundation for the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's and ushered in a public debate about the role of the state in adjudicating religious matters. Jews, some Catholics, and liberal Protestants began to promote the idea that the secular state was in the best interests of the country. The importance of maintaining a secular state

became a mainstream belief along with American acceptance of group rights.”

The increasing rise of cultural pluralism and secularism had unforeseen consequences. There was a decided upsurge of conservative belief decrying the secularism of the country. In 1979, Reverend Jerry Falwell co-founded the organization the “Moral Majority,” intended to serve as a platform for American conservatives to enter politics. A new schism, the “liberal-conservative divide,” was developing. The primary religious divisions were no longer between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews but between liberals and conservatives of all three faiths. This “divide” continues until this day.

The reader who relishes a nuanced view of the forces that have shaped American history and the American Jewish experience will find this book a delight. It is not an easy read but understanding the subtleties of social and cultural history and events requires complex analysis. Endnotes, index, photos. **CP**

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR



**GOOD EGGS:
A MEMOIR**

Phoebe Potts

Harper, 2011. 251 pp. \$23.99 [e]
ISBN: 978-0-06171146-6

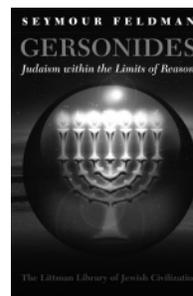
From the bedroom, to the waiting room, to the hospital room, this graphic memoir offers a funny yet sincere portrait of one couple's attempt to negotiate the tough reality of infertility. Phoebe does her best to handle the jealousy that besets her upon seeing other parents with children, the strain frequent doctors' visits put on her marriage and her bank account, and the hopelessness she feels from one disappointment after another. A narrative aside also describes Phoebe's history with depression: when her post-college career path leaves her disconnected and disconsolate in Mexico, trying to learn Spanish to become a better advocate for the working class, she is overcome by persistent negative thoughts, for which she eventually seeks the help of therapy and medication. Sound heavy? Don't be put off. In Potts's competent hands, serious sub-

ject matter coexists naturally with comedy.

Judaism is a vital force in the book. Phoebe's mother's conflicted relationship with faith influences her upbringing, but when a friendly new community gives Phoebe a fresh look at the loving side of Jewish thought, she discovers a rich spiritual home. Her work with the local Hebrew school further sparks her interest in learning, and her genuine, if naïve, enthusiasm even leads her to inquire into the steps to rabbinical ordination.

The cartoon style of the book is clean and crisp, and detailed panels provide a reading and visual experience that is engrossing and substantive. Extra touches—such as periodic glimpses at the inner thoughts of Phoebe's slippers—add bursts of whimsy. With this work, Potts establishes herself as a talented artist, an insightful memoirist, a playful humorist, and a compelling storyteller. **DCC**

BIOGRAPHY



**GERSONIDES:
JUDAISM WITHIN
THE LIMITS
OF REASON**

Seymour Feldman

The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010.
254 pp. \$59.50
ISBN: 978-1-904113-44-7

Levi ben Gershon was one of the most creative thinkers in Jewish history. Also known as Gersonides, he was an innovative scientist, a highly independent biblical exegete, and an original and courageous philosopher. In 1999, Seymour Feldman completed his translation of Gersonides's philosophical magnum opus, *The Wars of the Lord*. Now Feldman has written a book that lays out the main areas of thought that Gersonides grappled with in his *Wars*. The book is not a general introduction to the personality of Gersonides, and is best understood as a companion volume to the translation of *Wars of the Lord*. It does not deal with his science or astronomy, and his commentary on the Bible is treated only as a backdrop to discussions in *Wars*. But for what it does, it is very good. Feldman presents the very dense philosophical questions in the context of earlier