**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Shemini 5774**

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**The Sin of Not Respecting One’s Teacher**

**By Rabbi Reuven Semah**

“And they brought before Hashem an alien fire that He had not commanded them.” (Vayikra 10:1)

In our perashah we learn about the importance of honoring and respecting our Sages. On the opening day of the new Mishkan, the two sons of Aharon Hakohen were put to death by Heaven. Rashi explains that they died because they rendered a halachah decision in the presence of their teacher, Moshe.

**Other Reasons Are Given for**

**The Deaths of the Two Sons**

The Ben Ish Hai asks: How can our Sages say the reason they died was because they rendered a decision in front of their Rabbi, if the Sages themselves enumerated other sins and the verse quoted above states a different reason, that they brought a foreign fire?

He explains there is no contradiction. Even though there were other sins, if Nadab and Abihu had not dishonored Moshe, his merit would have saved them from being punished. However, after they blemished his honor, his merit was no longer able to protect them. Thus they were punished for the other sins as well. Therefore, it is considered as if they died because of the disrespect to Moshe Rabenu.

A true story is told by Rabbi Yechiel Spero which brings home the point. Rabbi Leibish Mintz was a brilliant Rabbi. He was appointed as the Rav of a city in Poland. One day a rumor spread that the Rabbi, who had a wealth of general knowledge, had at one time studied in non-Jewish schools. There were some people who were uncomfortable with this information and began to distance themselves from the Rabbi. They went to other Rabbis for their questions, but left him with the job of dealing with government officials when necessary; since he knew how to speak their language, he would be useful in that regard.

**An Epidemic Broke Out**

There was an incident when an epidemic broke out in town and the government forbade any large gatherings, to avoid the spread of disease. Some members wanted to make a big wedding and have many people. The Rav backed the government and forbade the large wedding.

That Rosh Hashanah as the congregation prepared themselves to hear the Shofar, the Rav stepped up to the tebah to be the makri (in Ashkenaz tradition, this is the one who calls out the sounds of the shofar for the blower to follow).

However, one of the members stood in his way and would not move. “For our shofar blowing we need a makri who doesn’t speak Latin like you!’

**The Rav was Stunned**

The Rav was stunned. He continued, ‘When we need someone to call out the sounds for a gentile god we will call you, but for Hashem we need a loyal Jew!’

The Rav scolded the man and then the man slapped the Rabbi in the face! A riot ensued, the police were called, and they had to escort the Rabbi out with police protection. A few days later, he left the town in utter shame and embarrassment. The name of the town was Oswiecim, Poland, or as we know it, Auschwitz.

Perhaps we are convinced that we would never, ever slap a Rav across the face. But there are countless stories of individuals who have made disparaging remarks against big Rabbis. The more honor to the Rabbis, the more blessing there is.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of the Jersey Shore Torah Bulletin*

**It Once Happened**

**Reb Leib Sarah’s and the Anti-Semitic Polish Count**

Reb Leib Sarah's was born with the blessing of the Baal Shem Tov (Besht). Early on, he became famous as a miracle-worker, and he was sent on many missions by the Besht to aid Jews.

One day, as he stood in the marketplace of Berdichev, a Jew approached him and exclaimed, "Thank G-d, I've found you!" The Jew, named Reb Binyomin, was the head of the community of Kobrin, and he had a serious problem.

**The New Count Upinsky**

The small town of Kobrin belonged to the Count Upinsky. While the old count had been friendly to the Jews, inviting them to settle on his lands rent-free, his son and successor was a bitter anti-Semite. The young count was now threatening to expel the Jews and seize all their property unless they paid him both rent and interest for all the years they had lived on his estate.

Reb Leib listened attentively to this terrible story, and then promised to try to intercede with the count. The very next day Leib Sarah's travelled to Kobrin and stood before the nobleman, ready to plead the Jew's case. The count was momentarily startled by the sudden unexpected appearance of the stately old Jew, but he recovered quickly and demanded immediate payment of the "debt."

**A Request for Fairness**

Reb Leib replied in measured tones: "Sir, your father never expected or demanded rent from the Jews, and I ask you in all fairness to cancel their debt, for payment had never been intended. In return they will pray for your success and well-being all the days of your life."

"I do not need their prayers, but their money I cannot do without!" was his angry reply.

Leib Sarah's shot the count a burning, penetrating look that had the effect of calming his anger. The count soon regained his composure and continued: "Listen, I am going to make you an offer in the strictest confidence; take care no Jew betrays me. Our Polish people are tired of the Russian Czar's oppression. We are organizing a rebellion and we want Jews to join our side. If you agree, the debt will be cancelled."

**An Obligation to Support**

**The Government**

"No, sir, this we cannot do. Our religion commands us to support the government under which we live. We may not join you."

His reply enraged the count. "Get out," he screamed. "You will pay dearly for this!"

Reb Leib returned to Binyomin with news of his failed mission. "Now, I will send you to someone who can indeed help. But you must keep this strictly secret."

Deep in the forest was a small hut where a poor broom-maker lived with his wife. It was here Binyomin was to go with all his provisions for Shabbat. Arriving at the hut Binyomin saw an old woman sitting in a poorly-furnished room. Just then her husband arrived, his face showing no surprise at the unexpected guest.

**Praying Under the**

**Fragrant Fir Trees**

Binyomin prayed under the fragrant fir trees, and then entered the hut to find the old man reading the Grace After Meals slowly like a small child. After quickly eating, Binyomin lay down on a bench outside and fell asleep.

In the middle of the night he was awakened by the sound of a voice singing Shabbat melodies. The voice came from the hut, but a heavenly voice seemed to echo back. The hut shone with a burning light; Binyomin quickly shut his eyes, and when he opened them again, it was morning.

The night's vision convinced Binyomin that the broom-maker was no ordinary man. He could hardly wait for the end of the Shabbat to reveal his mission.

But before he could relay his request, the broom-maker came to him and said: "The Guardian of Israel has heard the prayers of the Holy congregation of Kobrin. The count's decree is null and void. Go in peace, but never tell anyone about this Shabbat."

The next morning Binyomin returned home to hear what had occurred. On Shabbat morning a refinement of Russian cossacks stormed the count's castle, arresting him for treason. The governor it seems, had suspected Upinsky of traitorous activities. One day a letter was intercepted which said that the count had been unsuccessful in enlisting the support of the Jews for the rebellion. With this evidence the castle was seized and the rebellion quashed.

In appreciation of their loyalty, the Czar awarded the Kobrin Jews the land of the Upinskys as a perpetual free hold, rent and tax-free.

*Reprinted from this week’s edition of “L’Chaim,” a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn, NY. Adapted from Talks and Tales*

**'Shul on the Beach' Makes Orthodox Waves in Los Angeles**

**By Alison Kaplan Sommer**

[](http://m.forward.com/workspace/jit/?filter=image-full&url=http://forward.com/workspace/assets/images/articles/w-californiashul-030714.jpg.jpg)

*On the Boardwark: The little “Shul on the Beach” is the pride and joy of one Rabbi Eliyahu Fink, a baby-faced 32-year-old rabbi with a conventional Orthodox education but some very unconventional views, and even more unconventional visitors to his congregation.*

Did you hear the one about the Orthodox synagogue located between a rehab center and a lingerie shop, steps away from medical marijuana clinics and tattoo parlors, with a dead-on view of a beach where sun worshippers frolic?

If you haven’t, it means you’ve never been to the Pacific Jewish Center on the boardwalk in Venice Beach, California. The little “Shul on the Beach” is the pride and joy of one Rabbi Eliyahu Fink, a baby-faced 32-year-old rabbi with a conventional Orthodox education but some very unconventional views, and even more unconventional visitors to his congregation.

**We Allow Almonst Anyone**

**To Come into the Shul**

“We allow almost anyone to come into the shul as long as they look safe,” says Fink, looking very un-rabbinical on a weekend morning in a button-down shirt and a baseball cap, as he meets me in the cafe next to the synagogue and ushers me inside, away from the activity of the Venice boardwalk. A bustling all-day festival of shops and cafes, the Venice boardwalk is one of the biggest tourist attractions in Los Angeles, but also a haven for lost souls down on their luck, some of whom find themselves in the Pacific Jewish Center looking for consolation.

“You can’t just say they’ll go to the next shul and find the next rabbi. There isn’t one, so we have to be on our best behavior and have to always be alert, always be ready for that person who needs open arms or somewhere to cry. Sometimes when it’s more empty on a Friday night, people will come in, non-Jews, and prostrate themselves on the ground in a non-Jewish type of prayer and maybe they’re even high. On one hand I think to myself, ‘is this appropriate?’ On the other, I think to myself, where would this person be able do this if this person can’t come here? This is giving them something no one else can give them, a place where they feel connected.”

**More than Just a Refuge**

**For the Dispossessed**

He hastens to add that his synagogue is far from being merely a refuge for the dispossessed. Some very sophisticated people stop in as well. His small core of congregants are businesspeople and entrepreneurs, and Venice being what it is, sometimes Hollywood glitter blows their way. Natalie Portman has been snapped by paparazzi carrying her baby Alef into the synagogue. One Yom Kippur, it was Sasha Baron Cohen who performed the “Birkat Cohenim.”

Most recently, Fink raised the synagogue’s media profile by agreeing to be the first synagogue to participate in a National Geographic reality series called Church Rescue, in which three business-savvy ministers, known as “the church hoppers” travel the country helping faith-based organizations reestablish themselves in the marketplace. By participating in the show, the synagogue got an “Extreme Makeover”-type facelift, complete with repairs, paint job and renovation.

The unusual location of the Pacific Jewish Center is connected to the history of Jewish Los Angeles. Before air-conditioning and backyard swimming pools, the Jews of urban L.A. would migrate to the beaches of Santa Monica and Venice for the weekends, and several small synagogues were established to serve their needs.

**A Revival in the 1970s**

Over time many of those potential congregants stayed home, prompting almost all of the beach synagogues to shut their doors. Only the PJC, where a tiny group of elderly Jews had trouble putting together a minyan, remained. In the 1970’s Rabbi Daniel Lapin and writer Michael Medved decided to revitalize the PJC and it now has a small but strong core membership of 50 families, supplemented by its high number of transient worshippers. The nature of Venice beach as a tourist destination means that congregants come and go like the tides of the ocean. Sometimes worshippers return every few months, sometimes they come once a year and sometimes they don’t come back at all.

Fink was raised in a modern Orthodox family in Monsey, N.Y., but he took a more Haredi direction after attending the prestigious Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore and receiving his ordination. Married at 20, he worked in college and high school Jewish outreach, thought about a career in social work, but eventually enrolled in law school in L.A. That’s when a family member saw an ad for a position at the PJC shul.

**A Very Diverse Community**

“They had been looking for a rabbi for more than a year. They had a problem because it’s a very diverse community.” Fink’s very traditional background, combined with his youth and liberal politics, was acceptable to both the traditionalists and the less strictly religious members of the congregation.

He’s manned the pulpit for the past five years. The position was supposed to be a temporary, part-time job, but Fink says it soon became clear to him that he would make a much better rabbi than he would a lawyer. While his brick-and-mortar congregation is small, Fink tries, as a true member of the Internet generation, to serve a wider online congregation through writing in support of greater acceptance and inclusion in the Jewish world.

The goal of his blog, Fink or Swim and on social media, is to “bring my message to a broader audience and bring people into my community even if they don’t live here” and to give a voice to “passionate and compassionate Orthodox Judaism.”

**Gender Equality is a Sticky Subject**

Gender equality, however, is a sticky subject. Online, he is an enthusiastic supporter of egalitarian “Open Orthodoxy” and supports the Women of the Wall. But as a congregational rabbi of a synagogue belonging to the Orthodox Union network, he feels bound by responsibility to his congregants to maintain a traditional Orthodox synagogue. He takes pains to point out that the gender-separating mehitza is down the middle of the sanctuary and women are not relegated to the back. However, he admits that he imposes more traditional limitations on women’s public participation in prayer then he would like.

While the PJC is unusual even by Los Angeles Orthodox standards, Fink finds the city’s Orthodox community as a whole very different from those on the East Coast. “The Orthodox L.A. Jewish community is way more diverse and way more tolerant than almost any other heavily Orthodox community that I’ve seen…There are relationships that cross what are usually considered uncrossable boundaries in the Orthodox Jewish community.”

**A Special Mission to be a Sympathetic**

**And Understanding Orthodox Rabbi**

Many of his real-life and many of his virtual congregants are those who left Orthodoxy. He has an affinity for the so-called “Off the derech” community partly, he admits, because many of his former yeshiva classmates see him as having fallen away from the true path. He views it as his special mission to be a sympathetic and understanding Orthodox rabbi who respects and withholds judgment on individuals who have left strictly Orthodox or Haredi communities.

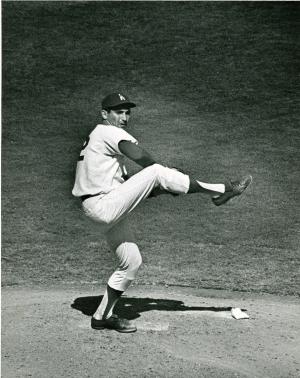
*Excerpted from last week’s email of the AJOP (Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals) Update. The article originally appeared the week before on the Forward.com website.*

**Where Have You Gone,**

**Sandy Koufax?**

***Catching up with the baseball legend, as the 50th anniversary of his iconic Yom Kippur day off approaches.***

**By Steve Lipman**

[](http://www.thejewishweek.com/images/most-famous-jewish-left-hand-sports-history-pitches-courtesy-los-angeles-dodgers)

“I can’t picture people talking about me 50 years from now.”

Sandy Koufax in a 1965 [Sports Illustrated](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com) interview.

Glendale, Ariz. — Baseballs in hand, Kyle Leibel, a 14-year-old fan from East Meadow, L.I., and John Fuchs, a pal from Phoenix, patrolled the grounds of the Los Angeles Dodgers spring training site here one recent morning, looking for autographs.

In the early days of the Dodgers’ preparation for the 2014 season, the teens, among dozens of other fans, chased down pitchers and catchers, traditionally the first players to report to spring training.

Then Steven Leibel, Kyle’s father, steered them to a scrum of fans pressed against a chain link fence, clamoring for an autograph from a white-haired senior citizen.

**The Long-Retired Hall of**

**Fame Dodgers Pitcher**

Kyle and his friend didn’t know much about the former player — Sandy Koufax — at the center of the fans’ attention, but Steven Leibel quickly filled them in: Koufax, now 78, is a long-retired Hall of Fame Dodgers pitcher, the wielder of an overpowering fastball and a drop-off-a-table curveball who dominated National League hitters for an unmatched six-year stretch in the early 1960s. He retired at 30 because of an arthritic left arm, and cemented his reputation in the Jewish community for declining to pitch the opening game of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur.

Koufax noticed the teens across the fence. “Are you out of school?” he kidded them. “You shouldn’t be out of school.”

The question was rhetorical. Kyle and John didn’t answer. They got his autograph. “Thank you, Mr. Koufax,” they yelled. Then they ran off, in search of other, younger players. But before they did, Steven Leibel made sure they knew what they had: “You got the autograph of the century.”

**A Reluctant Hero’s Rare**

**Zone of Privacy**

Welcome to the life of Sandy Koufax, No. 32, a reluctant hero who, in an age of selfies and Twitter, has carved out a rare zone of privacy for himself. When he does venture into the public eye, his signature is in demand. Next season, though, the 50th anniversary of arguably the most famous game a major league pitcher did not pitch, Koufax will likely find himself in a brighter spotlight.

The subject of countless sermons and newspaper columns and bar/bat mitzvah speeches in the last 49 years, that game, that decision, that moment that served as a touchstone of an emerging Jewish confidence in this country, will likely be recalled again in the Jewish community, and perhaps beyond.

This season — the Dodgers open against the Arizona Diamondbacks on March 22 and 23 in Australia — will be Koufax’s last before American Jewry relives that World Series, before the 2015 commemorations begin, before the onslaught of historical essays and requests for his thoughts.

Not that he’s likely to answer many questions or make many personal appearances. Koufax notoriously avoids making himself a celebrity, an elusiveness that has undoubtedly added to his mystique. He rarely grants interviews.

**An Interview for the Jewish Week**

But for reasons he did not reveal, he agreed to be interviewed by The Jewish Week that morning at spring training, two days before he was struck in the head by a foul ball during the team’s batting practice. (He was shaken, received treatment by the Dodgers’ trainer, and was OK the next day.)

It was a sunny, unusually warm winter week in this Phoenix suburb. Outfitted in a white golf shirt, cargo shorts and running shoes, Koufax sat at a small beach table outside the Dodgers’ headquarters, in the shadow of an umbrella, a pair of sunglasses over his eyes. He’s still in shape, his grip strong; he looks at least 10 years younger than his age.

Koufax spoke for about a half-hour, in short replies, sharing — as is his wont — snippets of his career but nothing about his inner life. He was civil, courteous; but being subjected to an interview was clearly painful; he looked like a hitter must have looked at the plate, facing a Koufax fastball. Public self-reflection is not his comfort zone.

**Yom Kippur of 1965**

After introductions, the conversation turned quickly to Yom Kippur of 1965, which fell during the Dodgers-Minnesota Twins World Series; it is the subject that most interests Jewish fans. Yet Koufax wrote virtually nothing about it in his 1966 autobiography, devoting two paragraphs to the historic game. “I had already pitched and lost the second game because of the coincidence of the opening game falling on Yom Kippur,” he wrote, looking back at his start in game 2. “There was never any decision to make … because there was never any possibility that I would pitch. Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish religion. The club knows that I don’t work that day.”

A reader does not learn from the autobiography how Koufax spent that day (reportedly in his room at the ritzy St. Paul Hotel a few blocks from the banks of the Mississippi), if he prayed, if he fasted, if he followed the game on TV or radio, if he looked out the window at downtown St. Paul or at rowers from the Minnesota Boat Club, which is housed on a small island across from the hotel.

“You’re not going to learn about that now,” Koufax told The Jewish Week.

What he did that day in ’65 was private; he never talks publicly about it.

**Wasn’t a Big Deal**

Taking off on Yom Kippur wasn’t a big deal, he said. “It was something I always did.” In 11 previous seasons with the Dodgers, in Brooklyn and in Los Angeles, he had taken off Yom Kippur, which had occurred during the regular season, he said. He had adjusted his pitching schedule each year to make up for the missed start, while spending the holiday with his parents.

Yom Kippur in 1965 drew more notice, Koufax said, only because of the confluence with the World Series.

Why didn’t he play that game?

“Respect.”

It’s as simple as that?

“It’s as simple as that,” Koufax said.

He wasn’t trying to make a statement about Jewish pride?

“Absolutely not.”

Did anyone — owners, management, teammates — pressure him to start the Series, a pitcher’s most prestigious assignment?

He shook his head. “No pressure.”

Was it a risk — could he endanger his standing with the team?

“No.”

Did the other Dodgers ask him, when he showed up to pitch the next day, what he had done on Yom Kippur? Did they ask anything about the holiday?

“No discussion.” They were used to his absence on the Day of Atonement; then, back to business.

Did he have any idea that that day of rest — barely a month after he pitched his fourth and final career no-hitter, this time a perfect game — would make him an icon?

He shook his head. “No.”

When did he start to realize that, for many Jewish fans, he would become more famous for the one game he didn’t pitch than for the hundreds he did?

The buzz began, a little, the next year; the momentum built afterwards. “There have been 49 years since then,” Koufax said.

Does the ongoing fuss surprise him?

“Yes.”

“I wasn’t the first” — the first Jewish star to sit out a Yom Kippur game, he said, trying to deflect the focus from him. “Hank Greenberg did it.”

Greenberg is the Hall of Fame first baseman for the Detroit Tigers; his Yom Kippur off came in 1934, during the end of the Tigers’ successful drive for the American League championship.

Koufax answered several questions, declined to answer others, then stood up and walked into the Dodgers’ headquarters building.

**‘In the Jewish Ether’**

He spent a few hours that morning tending to his official duties, working with Dodger pitchers as a part-time instructor — his official title is Special Advisor to Dodgers’ Chairman Mark Walter — while along the way giving his autograph to fans who held out balls or programs or old baseball cards for a signature scribbled by the most famous left hand in American Jewish history.

Koufax’s decision to observe Yom Kippur in 1965 didn’t attract particular attention in the media at first. The New York Times and New York Post reported matter-of-factly that he would miss the start because that day was “the holiest Jewish holiday.” The Daily News was on strike that week. This newspaper’s predecessor, the Jewish Week & American Examiner, made no mention of the game.

But, through word of mouth in Jewish circles, everyone knew. Over time, that game assumed mythic proportions.

“A generation of young Jews considered him ‘the greatest Jew in America,’” Brandeis University historian Jonathan Sarna tells The Jewish Week. “In an era when lots of Jews thought it was best to keep their Judaism quiet,” Koufax’s act “gave some Jews courage to be outwardly Jewish in other ways — by wearing a Jewish symbol, demonstrating for Soviet Jews, or the like.”

The missed World Series start “was in the Jewish ether after ’65,” says Steven Schnur, a Scarsdale author and college instructor whose 1997 book about a fifth-grader who is supposed to pitch an important game for his team on the first night of Passover is titled “The Koufax Dilemma” (William Morrow). Koufax, Schnur says, “was the universal symbol of a Jew who made a choice that we as a community admired.

“It has nothing to do with an Orthodox lifestyle,” or with a commitment to observance of halacha, says Schnur, who identifies himself as a committed Reform Jew.

**Growing up in Bensonhurst**

Koufax, who grew up in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, was (and remains, as far as is known) devoutly secular, with little formal Jewish education and (according to all accounts) no bar mitzvah. He intermarried twice and divorced twice; he has no children.

“A secular, non-practicing Jew,” is Jane Leavy’s description in “Sandy Koufax: A Lefty’s Legacy” (Harper Perennial, 2002). A secular Jew who became a symbol for the entire Jewish community, Koufax committed an act of respect for Jewish tradition that even reached into Orthodox circles.

“As we boys huddled in the lobby of shul that Kol Nidrei night the talk was not on Teshuva [repentance], rather it was on Koufax,” Rabbi Ron Yitzchok Eisenman, a haredi spiritual leader who grew up in Brooklyn and now lives in Passaic, N.J., wrote last year on the aish.com website.

That Yom Kippur game came only two decades after the end of World War II and the Holocaust, two years before Israel’s triumph in the Six-Day War, which gave American Jews a boost of pride.

**Inspiring Other Jews with a**

**Better Sense of Self-Worth**

“When Sandy Koufax stated that he would not pitch on Yom Kippur, many Jews in America stood a little taller and had a better sense of self-worth and Jewish pride. That was as true in the Orthodox observant community as it was in the general Jewish community,” says Rabbi Berel Wein, an Orthodox scholar and historian who now lives in Jerusalem. “His refusal to pitch on Yom Kippur influenced that generation of American Jews to become more publicly assertive and to be less ashamed of their Jewishness. The decision of Koufax to do the Jewish thing so publicly and in such a quintessential American setting as the World Series pumped a new confidence into that generation of American Jews.”

For many Americans, Koufax’s decision to sit out a World Series game transcended Greenberg’s similar decision.

“What makes Koufax’s episode so enduring,” says Jeffrey Gurock, professor of American Jewish history at Yeshiva University, “is the reaction of the baseball world — Christian world — to his decision.”

Koufax’s announcement that he would not pitch on Yom Kippur “was met with wide understanding and tolerance and constituted a reflection of the new levels of acceptance Jews were beginning to feel in the 1960s,” Gurock says. “It symbolized acceptance for our minority faith in an increasingly pluralistic world.”

**‘Role Model’**

According to Sports Illustrated, Koufax once told Rabbi Hillel Silverman, a veteran spiritual leader who has served congregations in California and Connecticut, “I’m Jewish. I’m a role model. I want them” — other Jews — “to understand they have to have pride.”

Jewish fans often tell him, “Thank you for not pitching,” Koufax says.

He says he talked about his 1965 decision with Shawn Green, a Jewish major leaguer from 1993 to 2007 (he spent time with the Dodgers and Mets), who twice faced his own Yom Kippur dilemma, “I didn’t tell him what to do.”

A growing number of Jewish athletes in the major leagues, the NFL and college football are facing the same decision about playing or praying. Almost all opt to play, citing their responsibilities to their teammates.

Does Koufax think they’re making a wrong decision?

“I don’t judge,” he says.

**A Visit from a Rabbi**

The day after Yom Kippur in 1965, Koufax was visited at his hotel in St. Paul by Rabbi Moshe Feller, a Chabad-Lubavitch chasidic leader. The desk clerk “probably figured I’m his rabbi,” Rabbi Feller said of his access to the star. The rabbi came with a set of tefillin.

Koufax accepted the gift. Rabbi Feller did not report if Koufax donned the tefillin that day. Either does Koufax. “He gave me the tefillin,” he says.

Since retiring, Koufax, who has lived in California and Maine, now resides in Vero Beach, Fla.; He’s taken up fishing and golf and marathon running. He has worked, at times, as a minor league pitching coach, as a broadcaster for NBC and as an instructor for the New York Mets, who are owned by Fred Wilpon, a high school teammate.

He did not return to the University of Cincinnati, which he left when he signed with the Dodgers; he did not take up architecture, his college major.

How does he spend his time nowadays?

“I keep busy.”

Usually, by design, out of the public eye.

“Koufax might be,” the Bleacher Report website opined in 2010, “the most famous hermit left in American ‘public’ life … after the death of J.D. Salinger earlier this year.” His occasional public forays — throwing out a ceremonial first pitch at the Dodgers’ opening home game in 2008, attending a White House reception in honor of Jewish American Heritage Month in 2010 — are headline news.

“Here’s a Sandy Koufax shocker: He’ll spend a night in the spotlight,” the Los Angeles Times stated in 2010 when Koufax agreed to appear at a fund-raising dinner for manager Joe Torre’s Safe at Home foundation, which combats domestic abuse.

“I’m not a loner. I’m not a hermit,” Koufax says in his interview with The Jewish Week. “I go to movies. I go to restaurants.”

The autograph seekers are often rewarded.

**Family Tradition**

Robert Trujillo, 72, who grew up in New Mexico listening to the Dodgers’ games on radio, says he drove from his current home in Southern California to the spring training site in Glendale to get a pair of Koufax autographs for his grandchildren. He achieved his goal that day.

Steven Leibel, 51, who came from Long Island, says he heard Sandy Koufax stories as a kid from his father, a “rabid” baseball fan. Mostly, he heard about Yom Kippur 1965. “That was his top story. He kept telling that story.” Koufax’s decision that year “said the Jewish religion is more important than a baseball game.”

Now it’s Leibel’s top story. “My wife is from Israel. She doesn’t know baseball, but she loves to keep hearing that story.”

Leibel says his kids are too young to appreciate Koufax’s impact. They’ll hear more as they grow older — as Kyle did the other day here, when he got Koufax’s autograph.

The Koufax stories, the tale of the ’65 World Series, won’t stop with his children, Leibel says. He hopes his children will carry on the family tradition. “Hopefully they’ll to continue tell that story to their children.”

*Reprinted from the March12, 2013 edition of Jewish Week (New York).*

**Marvin’s Dance**

**By** [**Eli Levine**](http://www.aish.com/authors/249265101.html)

Marvin Casey’s amazing journey from black, Church-going hip hop dancer to yeshiva student, English/dance instructor in Israel.

How did Marvin Casey go from being an African-American, Church-going hip hop dancer from St. Louis to Yisrael Moshe, a married yeshiva student, part time English teacher living in Ramle, Israel?



Marvin grew up in Chesterfield, Missouri, attending church most Sundays and participating in his church’s youth group. Even though he didn’t really appreciate the meaning of the ritual, at age 17, Marvin was baptized in the church. That was the way it was done and Marvin followed suit.

Marvin decided to leave religion all together and immersed himself with his other love: hip hop dance.

But one week after his baptism, he decided he’d rather work on Sundays. “I just didn’t connect,” he told Aish.com. “There were certain things that didn’t sit with me – I don’t know if in religion in general or in Christianity – that if someone doesn’t believe what I believe, something is wrong with them. I was getting turned off by what I sensed was a disrespect for other faiths. You can’t really make the world a better place like that.”

So Marvin decided to leave religion all together, entering what he calls his “atheist phase.” During this time, Marvin immersed himself with his other love: [hip hop](http://www.aish.com/sp/so/Black-Jewish-Rapper.html) dance, on the dance floor almost every night. He would often come home at 2 or 3 in the morning, and wake up for the 7 am shift at his local Sam’s Club, and then attend classes at his local community college.

**An Intense Performance Dancer**

With his intense dedication performance dancer. “I was in love with movement,” he said. He eventually transferred to the University of Illinois to join the university dance team.

Although things were going well and Marvin was extremely busy, fundamental questions began to gnaw at him, leaving him feeling somewhat disconnected. “I needed a belief in a higher power to help me connect and to keep me humble. But I didn’t know what I really believed.”

Knowing the potential power of religion, Marvin began to research other faiths at the religion section at his local Borders bookstore, searching for some answers to life’s biggest questions.

Marvin had a number of Jewish friends growing up, and he often asked them philosophical questions based on the ideas he was reading at Borders. “What is the meaning of ‘kosher’?” he asked his friend Josh. His questions sparked lively debates and discussions, leading to more questions, sparking Marvin’s curiosity even further.

“In the Christianity I was exposed to, there is no real need to ask questions. If you love Christ, all your questions are answered. In Judaism, you are supposed to ask questions. That intrigued me and re-energized me. Judaism offered me faith and connection, but it was based on reason and a strong intellectual foundation.”

**Discovering Judaism**

One day Marvin asked Josh, “Are you going to the Kabbalat Shabbat service this week?”

“Are you serious?” Josh retorted. “I was not planning on going.”

“Well when you do go, can I come?”

“Are you okay?” josh responded with concern.

A week later, Josh made a special trip to a synagogue for Marvin. Marvin was drawn in with the singing. Even this budding semi-professional hip hop dancer found the music “kind of cool.”

Marvin came back for [Rosh Hashanah](http://www.aish.com/h/hh/rh/) services and tried out another synagogue for Yom Kippur. “I remember standing in front of the Aron haKodesh and everything just felt right,” Marvin recalled.

A few weeks later, Marvin walked in to the office of the synagogue’s rabbi and asked to [convert](http://www.aish.com/h/c/mm/sf/The-Black-Miracle-A-HanukkahThanksgiving-Poetry-Slam.html). “I know you are supposed to turn me away three times, so I’d like to get that part out of the way.”

**Awkward Moments**

Marvin began taking numerous classes on the practices and beliefs of Judaism. During the conversion process, Marvin experienced his share of awkward moments, prying questions, and uncomfortable stares. While his family and friends were fully supportive, that did not make the transition smooth.

Marvin forgot to take off the yarmulke. His buddies were looked at him thinking he was crazy.

At the time, Marvin would go to synagogue on Wednesday nights for the evening minyan and then he’d take off his kippah before heading out to dance with his hip hop buddies. They did not know he was in a conversion process. One night, he was running late. That particular evening, he forgot to take off the yarmulke. His buddies looked at Marvin like he was crazy.

“What’s that thing on your head?”

“A yarmulke,” Marvin replied, as he quickly removed it and stuffed it in his pocket.

“What? You’re not Jewish.”

“Well, actually, I’m converting.”

His friends immediately responded, “You don’t need to take it off in front of us.”

Marvin eventually decided to stop going out on Friday night and to partially observe the Sabbath. At this point his friends were so understanding he wasn’t nervous when he told them, “Guys, I know Friday night is our big night, but I can’t do it anymore.”

“No problem dude, we’ll see you Saturday night.”

While it took them a while to learn and get used to his new customs, they supported Marvin however they could, even providing him kosher food at barbeques and birthday parties. His parents made the same accommodations.

“Before, my role in the group was ‘the black guy.’ Now, I’m the ‘[black Jewish guy](http://www.aish.com/jw/s/48923742.html).’”

Marvin delved into the intellectual side of Judaism. “I love to be intellectually challenged.” The aggressive questioning and independent inquiry in Judaism – balanced by its ironclad moral principles – appealed to both the bookworm in him and to the artistic young free spirit.

He also fell in love with [Shabbat](http://www.aish.com/sh/). “It’s my time to breathe and not worry about work or about being anywhere other than the present moment.”

**Aliya to Israel**

Three years after his conversion, Marvin – now Yisrael Moshe – made Aliyah, moving to Israel in 2006. When the plane landed at Ben Gurion Airport, he froze. “I didn’t want to get off the plane! I had a moment where I had second thoughts, the change was too drastic. Making Aliyah is challenging enough, even more so for a black man who didn’t grow up with any Hebrew, with few Jewish friends, and with little Jewish culture. But I decided to stick to my path and with joy and trepidation, I got off that plane.”

“I didn’t want to get off the plane! I had a moment where I had second thoughts, the change was too drastic.”

**Receiving Many Looks and Questions**

Beginning his new life in Israel, he received many looks and questions: “Why did you move to Israel?” “Are you Jewish?” There were times people didn’t know whether to count him in their minyan. “I think white converts have an easier time blending in and don’t get the same questions that I did.” To this day, there are times Yisrael doesn’t know if he is being counted.

Nevertheless, he adapted. He joined a major institution in Israel that brings Jews together: the Israel Defense Forces. The military is often called “the melting pot of Israel.” Yisrael is a case in point.

He met Jews who spoke Russian, Spanish, French, English, and Hebrew. He met fellow soldiers of Ethiopian, Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Orthodox, secular, and traditional backgrounds. There were times Yisrael would find comfort socializing with other English-speaking soldiers, but when it came time to do the job, he says, they were all brothers. His army experience showed him how “so many facets of the Jewish people can co-exist in one place.”

Life Today

Today, Yisrael lives with his wife Oshrat – a Morrocan-Israeli – in Ramle, Israel, with their two year old son and a five-month-old daughter.

Yisrael teaches English at a high school by day, and teaches hip hop to various clients at night – including some of his rabbis. One of his most rewarding moment in his hip hop career came when he volunteered to teach a group of children with special needs in Ramle. One 10-year-old student with Downs syndrome would never dance. She would hide under the table as Yisrael would turn on the music.

One day, Yisrael met her mother. The woman greeted him with such enthusiasm. “Thank you so much! I know you don’t know me yet but thank you so much!”

When the mother identified herself, Yisrael responded with bewilderment. “Why are you thanking me?” he asked. “Your daughter always hides under the table.”

The mother explained, “When my daughter comes home every day, she turns on music and dances all around the house. She had never been so active but now she is.”

“That little girl taught me that someone is always paying attention to you. No matter what, someone is listening.”

*Reprinted from this week’s email from Aish.com*