In 1930, after a one-at-bat end of the season rookie stint with the Detroit Tigers, Hank Greenberg returned to his home in the Bronx, New York. Out for a ride in his Model A, he was pulled over for running a red light.

Asked by the police officer what he did for a living, Greenberg announced that he was a professional baseball player. The cop peered at his name on the driver’s license and laughed: “Who ... ever heard of a professional ballplayer named Greenberg?”

Hank Greenberg was not the first Jew to reach the major leagues. But he may well have been the best Jewish player in the history of the major leagues. In nine full seasons (the last of them with the Pittsburgh Pirates) and parts of three more, Greenberg won four home run titles, four RBI titles, and ranked sixth on the all-time list for power average. Had he not missed four full seasons because of military service during World War II, he may well have boosted his Hall of Fame career statistics by 50 percent.

In “Hank Greenberg: The Hero of Heroes,” journalist John Rosengren recounts his exploits, on and off the field. Borrowing the phrase used by U.S. Sen. Carl Levin for his boyhood hero, Mr. Rosengren celebrates Greenberg as “the hero of heroes,” who embraced his religious and ethnic identity, faced prejudice without backing down, became a role model, “single-handedly changed the way Gentiles viewed Jews” and “transformed the national pastime into a true meritocracy, a model of democracy.”

Mr. Rosengren documents the rampant anti-Semitism in major league baseball in the 1930s. Yankees outfielder Ben Chapman, he indicates, baited Jewish players and fans with Nazi salutes and ethnic slurs and “cut a swastika” with his spikes on second baseman Buddy Myer.
In 1947, Chapman, by then the manager of the Philadelphia Phillies, ordered his players to “bean” Jackie Robinson. And Detroit was especially hostile to Jews. Citing the role of gambler Arnold Rothstein in fixing the 1919 World Series, Henry Ford, the nation’s most notorious anti-Semite, proclaimed that “American baseball has passed into the hands of Jews” and called on “good Christians to reclaim the national pastime.”

Barbs from and brawls with teammates, opponents, and fans made Greenberg’s life “a living hell.” But he never exhibited fear. According to Mr. Rosengren, his struggles over whether to play ball on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur helped many second-generation Jews learn how to balance adherence to their religious faith and pride in their ethnicity with their place in the United States.

Although Greenberg did, indeed, offset heretofore popular stereotypes of Jews as victims, weaklings, and Shylocks, Mr. Rosengren almost certainly exaggerates his heroism, his influence as a role model, and his impact on non-Jews.

Greenberg’s decisions about playing on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, for example, varied from year to year -- and Mr. Rosengren gives him credit whether he went to synagogue or suited up for the good of the team.

“No one seemed to notice,” Mr. Rosengren suggests, when Greenberg played both games of a double header on Rosh Hashanah in 1937 because he was trying to surpass Lou Gehrig’s RBI record.

It is worth mentioning as well that although Greenberg enlisted in the armed forces after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and served with honor, he had asked for a Class 2 classification (applied to civilian activities deemed necessary to the national health, safety or public interest) in 1941 because his years of earning power were limited and a year out of action would reduce his effectiveness. Asked if he would volunteer, Greenberg told reporters, “I’ll go when they collar me.”

A phenomenal baseball player (and, at times, a prescient general manager and owner, who advocated free agency, American and National League expansion, shorter games, and inter-league play), Hank Greenberg exhibited great courage, intelligence, and integrity. He did not single-handedly change the attitudes of Gentiles toward Jews or transform baseball into a meritocracy.

Nonetheless, he did give baseball fans, young and old, many reasons to conclude that ability on the baseball field, and, for that matter, in any profession, is far more important than skin color, religion or national origin.

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