

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF HANK GREENBERG (1999)

INFO / SUMMARY:

Depression-era slugger “Hammerin’ Hank” Greenberg is the almost-mythical center of Aviva Kempner’s 1998 film about the first Jewish icon in baseball. Before heading off to fight in World War II, he helps hoist the Detroit Tigers to prominence in the American League and makes baseball a sport in which Jews too can take pride. When he returns from the battlefields of Europe, he manages to pick up where he left off, helping the Tigers win additional pennants as well as the 1945 World Series and becoming a beloved icon to many communities.

QUOTES:

“With *Hank Greenberg*, I wanted to counter the screen stereotype that Jewish men were nebbishes.” –Director Aviva Kempner

“Particularly after the Holocaust, Greenberg’s physical strength—in contrast to the images of skeletal, starving Jews in the concentration camps—and his courage in the face of anti-Semitism in the baseball stadiums, roused Jews throughout the country to root for him and *kve//* (swell with pride).” –Ronnie Friedland

“He defied every single stereotype...He was the single most important Jew to live in the 1930s.” –Alan Dershowitz

“When I was playing, I used to resent being singled out as a Jewish ballplayer. I wanted to be known as a great ballplayer, period. I’m not sure why or when I changed, because I’m still not a particularly religious person. Lately, though, I find myself wanting to be remembered not only as a great ballplayer, but even more as a great Jewish ballplayer.” –Hank Greenberg

TEXT:

Greenberg’s nickname was the “Baseball Moses,” but would “Baseball Saul” be more accurate? Consider the similarities between Hammerin’ Hank and the Israelites’ first king: “Saul was the perfect fit for the king: Saul is a handsome man and a head taller than any Israelite” (1 Samuel 9:2). Saul had the look of a king, so he became the king. How does the 6’4,” 230-pound Greenberg compare?

In terms of the value of looks, it is strange but true that the taller candidate for President in the U.S. usually wins.

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Do Jews value looks and height as much as other groups do, in your opinion? And why are looks and height so important in general?

The Israelites begged for a king of their own who looked like the kings of other nations; American Jews in the 1930s and '40s were thrilled at having a hero in Greenberg who was bigger than most other ballplayers, and who said he liked to “shake his fist at Hitler” when he hit home runs.

ALTERNATE TEXT:

Hank Greenberg features a clip from the 1947 film, “Gentleman’s Agreement.” The film follows a gentile journalist named Phil (Gregory Peck) who pretends to be Jewish to investigate the extent of anti-Semitism in America. In the film, Phil ‘contends that his biggest discovery has been that the ‘nice people,’ who are not anti-Semitic, sustain prejudice by not protesting against it.” For example, Kathy, Phil’s girlfriend, recalls feeling offended by an anti-Semitic joke, but does not act.

Overall, *Gentleman’s Agreement* illustrates how both gentiles and Jews tried to keep Jews out of the spotlight. How does Greenberg complicate this idea?

QUESTIONS:

- 1) When Aviva Kemper talks about the idea of Jewish men as “nebbishes,” what is she referring to? What is a “nebbish,” exactly?

What are the classic images of Jewish guys in American pop culture now? What were they in the 1930s and '40s in America and in Europe? How does her film refute those ideas or affirm them?

- 2) What significance do you see in the fact that Greenberg played not for the Yankees but for the Detroit Tigers, though he grew up in the Bronx? How did the location affect his career?

Does it mean something different to be a man, or a Jewish man, in New York as opposed to Michigan today? How about fifty years ago?

- 3) Who would be, or is, today’s Hank Greenberg? In what respect would Greenberg’s experience be different today?

Baseball was the quintessential American sport in the 1930s—by becoming a star in that field, Greenberg proved himself to be an American. Would he still be able to use that path? How does his experience compare to that of Dmitriy Salita in *Orthodox Stance*, a Russian-Jewish immigrant who became a boxer?

LINKS:

Film site: <http://www.hankgreenbergfilm.org/>

Sports Illustrated article:

<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1005628/2/index.htm>

Ronnie Friedland interview: <http://www.jewishmiddlesex.org/page.aspx?ID=493>

Wikipedia page on Presidential height:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heights_of_Presidents_of_the_United_States_and_presidential_candidates