

Yechiel the Baseball Player

Ira Berkowitz

He was skinny, with long, wispy payos that rustled in the slightest breeze. His long coat was frayed and stained; his shoes were scuffed, gray, and wrinkled with creases. Yechiel sat on a folding chair in the school playground, sunlight glaring into his eyes from the white page of gemara in front of him. Shade from a huge maple tree was just a few yards away, but Yechiel did not think to move his chair. Instead, he struggled in his reading, asking G-d for help in deciphering the gemara.

Yechiel was a teacher; his fifth graders were playing baseball in the same playground. They liked their teacher but paid him only the mildest attention when they were in class. Because they liked him, they did not torment him as they did other ineffectual teachers. But they still ignored him. What possessed them, therefore, to invite Yechiel to play baseball with them? Recess was too valuable to be shared with your math teacher.

“Mr. Stefansky, want to play?”

It was a crazy question. If Yechiel were any good, he'd give an unfair advantage to whichever team of fifth graders he played with. And if (as was more likely) he wasn't good, who wanted him?

“Come on Mr. Stefansky! We need another man.”

“Yitzzy Berman left, Mr. Stefansky. We need another player.”

Yechiel got up, laid his gemara on his seat, and shambled over to the boys, his arms and legs at cross purposes.

The boys sighed as they rearranged the teams to include Yechiel, wondering just what they had been thinking when they invited him over. Yechiel, too, wondered why he had come, as he stood in left field, gloveless, watching the ball hop past him. A few times he made a feint in the ball's direction, but his legs were dry and wooden, incapable of running.

The boys put on their most solemn demeanor when their teacher stepped up to the plate, not wanting to laugh at his splayed feet, his knees grazing each other, and his bat held like an exclamation mark above his left shoulder. More afraid of being struck than struck out, Yechiel murmured a prayer just before Yossi Rosenzweig released the ball.

“Ribbono shel olom! Master of the universe! Help!” And he swung—not level, but in an arc—and made contact.

Reports vary as to what happened next. Some say that the ball made a high, whistling sound as it rocketed out of the playground. Others claim that the ball made no sound at all but accelerated as it flew, picking up speed at discrete points in its trajectory. Still others scoff at these violations of the laws of physics, but are at a loss to explain why the ball was burnt and coverless when it was retrieved after school that day.

“Run, Mr. Stefansky, run!” called Heshy Greenspoon. “Home run! Home run!” The other boys just looked at Heshy. A home run was hardly what was remarkable here.

Yechiel did his best to run (though, indeed, what was the rush), but made sure to plant both feet on each base as he made his way around the improvised diamond.

The boys talked avidly to each other in class about their teacher's home run, ignoring Yechiel as he wrote equations on the blackboard. They talked about it on the bus going home and in the kitchen with their older brothers later that night. By morning, Yechiel's home run was known all over Rockland County.

But it was unknown in Yechiel's family: a wife and twelve children who lived in a two-bedroom apartment and who irritated each other constantly, like sand in one's shoe or a mosquito bite behind the knee. They lived on Yechiel's meager salary (barely enough for a childless couple) and on the mélange of lunchroom food Yechiel brought home each day, jello invariably mixing with tuna fish, chocolate pudding with creamed corn.

“I played baseballs today,” Yechiel told his wife as she swept the floor behind him and between his feet. “I played them at school.”

“Do they pay you more if you play?” she asked, thinking it was some kind of extracurricular activity.

“No, they don't pay. But I hit the ball, with G-d's help.”

“If they don't pay you, why should you do it?”

“The kids like it. They look up to me.”

Shaindy looked at her husband with pity and derision. She said nothing, but continued to sweep around him. “How can you make more money?” she said.

“I brought home fish sticks today,” Yechiel answered. “They're high in protein.” He retreated to the bathroom, the only place in his home where he could have peace, and listened to the sound of his children descending on the food he had brought home. They hated the stuff, but fought over it anyway because there was never enough to feed all twelve.

The next day, the seventh graders told the fifth graders that Mr. Stefansky was going to join *their* baseball game at recess. The fifth graders argued that Mr. Stefansky was their teacher and they had the rights to him, but were silenced by a few violent shoves that landed them on the pavement.

“Come on, Mr. S. You're playing with us.”

Yechiel walked over to the seventh graders' side of the playground, somewhat intimidated by these older boys.

The truth is that the seventh graders were not interested in Yechiel as a way to boost the score of whichever team got him. They just wanted to see this phenomenon for themselves, to have Mr. Stefansky slam the ball in their game, too, and to see if he could stand up to their superior pitching.

But he didn't. The first time Yechiel was at bat, the ball flew past him—three neat strikes. He had to be told to step down because Yechiel was under the impression that one struck out only by swinging and missing. A few boys smirked, but most were disappointed that he hadn't hit.

Yechiel's fielding was as poor as it had been the day before, even with the help of a mitt one of the boys had lent him. The ball sailed over his shoulder, bounced between his legs, and even grazed his mitt a few times when he wasn't looking.

Then, with only a few minutes left to the end of recess, it was his turn at bat again. This time, the pitcher was tired and threw wild, and the ball came straight at Yechiel.

"Gottenyu!" he cried out, and swung at the ball as he would at an assailant.

No one who witnessed this event has been able to explain how a bat chopping down at a ball could hit the ball upwards. Similarly, no one has been able to explain how the ball broke two windows in the yeshiva across the street, one on the north side as it entered and one on the east side as it left. In any case, the seventh graders now had bragging rights and told the fifth graders that today's hit was easily more impressive than yesterday's. The fifth graders disagreed, and a fight would have broken out if the Rosh Yeshiva had not come out to announce that recess had ended fifteen minutes ago.

Talk of Yechiel's home runs made its way into the general world; that is, the non-Jewish homes of Rockland County. On the following day, strangers showed up at the yeshiva's playground. They wore bright red caps, pinstripes, and cleats, and they were the baseball team of Woodrow Wilson High, nationally ranked. The seventh graders did not protest as these boys invaded the playground. They merely pointed at Yechiel, who was sitting in his folding chair, unaware of the uniformed figures marching toward him.

"Steffenski?" said the tallest of the players when he reached Yechiel.

"Stefansky," Yechiel said, and returned to his Talmud, wondering vaguely why these boys had wanted to know his name.

The young man cleared his throat. "Stefanski, we hear you're a phenomenal hitter."

"Thank you. And it's Stefansky with a 'y'." Yechiel again returned to his learning.

"Oh. With a 'y'." The young man stood there speechless for a while until a teammate elbowed him.

"Ask him to play with us, Conrad."

Somewhat confused, the young man tried again. "Mr. Stefansky, would you play with us?"

"Now?"

“Now.”

“All right.”

“Thank you,” said Conrad, who felt that this strange, middle-aged man in his black costume and narrow side-curls had already bested him.

Again, Yechiel took his position at a makeshift plate. Again, he gripped the bat; this time it lay horizontally over his shoulder. But the Wolverines did not smile. They stood tense at their positions, their faces flat and impassive.

Conrad called to Yechiel from his position at first base. “Mr. Stefansky, do you mind if the pitcher throws a few practice balls?”

“Not at all.” He stepped away and watched the fastballs. They seemed to disappear from the pitcher’s hand and reappear instantaneously in the catcher’s mitt.

“We’re ready, Mr. Stefansky,” said Conrad after the pitcher nodded in his direction.

Yechiel took his position again. “Ribbono shel olom,” he whispered. “If it’s a good thing for the Jews, please let me hit the ball. And if not, not.”

When the pitcher released, Yechiel swung with all his might, catching the ball at the tip of his bat. The catcher jumped forward from behind him. “Pop fly,” he shouted, positioning himself under the ball, which had risen up on a perfect vertical.

Everyone—the Wolverines, the yeshiva students, the faculty members who were on the playground—watched the ball, and continued watching as it slowly climbed higher and higher.

“What—?” said the Wolverines’ catcher. Taking its time, the ball was receding into the sky. It rose until it could no longer be discerned against the clear blue sky.

The boys stood with necks craned long after the ball had ceased to be visible. Faculty members streamed out of the school and joined them, heads back, mouths open, even though they had never seen the ball rise in the first place. The Rosh Yeshiva came out again, but his threats and pleas were ignored. Then he too stood in the playground and stared at the invisible point where all other eyes were focused.

Night fell. Finally, the group dispersed, rubbing sore necks and shaking their heads. Yechiel had left hours before, unnoticed, afraid of what his wife would say if he came home late.

She scolded him anyway. Yechiel had forgotten to bring home dinner, and the family had to make do with peanut butter spread imperceptibly on stale rye bread. Yechiel went to bed early but couldn’t sleep, kept awake by the noise of his empty stomach. His wife stayed awake, too. She fumed and worried in the kitchen until she could no longer keep her eyes open.

One by one, the Stefanskys fell asleep. Two children were draped over the couch. One fell asleep on the bathroom floor. Others struggled unconsciously with each other on narrow mattresses in the children’s bedroom. None of them dreamed that phone lines across the country were resonating with talk about Yechiel Stefansky. None of them

dreamed that a scout from the New York Yankees would appear the next morning at Yechiel's school.

To Be Continued, B'li Neder