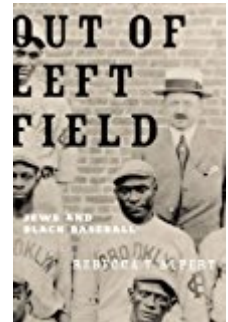


**Rebecca T. Alpert.** *Out of Left Field: Jews and Black Baseball.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 256 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-539900-4.



**Reviewed by** Edward S. Shapiro

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**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

*Out of Left Field* has set for itself an ambitious goal. “The story of the Jews who came out of left field and into the world of black baseball,” Rebecca T. Alpert argues, “provides a unique vantage point through which to interpret the complex economic and social negotiation between blacks and Jews in the first half of the twentieth century, tell the story of black Jews, and understand Jewish efforts at social justice in a business that was defined and constricted by the black-white racial divide” (p. 34). Alpert, a member of the departments of religion and women’s studies at Temple University, is a prominent feminist scholar and the author of *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* (1997), *Whose Torah? A Concise Guide to Progressive Judaism* (2008), and *Voices of the Religious Left: A Contemporary Sourcebook* (2000). A partisan of the Left, she seeks in this volume to tell the story of the involvement of Jews in black baseball in a way that will hopefully strengthen ties between blacks and Jews along leftist lines. Her book is part of the genre of oppression studies.

The book’s scaffolding, unfortunately, is too weak to sustain her argument. The major topics she covers are the place of Jewish businessmen in black baseball; the history of an ostensibly black baseball team; the role that Jews had in transforming black baseball into “comedic baseball”; the role of Jewish communist sportswriters in integrating major league baseball; and the relationship between Jackie Robinson and Hank Greenberg, the most prominent Jewish ball player of the 1930s and 1940s. Of these topics, the most extensively treated and for Alpert seemingly the most important is the involvement of Jews in the ownership of black baseball teams. Only three Jews were prominent in the ranks of owners of black baseball teams—Eddie Gottlieb of Philadelphia, Abe Saperstein of Chicago (also the owner of the Harlem Globetrotters), and Syd Pollock of New York—and this is too small a sample to prove much of anything, particularly when Alpert’s story covers nearly half a century.

These three Jewish businessmen did not come “out of left field.” To them black baseball was sim-

ply another way to make a buck, and they dealt with their players and fellow owners in the same manner that the black owners did. Some black owners resented these Jews because they increased competition in a niche business at a time when economic prospects for ambitious blacks were limited. Black baseball was a “marginal” business, similar to junkyards, Hollywood films, gambling, liquor manufacturing and distribution, and pawnshops, which offered opportunities to aspiring first- and second-generation Jewish entrepreneurs and which white Gentile entrepreneurs disdained as socially *déclassé*. To argue that the involvement of these Jews reveals anything about the “complex” relationship between Jews and blacks is a stretch since only one of the three Jewish owners participated in Jewish communal and religious life. Would things have been different had the three Jewish owners instead been white religious Methodists as was Branch Rickey?

Alpert’s discussion of the role of Jews in what was called “novelty baseball” or comedic baseball is also questionable. The only Jewish businessman involved in this was Pollock when he owned the Indianapolis and Cincinnati Clowns. As was true with Saperstein’s Harlem Globetrotters basketball team, the clowning was done by blacks, not whites. Even some black owners, concerned about the bottom line, approved of baseball clowning since it brought people to the stadium. That it might have disseminated negative stereotypes about blacks was irrelevant to them. In any case, the number of Jews involved in this form of entertainment was too small to support the claim that Jews were responsible for the demeaning of blacks by transforming black baseball into a minstrel show.

*Out of Left Field* reflects an orientation toward Jewishness that emphasizes history and sociology rather than theology or philosophy. This is manifested in Alpert’s discussion of the Belleville Grays baseball team, which, she writes, was com-

posed of “black Jews.” In fact, the group sponsoring the team was part of a black syncretic Christian sect begun by William Saunders Crowdy, who had founded the Church of God and Saints of Christ. It was not uncommon for American blacks during and after slavery to compare their situation with that of the Jews of the Bible, with the American South substituting for Egypt and the Jewish flight to the Promised Land equated with the escape of blacks from slavery and Jim Crow. But this did not make them Jews, any more than Crowdy’s adoption of the Jewish calendar and observance of Jewish holy days, including a Sabbath lasting from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, made him and his followers Jews. Crowdy continued to profess faith in Jesus, practiced foot washing, and forbade the drinking of wine.

Crowdy’s successor, William H. Plummer, developed the black community in Belleville near Norfolk, Virginia. Plummer’s group called itself Temple Beth El, but it continued to belong to the Church of God and Saints of Christ and practiced religious rites that were a hodgepodge of Jewish and Christian beliefs and practices. His son and successor, Howard Zebulon Plummer, went by the title of “Bishop.” Even if one accepts Alpert’s dubious premise that the black residents of Belleville were authentic Jews, she presents no evidence that the players on the Belleville Grays, most of whom as time went on were not even from Belleville, considered themselves to be Jews or practiced Judaism. In fact, many of the players on the team were Christians and believed they were playing for a Christian team. She quotes one of the players who trained with the Belleville Grays in 1939. “It was a Christian organization,” he wrote (p. 59).

Alpert, who was ordained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Pennsylvania, strongly protests against the privileging of any one form of Judaism, particularly the “assumption that the rabbinic Judaism practiced by Ashkenazi Jews is normative and all other versions of Judaism must

be scrutinized for their similarities and differences to that standard” (p. 22). She argues that the exclusion of the Belleville Grays from American Jewish history is racist and stems from the desire of Jews to assimilate and to be accepted as white. She offers no proof of this, and her assumption is counterintuitive since there are many blacks in America and Israel today who have been welcomed into the Jewish community as long as they do not call their leaders “bishops” and continue to see themselves as Christians.

The heroes of this book are Lester Rodney, Nat Low, and Bill Mardo, three Jewish sports-writers for the *Daily Worker*, a communist daily newspaper published in New York City. The three, Alpert writes, exhibited “the only consistent and fundamentally moral stance against segregation,” had “access to the white baseball power structure,” and used their “political skills” and contacts to other political radicals to mount an effective grassroots campaign against segregation in the national pastime (pp. 4, 30). They were, she argues, indispensable in integrating major league baseball in 1947. In fact, Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, and Robinson, selected by Rickey to be the major league’s first black player, disdained communism and wanted little to do with communists, and Rickey vigorously denied that he had been influenced by the *Daily Worker*. The communist movement was a tiny and detested group in America during the 1940s, and its espousal of the integration of baseball did more to discredit than to encourage the cause.

In praising the three communist sports-writers, Alpert seeks also to rehabilitate the image of radicalism in general and the American communist movement and communism in particular. Communism, she claims, was not only compatible with American values, but also “compatible with the Jewish vision of social justice, including beliefs in human equality and dignity, and the rights of laborers to fair wages and decent working conditions” (p. 137). Alpert believes the only place for

Jews who took seriously the moral demands of Judaism was alongside the radicals, and she laments the demise of the radical coalition of blacks and Jews during the golden years of the 1940s. She repeatedly condemns Cold War liberals; bemoans the fate of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg who were “singled out” by anti-communists during the McCarthy era; and criticizes Jews for embracing militant anti-communism, either out of an inordinate fear of communism or because they believed that this was the price that had to be paid to prevent a recrudescence of anti-Semitism. The black-Jewish entente limped along into the 1960s when those Jews who had remained true to the cause became disillusioned “under the pressure of a reconfigured black politics that recognized that securing legal rights alone would not end discrimination” (p. 6).

A common mistake of historians is to elevate the topic they are writing about into cosmic importance. A good example of this is Alpert’s discussion of the relationship between Greenberg and Robinson. Greenberg was then in the final year of his Hall of Fame career, and Robinson was in his first season in the major leagues. In a game in Pittsburgh in May 1947 between the Dodgers and Greenberg’s Pittsburgh Pirates, Greenberg told Robinson not to become discouraged, words that Robinson appreciated. Both players discussed their encounter in their autobiographies, and Alpert notes that it became an iconic event and “central to the myth of black-Jewish relationships as seen through the lens of baseball” (p. 171). But apart from its symbolism, how important was this single and brief conversation, and what does it really reveal about the history of black-Jewish relations aside from the fact that it has been accompanied by much feel-good mythologizing?

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