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IN THE GREAT JEWISH TRADITION, 43 MEMBERS OF THE TRIBE WITH NAMES LIKE GREENBERG, LIPETZ, AND FISH, TEAM COMMON EXCEPT A TRACE OF JEWISH BLOOD. THEY UNITED AND EVERY TIME THEY STEPPED UP TO THE PLATE, IT WAS



DESCENDED ON SOUTHERN FLORIDA. BUT INSTEAD OF PLAYING CANASTA, THEY DREAMED OF VICTORY ON THE DIAMOND. ISRAEL'S SQUAD OF MINOR-LEAGUE HOPEFULS AND MAJOR-LEAGUE HAS-BEENS—PLUS A VERY DEEP MENSCH BENCH—HAD LITTLE IN THE HOPES OF BRINGING GLORY TO THE HOLY LAND (AND MAYBE THEMSELVES) IN THIS MONTH'S WORLD BASEBALL CLASSIC. A SWING AND A MITZVAH.

BY CHARLES BETHEA | PHOTOGRAPHS BY REBECCA GREENFIELD



THE HEBREW NATIONAL PASTIME: Clockwise from top left: Outfielder Cody Decker returns to the dugout; an Orthodox fan blows a shofar; bench coach Gabe Kapler shows off his tattoo; outfielder Joc Pederson's Team Israel glove.

IT'S AN OY-SO-HUMID MID-SEPTEMBER SATURDAY AFTERNOON in Jupiter, Florida, and the backup to the backup catcher, Nate Fish, just got his first hit for Team Israel, a single swatted over the outstretched glove of Miami Dade College's second baseman. Now Fish is back in the dugout, asking the bearded giant Shlomo Lipetz, a pitcher and a mensch, whether anyone got a picture of the long-awaited moment: "Shlo, I need one for the blog!" A Brooklyn-based coach for 10-and-under elites, as well as a painter, occasional funk-soul DJ, and avid blogger—"the King of Jewish Baseball" chronicles his hardball adventures—Fish, 32, is a decade removed from his college playing days and has a bum knee.

Lipetz dips his Skoal and smiles, mimicking Fish's radio-quality baritone: "I'm the King of Jewish Baseball, and I just got a hit!" Lipetz (a.k.a. Shlobot, a.k.a. Shlo-motion, a.k.a. Shlome Boy), 33, is the programming director at City Winery in New York, but he's also the most famous Israeli baseball player of all time. No, there haven't been many—only 10, including him, have made it as far as American college teams. Lipetz discovered baseball at 7, when he watched Dwight Gooden pitch at Shea Stadium. He moved to America from Israel at 22, walked on to San Diego's Mesa College team, and went on to experiment with intimidating facial hair in various semi-pro and independent leagues.

We're entering the top of the sixth inning of a warm-up game four days before Israel will compete in a modified double-elimination tournament against Spain, South Africa, and France for the right to advance

to the 2013 World Baseball Classic. Israel is the cofavorite in its bracket, along with Spain. Both rosters will have ringers—a player need only be eligible for citizenship to represent a country; for Israel, it's enough to have a spouse with a Jewish grandparent. Aside from a couple of hot prospects, most of the guys who've come down to Florida are career minor leaguers, cast-offs, and has-beens. It may be a ragtag team, but it's a historic one. No one wants to be left out of the Greatest Jewish Baseball Team of All Time. Besides, there's a higher cause—the players were recruited by coaches handpicked by the Israel Association of Baseball (IAB), founded in 1986, which is hoping that a berth in the Classic will generate more interest in America's Pastime among Israel's uninterested youth than all of the IAB's previous efforts combined.

All told, 43 players with proof of Judaic roots (bar mitzvah photos, family trees), if not evidence of a bris (a clubhouse joke), are milling around the dugout. Only 28 will make the official roster: 3 Israelis, 25 Americans. They range in age from 20 to 40. Nineteen have had bar mitzvahs. There's a bench coach with a Star of David tattoo, a pitcher who works as a research consultant for the S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace, and former MLB All-Star Shawn Green, who signed an \$84 million deal with the Dodgers in 1999 (and who famously sat out a game to observe Yom Kippur). Green, now 39, is sitting in a folding chair just outside the dugout, swinging an invisible bat with a far-off stare, as Adam Greenberg steps into the batter's box. Greenberg also owns a

SHOULD TEAM ISRAEL BE VICTORIOUS, "JEWS—NAY, ALL PREDICTS. "IF ONLY FOR A MOMENT, ALL HUMAN AND PLANT AND



HOME RUN? MAZEL TOV! Catcher Charlie Cutler, second baseman Josh Satin, and pitcher Josh Zeid chat in the dugout.

place in baseball lore—in 2005, the Chicago Cubs prospect was beamed on his first major-league pitch, a 92-mph fastball to the back of the head that knocked him out of the game and left him with a case of vertigo that derailed his MLB dream. Greenberg has bounced around the minors ever since. He’s still seeking that first swing in the Bigs, a cause that’s being helped by a sympathetic Cubs fan who started an online petition, oneatbat.com, calling for a team to give Greenberg another chance.

Now Greenberg is crowding the plate, staring down a wild pitcher, with Israel up 3–1 in the seventh. Brushed back on the first pitch, he stands his ground and hits a deep fly. “Nice cut!” yells manager Brad Ausmus, a three-time Gold Glove–winning catcher who played more games than any other Jew in major-league history—1,971—before retiring in 2010 and beginning to explore his religious roots. (IAB secretary general Peter Kurz joked that until recently, Ausmus couldn’t find Israel on a map.) Ausmus hopes to be a major-league manager one day.

David Klein, 24, a self-described “surfer Jew,” leaves the dugout between innings to visit with his parents. They’ve just flown in from California and stand nearby in the grass. Klein’s nervous mother pushes sandwiches into his hands: “Have the tuna first, sweetie, it’s getting mushy.” Israel has the lead, thanks to the hot hitting of blond outfielder Joc Pederson, a 20-year-old Dodgers Class A prospect whom Baseball America’s website calls “arguably the best” player in the qualifiers. Pederson has come to Jupiter to . . . well, he’s not the explaining type. Shortly after Israel beats

Miami Dade, a reporter asks Pederson for a story. “I don’t have any,” he says. “You stumped me.”

Kurz, the secretary general, has no doubt what the story is—bringing serious baseball to the Holy Land. In July, the IAB held a fund-raiser at City Winery. Lipetz was there, of course, as were Fish—who came in uniform, straight from a semi-pro game in Brooklyn—an Israeli delegate from the U.N., Mets legend Art Shamsky, and David Broza (“Israel’s Bruce Springsteen,” says Lipetz), who performed a few songs. They drummed up around \$10,000 for the team, but the IAB is also raising money for a new baseball field in Israel. As of now, there’s only a single truly serviceable diamond, in a Baptist village just outside Tel Aviv. “We need to fund our \$5 million field of dreams,” says Kurz, who grew up on New York’s Upper West Side but moved to Israel at 30, after having worked on a kibbutz. “If you build it . . . what’s the line?” He thinks. “Oh yeah. They will come.”

FISH JUST WANTS TO PLAY UNDER BRIGHT LIGHTS. BESIDE HIS HOTEL bed, where he just did a radio interview with “a Jewish station that keeps calling,” sits *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins. Fish had a thoroughly Jewish upbringing in Cleveland: He was bar mitzvahed, kept kosher, went to Hebrew school, and observed Shabbat every Friday night at home. “By the time I was 16, I was collecting rabbi cards,” he says. “Thank God I found art!” And baseball. Fish played with the MLB star Kevin Youkilis at the University of Cincinnati. Later he played in the Dominican

MANKIND—WILL DANCE IN THE STREETS,” CATCHER NATE FISH
ANIMAL LIFE ON EARTH WILL EXIST IN PERFECT HARMONY.”

Republic, Argentina, and Germany—where the team housed him in an insane asylum. “It was the closest building to the field,” Fish says.

He also played in Israel, the strangest place of all. American Zionists are said to have introduced the game to what was then British Palestine in 1927, but it has never quite caught on in the soccer- and basketball-obsessed country. In 1989, three years after the IAB was founded, a team of Israeli 10-year-olds traveled to the European Little League qualifiers in Germany and, as Fish tells it, “got crushed 51–0 by fucking Saudi Arabia.” (The next year, a 10-year-old Lipetz scored Israel’s first run in international competition, in an 11–1 loss to Germany.) The ill-fated Israel Baseball League, which operated for a single season, in 2007, had just a few bona fide nationals per team. The rest were Americans, Spaniards, Dominicans, Canadians, and Puerto Ricans who threatened to go on strike when they got paid in shekels instead of dollars. (“First they wanted to pay us in goats and chickens,” Lipetz jokes. “It was a shit show,” says Fish, who nonetheless had a banner year, hitting .347 for the Tel Aviv Lightning.) The IBL’s founder, Larry Baras, a Jewish bagel baron from Boston, wound up owing money to vendors, which, according to Kurz, still hasn’t been repaid, and the league went kaput. (Baras couldn’t be reached for comment.)

Now the IAB has opened a new chapter, and hopes are once again high. The day after beating Miami Dade, Team Israel takes on another college team. Lipetz watches from the sidelines, dipping and staring at the old Jews in the bleachers holding umbrellas to protect themselves from the sun. “I think the only groupies we’ll get are *yetzas*,” he says mock-sadly, meaning grandmas. An hour later, Israel has another win, thanks to a homer by the soft-spoken, gargantuan first baseman Nate Freiman, whose proud, tiny grandma sits in the stands trying to explain the rules to a fellow *bubbe*: The team is now 2–0 in tune-up games. “This is the first time we’ve played with this many Jews,” says Cody Decker, the left fielder. “That might be why we’re jelling.”

Later that evening, shirts tucked in, the team members take their seats in the hotel’s corporate ballroom for a traditional Rosh Hashanah meal of challah, apples, honey, brisket, and Manischewitz. To whet their appetites, they watch a cheery marketing video about Israel, which most have never visited. Joc Pederson looks on, mouth agape, as bikini-clad Israelis promenade along the shore of the Dead Sea. Glenn “Doc” Copeland, the baseball-patterned-yarmulke-wearing team doctor (“This beats my World Series with the Blue Jays!”), is apparently the only one eating gefilte fish with pleasure.

Throughout dinner, the players at Shawn Green’s table hang on his every word. At one point, Green proclaims that Lipetz will be on the *Late Show With David Letterman* if Israel wins. Guys nod. “If your name was Jim,” says Doc, looking at Lipetz, “who cares! But a guy with a beard and a name like yours, coming in from the pen?” He holds his palms to the heavens. Lipetz, for once, looks sheepish. But he’s a master of deflecting grandiosity: “So muttonchops won’t work?”

Most of the complimentary yarmulkes are still by the ballroom door when dinner ends. Nearby stands Adam Greenberg, nervously tapping his foot. He’s waiting for a uniform—the official uniform. Coach Ausmus just told him he’s on the team.

SCOUTING REPORTS FLOAT AROUND THE NEXT MORNING: AS EXPECTED, Spain is the second-best team on paper, behind “the Jews” (as a Spaniard in the hotel lobby refers to them). South Africa has four or five guys with minor-league experience. France is the weakest. Israel may not be the only team with ringers, but they’re *confident*. On his blog, which he’s constantly updating, Fish, who studied creative writing at the New School in New York, imagines opening night of the qualifiers:



PRIDE OF THE MACCABEES: Ben Guez, a top Detroit Tigers prospect, takes batting practice before a game against South Africa.



“Jews—nay, all mankind—will dance in the streets. Children will sing. Birds will fly high in the sky. And, if only for a moment, all human and plant and animal life on earth will exist in perfect harmony.”

Fish, however, didn't make the final roster. Ausmus brought him into his hotel room and told the artist-blogger-coach that his new job would be bullpen catcher. “The 29th man on a 28-man team,” Fish says with a sigh. But he doesn't let that dampen his enthusiasm. “The list I'm sending the gear guy in New York is, like, \$5,000 worth of stuff,” he says. It includes a special glove—the team has plenty of normal ones, but Fish likes flourishes—embroidered with the Israeli flag.

A bomb-sniffing dog inspects the team bus before Israel faces South Africa. There aren't any specific threats, and no one on the team mentions Israeli sports history—or international politics—but the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre has left its mark. When Kurz coached Israeli

“THIS IS THE FIRST TIME WE'VE PLAYED WITH THIS MANY JEWS,” ONE OUTFIELDER SAYS. “THAT MIGHT BE WHY WE'RE JELLING.”



Little League during the first Gulf War, players brought gas masks to practice, many of them scrawled with the names of their favorite MLB teams. Kurz recommends that players avoid wearing Team Israel gear around town, just to be safe. A team coordinator sent an e-mail that ended with the request: “Someone please help Joc with this.” Adam Greenberg doesn't need reminding. He pretty much only wears shirts advertising his new nutrition business, LuRong Living, which sells a deer-antler product that's supposed to aid muscle recovery.

A group of fans are walking around the bleachers in shirts that say TEMPLE BETH KODESH: “BE COOL, JOIN OUR SHUL.” Nearby, an Orthodox Jew is blowing a shofar—the ram's-horn trumpet historically used as a battle signal. “It's the little we can do for our brothers!” he says. Spectators are still buying shawarma and falafel when Nate Freiman

hits a home run in the top of the first. “Hava Nagila” plays between innings, and a few immigrant Jews ask their neighbors to explain the rules of the game: “So, there are three of the outings each inning?” One, from Israel, who works as an engineer in Boca Raton, admits that this is his first-ever baseball game, saying, “We are a country of brain, not sport.”

In the eighth inning, with a 2–0 lead, Charlie Cutler—a longtime minor-league catcher (“Call me Cut,” he jokes)—hits a three-run double into the right-field corner. There's cocktail clinking in the VIP box, where Kurz and Shamsky watch raptly. Freiman homers again in the ninth, clearing the way for Lipetz, who's been warming up with Fish in the bullpen. He'll close out the game with Israel up 7–0.

The crowd goes wild with flags and horns as Lipetz takes what an Israeli booster calls “the pile of dirt”: LET'S go, SHLO-mo. “He looks like



THE OYS OF SUMMER: From top: Bullpen catcher Nate Fish raises a glass of Manischewitz at the Rosh Hashanah dinner; fans celebrate a victory over South Africa. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Reliever Shlomo Lipetz delivers a pitch; Fish in self-styled regalia; catcher Charlie Cutler gets his props; Fish before a warm-up game against Palm Beach State.

a bear on the mound,” Kurz says. A man in the stands agrees: “That’s what an Israeli pitcher looks like.” Lightning strikes in the distance.

But Lipetz quickly walks three, loading the bases. The dugout stirs; Shlo-motion is yanked. A new pitcher enters, and after a few meaningless runs, a pop-out ends the game. Israel wins. Rain falls in sheets. Lipetz half-smiles on his way to the clubhouse, explaining what he muttered when Ausmus pulled him: “*Ben zona* (son of a bitch), *ahu sharmuta* (brother of a whore), *kus rabak* (God’s pussy). The last two are a mix of Hebrew and Arabic—two-state jams, you could call them.”

Back at the hotel, in a common room, guys are laughing and watching a YouTube video of Cody Decker jousting with another player, using foam pipes and wearing catcher’s pads, in a minor-league locker room they’d prefer to never see again. It’s never felt farther away. Team Israel’s on a roll.

IT’S THE MORNING OF THE FINAL GAME, AND FISH IS SHAVING IN the hotel bathroom after a solid night’s sleep. Israel beat Spain two days ago, thanks to another two-homer game from Freiman. “If Nate keeps hitting,” Ausmus tells reporters, “there will be no stopping him.” Then Spain beat South Africa (which had already knocked out France), setting up a grudge match between the two favorites. In the improbable event that the two catchers in front of Fish go down, he’ll be ready. “We’re gonna go out like savages if we win today,” he says, visualizing a seedy club in South Florida filled with reveling Jews. Lipetz is stretching beside

his bed, trying to focus on the present. “The first one kind of traumatized me,” he admits, referring to his failure to close out South Africa. “But I know everyone wants to see the token Israeli come in again.”

In the locker room before the game, Pederson applies temporary tattoos to his arms—“dragons and stuff”—while the rest of the guys sign balls and jerseys: These items will be very valuable one day, they think, especially if they win. Finally, the team gathers around Coach Ausmus, a small man with a strong voice, who says, “I don’t have a Knute Rockne speech for you. Just go out there and do what you do best.”

In the first inning, Pederson scores on a Shawn Green single, the vet’s first meaningful hit of the tournament. In the second, a relief pitcher takes a bathroom break and reports to Lipetz that buckets of champagne have been placed in the locker room. But Fish looks on helplessly from the bullpen as Spain keeps hitting “squibbers and seeing-eye singles.” Spain’s fans are fewer, drunker, and louder than Israel’s. Their pitchers are wilder too. But their offense is showing no letup.

It’s tied 7–7 going into the bottom of the ninth. With a man on second, Pederson shoots one to right. “That’s the ball game,” Ausmus says—his players lean toward the field. Lipetz spits out his dip. Fish shuffles to the edge of the third-base line, shouting, “Joc shit on that ball!” But Spain’s right fielder is perfectly positioned for the catch.

The strike zone has been shrinking all game: Earlier in the ninth, Cutler was ejected for muttering to the ump, “You’re fucking blowing this.” With Israel reeling, Spain scores on a two-out two-run single in the top of the 10th. Israel has one last chance . . .

And they go down one-two-three. Game over. Tourney over. Spain’s conquistadors dog-pile on the mound; Jews will not dance in the streets.

The locker room is silent, the champagne gone. “This hurts more than any loss I’ve ever experienced,” Ausmus says, pacing.

Most of the players stay up all night before their flights home, rehashing each pitch. Fish, as ever, seeks the silver lining: “In a week, guys with no connection to Israel were transformed. Everything came together as planned. Well, almost everything.”

“I DID LET MY MIND RUN A LITTLE,” SHLOMO LIPETZ WILL LATER RE-call, “when Shawn told me that I’d be on *Letterman*. I don’t see how I could’ve gone on air alone, but of course I would’ve loved it.” He pauses. “I would’ve preferred to be on *Jimmy Fallon* or *Conan O’Brien*, though.” And yet, in early October, one of the players does make national headlines: The Miami Marlins offer Adam Greenberg a one-day contract—thanks to the efforts of his online supporters—which he accepts. Mets ace R.A. Dickey, who’ll go on to win the Cy Young Award, strikes him out in three swings. “It was magical,” Greenberg tells ESPN. A month and a half later, while he’s having dinner with Lipetz and Fish in Connecticut, the Baltimore Orioles offer Greenberg a contract with their AAA affiliate in Norfolk, Virginia. “Life,” he says, “is unpredictable.”

In early December, Nate Fish accepts Peter Kurz’s offer of a gig: head of baseball operations for the IAB. Can he move to Tel Aviv in June? “I’ll be the only paid full-time baseball employee in Israel,” Fish says. “It’s a start.” And a good fit. Several weeks earlier, the King of Jewish Baseball, who didn’t play a minute of qualifying action, took it upon himself to donate a signed team uniform to the American Jewish Historical Society in New York, then sent a mass e-mail to Team Israel: “We will live forever in infamy”—an unconscious slip—“thanks to the powerful archiving capabilities of Jews everywhere. Our team jersey will eventually hang on the wall next to Hank Greenberg’s and Sandy Koufax’s.”

Fish signs off with unwavering faith: “Eyes on the prize, boys. We’re drinkin’ champagne in ’16.” ■