

Book Review: *Pray Ball 2*

By Paul Weider

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Solomon Schechter supposedly said, “You can’t be a rabbi in America unless you can talk baseball.” Rabbi Jamie Gordon agrees with the sentiment—and can talk baseball.

Gordon is the author of two books about the lessons sports have for Jewish kids— and their adult coaches. *Pray Ball! The Spiritual Insights from a Jewish Sports Fan* came out in 1999. Each chapter illustrated a spiritual, Jewish value—such as leadership, teamwork, and fairness—using sports figures and events as analogies.

Now comes the second part of the double-header: *Pray Ball 2!!: Spiritual Insights into Sportsmanship* (Team Spirit Press). If the first book is theory, the second is practice—how to use sports as a way of imparting Jewish values to children.

“I wanted to formalize what I had been doing for ages,” said Gordon, who is based in Chicago. “Over the past two decades, I have run successful pilot programs utilizing some of the materials in my new book at various Jewish educational institutions,” Gordon said, “including JCC day camps, Hillel Torah North Suburban Day School, Solomon Schechter Day School, and Jewish Council for Youth Services.” For the book, he consulted with camp and community-center directors, school principals, and rabbinic authorities—current and classic—from all Jewish denominations.

Now that he feels he has the system down, he wants to share it: “It is my goal for my new book to be used by Jewish educational institutions— schools, camps, JCCs, etc.—as an educational tool to enhance sports and physical education programs,” he said. Next, he is following the book up with supplement s and workbooks for both coaches and students.

Jewish—and non-Jewish—athletes can serve as role models, Gordon continues, and he includes photos and stories from the careers of some 300 of them in the book. And not just the athletes and coaches themselves; team owners, referees, sportscasters, fans, and the parents of athletes all offer lessons that reflect Jewish values, he said. One story is about Michael Jordan complimenting one of Gordon’s kids after a school basketball game, even though Jordan’s own daughter did not have her best game herself.

But it’s about more than looking to celebrities. The games themselves offer many lessons with Jewish resonance, Gordon explains—like respect, discipline, and being gracious in both victory and defeat. Even checking in on an injured teammate, he said, is practicing the Jewish tenant of *bikur cholim*, visiting the sick. “What we learn from sportsmanship can be translated into other relationships,” he said.

Two other contributors to the book show the balance he struck between Jewish and athletic elements; the preface is by Hebrew Theological College’s Touro University’s Rabbi Dr. Zev Eleff, and the foreword is penned by bestselling author Jonathan Eig, who has written biographies of Lou Gehrig and Muhammad Ali.

Gordon established a non-profit, the Team Spirit Institute, which creates and implements educational programs using sports to teach Jewish values, traditions, and history. The proceeds from the book will support the Institute. He hopes that copies of the book itself will be sold as a fundraiser for other non-profits.

Gordon’s own children—Max, Rita, and Sophie, all now in their 20s—played varsity basketball at Hillel Torah and Ida Crown Jewish Academy. They also each played other sports—Max played baseball, Rita played soccer, and Sophie ran track. Rita also played basketball and soccer at Yeshiva University’s Stern College for Women (Division III).

“Their involvement in sports, as both participant and fan, all helped enhance their commitments to being observant, Zionist Jews,” their dad kvelled, “And, most importantly, very kind, decent, caring human beings.”

Pray Ball 2!! can be purchased at Rosenblum’s World of Judaica, AllJudaica. com, and Amazon.com. To purchase 10 or more copies (at discounted prices), email Sales@TeamSpiritInstitute.org.

Rabbi James Gordon is a Past President of the Decalogue Society.