In 1959, Yom Kippur – Tishrei 10 on the Hebrew calendar fell on October 12. Although raised in an Orthodox Jewish home, Hank Greenberg, then 48 years old and living in Manhattan, was no longer religiously observant. Nonetheless, on this, the most solemn and holy day of the Jewish year, something stirred in him. Divorced and the custodial father of two sons, Greenberg told his boys, Glenn, 12, and Steve, 11, that they were not going to go to school that day because it was Yom Kippur. Glenn and Steve had not received a Jewish education, but Greenberg would take his sons someplace special on Yom Kippur 1959. It was not to a synagogue. Greenberg could not return to the traditions of his immigrant family. Instead, they went to the Hayden Planetarium, spending two to three hours there.

Undoubtedly, in this unconventional observance of the sacred day, father and sons encountered some of the central concerns of religion – awe at the vastness of creation, and the place of humanity within something much larger than itself. Steve observed of his father on Yom Kippur 1959, “he took us someplace that was obviously special. Someplace that maybe represented the vast unknown; someplace he hadn’t been to for a long, long time. It was for him a reaching back to something, but he couldn’t go all the way.” Greenberg undoubtedly thought of another Yom Kippur, 25 years before in 1934, when his decision as a young baseball player concerning observance of the High Holidays attracted national attention.

Despite a career abbreviated by four-and-one-half years of World War II military service, Greenberg, a 6’4” first baseman-outfielder, ranks as one baseball’s greatest sluggers and stands with pitcher Sandy Koufax, a fellow Hall of Famer, atop the list of the game’s most iconic Jewish players. In the equivalent of nine-and-one-half seasons, Greenberg hit 331 home runs, accumulated 1,274 runs batted in, averaged .313, four times led the American League in both home runs and runs batted in, won two Most Valuable Player awards, and led his team to four pennants. Until 1998, no right-handed batter exceeded Greenberg’s 1938 season total of 56 Home runs. His .605 career slugging percentage is exceeded by only five other hitters.

In contrast to Koufax, whose 1961-66 pitching peak coincided with a period of general acceptance of Jews in American society, Greenberg’s 1933-40 prime seasons took place amidst resurgent domestic antisemitism, which was fueled by victims of the Great Depression who blamed hard times on the Jews, and the 1933-34 rise in Europe of those Jews who sought to provoke a war between Nazi Germany and the United States. Moreover, Greenberg played for the Tigers, who had a Depression-era home crowd and were 50% Jewish, led by Charles Coughlin, arguably America’s two most notorious antisemites. Automotive manufacturer Ford republished the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” a work purporting to document a Jewish conspiracy to control international finance and world government. Coughlin, a radio preacher with a national radio show, rallied against Jewish dominance of the American economy, manipulation of politics and support of Communism. During the 1934 baseball season, public attention to Greenberg’s Jewishness peaked both among co-religionists and Gentile Americans. The Tigers entered September 1934 battling for the American League pennant for the first time since 1909, and the 23-year-old Greenberg, the team’s top slugger, was crucial to Detroit’s chances. With the automobile industry devastated by the Great Depression, baseball provided Detroit with one of its few strong bonds of social cohesion.

When Greenberg indicated that he might not play in Detroit’s September 10 home game against the Boston Red Sox because it conflicted with Rosh Hashanah, the press noted that the Tigers needed Greenberg on the playing field more than even during this crucial phase of the pennant race. Detroit sportswriters emphasized Greenberg’s obligation to his teammates and to the fans. In response to queries, Detroit Rabbi Leo Franklin provided a statement that heightened the pressure on Greenberg: “In the Jewish faith, there is no power granted to the rabbi to give dispensation to anyone for doing anything which reads contrary to his own conscientious convictions – indeed, we insist upon the doctrine of personal responsibility. In such a case as this, Mr. Greenberg, who is a conscientious Jew, must decide for himself whether he ought to play or not.”

While Detroit boosters asserted that Greenberg had a civic duty to play baseball on September 10, there were fellow Jews who reminded him that his failure to observe Rosh Hashanah would make it more difficult for co-religionists to absent themselves from school or work on the High Holidays. A great internal struggle raged within an anguished Greenberg between synagogal and ballfield. On rsv Rosh Hashanah, he sleeplessly tossed and turned throughout the night. Come the morning of September 10, Greenberg attended Rosh Hashanah services at the Shurey Zedek synagogue. As afternoon approached, Greenberg, in something of a daze and half expecting divine retribution, arrived at Navin Field and took his position at first base. The Tigers defeated the Red Sox 2-1 in this crucial game. The Tiger scoring came as a result of two home runs, both by Greenberg. Following the game, Greenberg returned to Rosh Hashanah services at the Shurey Zedek synagogue.

Greenberg made a different decision on Yom Kippur. He did not play on September 19, 1934, and attended Rosh Hashanah services. Without Greenberg, the Tigers lost to the New York Yankees 5-2. The folk poet Edgar Guest wrote: “Came Yom Kippur – I didn’t say Greenberg. I said Ginsberg or Goldberg.”

During much of his adult life, Hank Greenberg felt an ambivalence about Judaism. Some of it derived from the pressure he felt as a young man thrust into the unwanted position of standard bearer for American Jewry, a status that reached its apogee in the controversy surrounding his 1934 High Holiday observance. Neither theology nor the synagogue played a significant role in Greenberg’s identity in the years that followed. However, Greenberg expressed his Jewish identity in other ways – battling against antisemitism, contributing to Jewish charities and organizations, supporting Israel and boosting other Jewish ballplayers. See “Dilemma” on page 8
Morality versus Divine command

RABBI RACHEL ESSERMAN

“Thou shalt not murder” is one of the Ten Commandments. Yet, twice a year – during Rosh Hashanah and Shabbat Vayera – Jews read the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, which could also be called “the attempted murder of Isaac.” God tests Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his son. Is obeying this command immoral or the ultimate sign of faith? Aaron Koller explores this question in his fascinating and complex “Unbinding Isaac: The Significance of the Akedah for Modern Jewish Thought” (The Jewish Publication Society).

Koller notes the dilemma underlying the story: “The core claim, put as concisely as possible, is that the biblical God would like to want child sacrifice – because it is in fact a remarkable display of devotion – but more does not want child sacrifice, because it would violate the autonomy of the children.” According to Koller, many people think of the trial as one between God and Abraham. Yet, they forget there is a third person present – the one for whom this is a life and death matter – and that person is Isaac. Koller uses the story to discuss individual faith and whether faith should ever triumph over a person’s moral compass.

Koller offers Jewish interpretations of the Akedah from the ancient rabbis to poetry written in contemporary times. He includes both those who see the story as a true test and those who condemn God for making the request. Some believe Abraham is a shining example of faith. Others rebel against the story, claiming that Abraham failed the test by not arguing with God. The author then explores the interpretation of Soren Kierkegaard, a 19th century philosopher. Although not Jewish, Kierkegaard’s writings have influenced commentator’s of all faiths. In his writing, he calls Abraham “a knight of faith – someone willing to sacrifice his son even though he loves him: “The love [Abraham] had for his son is part and parcel of the sacrifice. Without that love, Abraham becomes cold, a killer in the name of God. With that love of Isaac burning hot, is Our Father, the knight of faith and the bearer of the ultimate sacrifice.” Koller sees this as a very Christian interpretation in that Abraham steps outside morality, the rules and laws that govern Judaism. Even so, many Jewish philosophers have adsorbed Kierkegaard’s ideas, even if they don’t always directly address it in their work.

Two major Jewish thinkers who were influenced by Kierkegaard are Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Koller notes that they both put a Jewish spin on Kierkegaard’s ideas. Leibowitz sees the Akedah as the story of a conflict between religion and ethics. He believes that “true devotion to God takes no heed of human considerations, even moral judgements.” Koller has a problem with this interpretation because it separates religion and morality, and makes the Akedah the center of all Jewish action. Soloveitchik believes no one can be certain redemption will follow any human action. He connects the Akedah to prayer and suggests that praying three times a day reflects Abraham’s actions. His act of prayer is the act of someone alone, though, someone who can only connect to God when alone. Koller sees this interpretation as incorrect because it doesn’t take into consideration that a third individual is affected by this action: the philosopher concentrates on Abraham and God, while ignoring the bodily harm that Isaac faced.

Koller also addresses what he sees as the major flaws in Kierkegaard’s thought. One problem is that the role of Isaac in the story – or Koller sees it “the erasure of Isaac from the narrative” – is not addressed by the philosopher. Kierkegaard’s ideas can lead to what Koller calls “radical subjectivity,” something that allows each person to decide their own morality. But Koller thinks that will lead to chaos. As the author notes, “Ethics, divorced from religion, is now free to go in dangerous and indeed horrifying directions.” He also believes that religion – at least Judaism – is not a solitary activity; it is a communal one and its rules help people understand how to behave in a moral manner. In addition, Koller doesn’t think that God and ethics can be separated: “The ethical cannot be purposely suspended because God aspires to the ethical.” That is what makes the story so difficult to interpret, but the author believes that any Jewish interpretation needs to take at this idea seriously. In the end, he suggests a Jewish ethical teaching based on the Akedah: “As much as it is enticing to do so, one person’s religious fulfillment cannot come through harm to another.” It’s impossible to do justice to “Unbinding Isaac” in a short review because this challenging work is so rich with differing interpretations. That means that even those who are familiar with the commentary on the story may still find a great deal to ponder. Anyone looking to seriously grapple with one of the most difficult stories in the Bible should read “Unbinding Isaac.” It offers an amazing amount of food for thought.