

Heart and sole

• By SARA K. EISEN

There's nothing like being almost nine and spending much of your nearly endless, hamburger-flavored summer at the ballpark with either your parents or your grandparents. Your goal is modest: to catch a foul ball to give to your big brother, who is too old to be seen trying. It's the stuff of 20th-century American fiction, and now it is the stuff of my second son's childhood in the 21st-century Middle East.

Not, it must be noted, that he is, Heaven forbid, a fan. True to both his generation and his genetics, Doron is a born cynic and maintains that his frequent trips to the rural stadium at Kibbutz Gezer are due to his appreciation of this newly Levantine professional sport, not because he was root, root, rooting for the home team. In his case, that would be the Beit Shemesh Blue Sox.

The Israel Baseball League (my oldest son calls it the Imported Baseball League) is easily the most exciting thing to happen to sleepy, heavily Anglo Beit Shemesh since we got the Aroma café and a garishly painted strip mall a few years back. BS is a place you move to for community, warmth, English, and safety, because nothing ever happens here. But baseball happened here this summer.

The league, in its inaugural season, was a big enough deal to be invigorating to those deprived of baseball – and anything else to do – for many years, and cozy enough (think the Arizona Fall League, on a slow day, and then shrink the attendance and stadium capacity by 80 percent) to still feel safe bringing your kids, and then letting them wander away to the fly zone, out of sight, to try their luck. A neighbor kid established a collection of 20 balls this way.

There were kosher hotdogs, steak sandwiches and fries, *minha* after the fifth inning behind the bleachers, friends you hadn't seen in a while, other friends (whom you love anyway) brandishing blue socks on a stick. For me, it was a place to remember what it used to be like to have a Sunday: the smell of beer outside; sitting and watching someone else run around as the sun set. The smaller kids were with my parents. Baseball really is about freedom.

Best of all, especially for Doron, was the fact that our across-the-street-neighbor and friend, a diamond dealer and a fantastic athlete named Jeff (We Want) Mor, had been recruited to pitch for the Blue Sox, one of very few Israeli citizens in the league. A guy – a Jewish, Orthodox guy – on the mound who you wave to on your way to camp! What more, really, could a boy ask for? (Perhaps for said neighbor to host the whole team at home for a barbecue one evening and to invite you over with your little brother and your glove.) It was the best introduction to baseball a kid could have invented.

There was also some magic in the form of league MVP and Blue Sox star infielder Gregg Raymundo, a professional player for nearly a decade in the MILB, and a devout Christian of Mexican extraction from Clovis, California – a town not much bigger than Beit Shemesh.



Gregg would often stay with Jeff for Shabbat, fascinated by Judaism.

In Jeff's suede yarmulke (perched jauntily on top of his head) Gregg looked like a Syrian Jew from Flatbush. His mom and girlfriend visited, too. To say that these were the frummet people I've met in a while would be pretty accurate: No exclamations like "Oh my God!!" taking the Lord's name in vain; being thankful and aware of each step taken in the Holy Land; attributing every small success to God; praying always, sometimes joining *minha*. Gregg would sign "Psalm 119" alongside his autograph. He told a neighbor of ours it had to do with how King David managed to capture, beautifully he thought, the relationship between man and God.

When Raymundo received his MVP award two Sundays ago, the night the Blue Sox took the championship, he thanked God and

threw his shoe into the stands. It was caught by none other than my son, who hadn't managed to catch anything fly or foul all season. He brought the giant footwear home in a plastic bag, also full of the sand that had accumulated on the sole.

Not a sentimental bone in his body, Doron wants to sell it on eBay. I won't hear of it. Someday, it will remind him of the summer before he turned nine, the summer he learned all about baseball from his nostalgic grandfather, the summer something at long last happened in the small town where he was born, the summer his 20-kilo frame consumed more meat than imagined possible.

The summer he got pegged with the shoe of the league's most valuable player (which he has since, in fact, given to his older brother), Doron decides he'll be back next year, not cheering on the champs, but trying, finally, for a ball.

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