



Former Sox slugger Kevin Youkilis served as a coach for Team Israel in the World Baseball Classic. | TEAM ISRAEL

'Youk,' colleagues go to bat for Israel

BY STEVE MARANTZ([HTTPS://JEWISHJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/STEVE-MARANTZ/](https://jewishjournal.org/author/steve-marantz/))

December 7, 2023



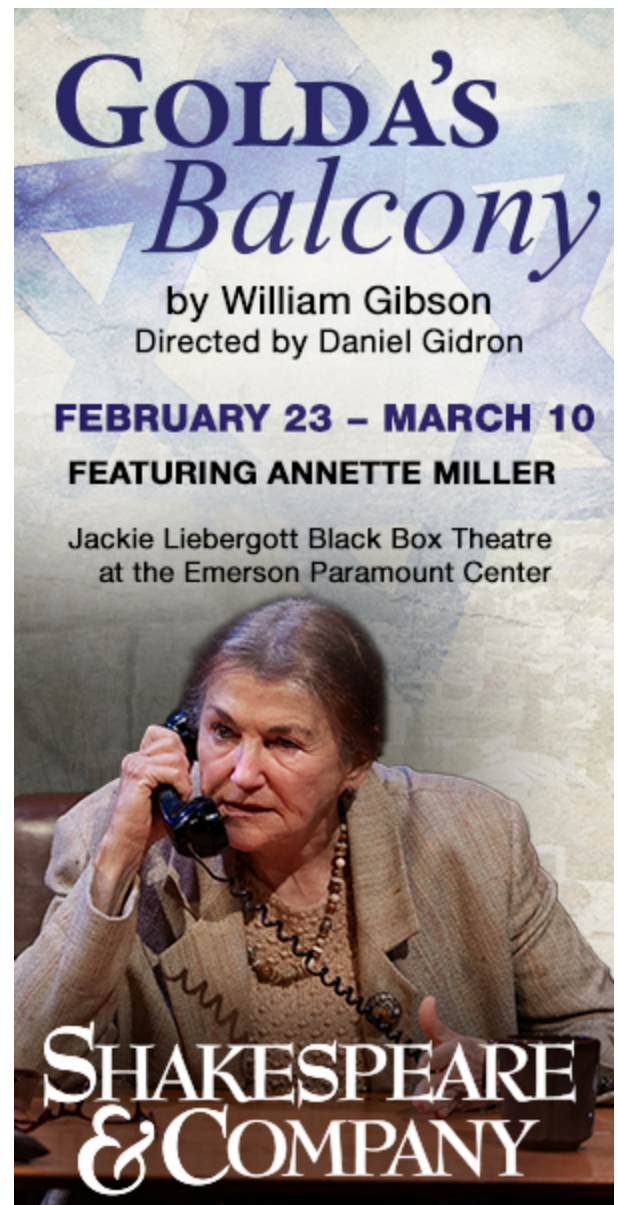
Houston Astros star third baseman Alex Bregman was first to respond. When the video file from Bregman landed in his inbox, Kevin Youkilis knew his mission had legs.

It was Oct. 15, eight days after Hamas' savage invasion of Israel. Bregman was filmed at the Astros clubhouse, in uniform, before a playoff game against Texas.

"My name is Alex Bregman and I am a Jew," he said. "Stand up against antisemitism and stand with Israel."

Soon, similar video files poured in from other Jewish Major League Baseball players and coaches, Ian Kinsler and Brad Ausmus among them. Youkilis, the former Red Sox all-star infielder, and his longtime confidante, Nate Fish, edited the material into a reel that went up on social media Oct. 19. Posted on Instagram and X by Youkilis, by the Israel Association of Baseball, comedian Jerry Seinfeld, and others, it quickly went viral.

Six weeks and 4 million views later, the reel aspires to be among the legendary social statements of celebrity athletes. It's reminiscent of Muhammad Ali's conscientious objection to the draft; the Black Power salute of John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the 1968 Olympics; Colin Kaepernick kneeling in support of Black Lives Matter; and Aly Raisman calling out sexual abuse of female gymnasts in support of the MeToo movement.



(<https://emersontheatres.org/Online/default.asp>)



(<https://sharsheret.org/>)

“Sometimes it’s not easy to put yourself out there, but in times of need, I felt it was my duty to put myself out there,” Youkilis said, speaking from his California home. “I don’t think of myself as a celebrity in any way – people say that because I could hit fastballs and sliders and field grounders. I just think of myself as a regular human being, and as a regular human being I felt the atrocities needed to be addressed. And to stick up and be proud to be Jewish at a time when people were kind of talking down. That’s how it started.”



Youkilis and other Jewish MLB stars spoke out against antisemitism in a social media video. | BRIAN BABINEAU

Youkilis was with the Red Sox from 2004 to 2012, won two World Series, and was a three-time All-Star. Many fans

weren’t aware he was Jewish, as Dan Shaughnessy wrote in the Globe, because “Youkilis never made much of it when he was playing here, and a lot of us thought he was Greek because ‘Moneyball’ dubbed him ‘the Greek God of Walks.’ “

Fish was Youkilis' teammate at the University of Cincinnati, where the two bonded over their Jewish heritage. Fish, who has been a player, coach, manager and executive in Israeli baseball, persuaded Youkilis to coach for Team Israel last spring in the World Baseball Classic. Fish and Youkilis conceived the video, along with another friend, Josh Lamberg.

"Everyone was freaking out after Oct. 7, not sure what to do," Fish recalled. "We knew we had this somewhat influential community of Jewish baseball players we had access to. This was our chance to impact the world and popular opinion a little bit. It doesn't erase the tragedy of war, but it was a chance for us to feel like we were doing something.

"One of the crazy things about the video is that most guys are not very vocal about being Jewish when they're playing. For them to say they so publicly are Jewish is something that hadn't happened before. It's really a significant thing with this video."

Among those on the video is catcher Ryan Lavarnway, who played on the Red Sox 2013 World Series champion team. A week before the Oct. 7 attack, Lavarnway captained Team Israel at the European Baseball Championship. "I think athletes have the unique ability to be visible in a strictly positive and supportive way," he told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. "We're not politicians, we're not members of the military. People are not looking for us or to us for the right answer. If anything, they're looking to us for representation and for role

models. And that is what Alex Bregman did. That is what Ian Kinsler did. That is what Kevin Youkilis is doing. It's helping people feel like they're not alone, and that there's hope."

Since posting the video, Youkilis has doubled down on his message of support and solidarity, displaying his Team Israel baseball cap in his X avatar. On Nov. 21 he responded to a tweet alleging he was being paid to support Israel: "I started posting to help bring positivity in a dark time for my Jewish brothers and sisters. You've constantly posted ignorant statements like this one assuming I am being paid by Jews/Israelis. No shekels were paid and we all see what you're referencing with this post..."

Youkilis spoke to the Jewish Journal before the hostage exchange. He was asked to update his feelings since his video was posted.

"I think my pride in my Jewish heritage has never been stronger," he said. "I always used to joke, two Jews, three opinions ... we all think differently, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox. I just think at this time it's more about staying united. I don't believe in a ceasefire if the hostages aren't returned. First and foremost, it's about the hostages coming back."

Americans need to better educate themselves about Israel and its history, he said.

"People need to be guided by the right voices, not internet or media sensationalists who don't really understand and are shouting opinions versus what's actually factual," he said.

He was asked where the conflict is going and how it will end.

“That’s the great question,” Youkilis said. “I don’t think we fully understand or know what the future holds. We’re living by the day, hoping for a better tomorrow.”

That's why the national anthem of Israel is Hatikvah, which is 'hope.' We know that what happened on Oct. 7 can never happen again. The Holocaust can never happen again. We're very privileged as a Jewish society to have a strong force that can back us militarily when things go awry. It's a hard thing to see what's going on with innocent lives on both sides, but that's the sad reality of war. It's not fun and it stinks, and I don't have the answers. But my daily thought process is hope for a better tomorrow and for everyone in that land to live peacefully."

“Hopefully, next year in Jerusalem,” he said.
“Am Yisrael Chai.”

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