

# Cover story

# Chessidim

The Jewish connection with chess goes back a long way

JOSH LIPOWSKY

**G**arry Kasparov. Leonid Yudassin. Boris Gulko. Bobby Fischer. Many of the world's greatest chess players have been Members of the Tribe — even Fischer, who became famous for defeating the Russians on the chessboard during the Cold War but became infamous for espousing anti-Semitic and anti-American views in later years. (See sidebar.)

Books, such as “The Great Jewish Chess Champions” (Hippocrene Books, 1986) by the late Harold U. Ribalow, a former sports columnist for JTA, and his son, playwright Meir Z. Ribalow, have detailed the chosen people's role in this ancient game. The Ribalows claimed that the majority of the world's chess champions during the last century

(and some years before) were Jewish.

They include Wilhelm Steinitz, who reigned from 1886 to 1894; Emanuel Lasker, 1894 to 1921; Mikhail Botvinnik, 1948 to 1957, 1958 to 1960, 1961 to 1963; Vasily Smyslov, 1957 to 1958; Mikhail Tal, 1960 to 1961; Fischer, 1972 to 1975; and Kasparov, 1985 to 1993.



Former world chess champion Garry Kasparov. S.M.S.I. INC.

Aaron Alexandre, a Frenchman who claimed the world title in 1776, was Jewish. From 1862 to 1902, according to the Ribalows, every major international chess tournament included one or more Jewish players, who never finished below fifth place. According to the Website [www.JInfo.org](http://www.JInfo.org), Jewish players have held the world chess championship 55 percent of the time since the competition began in 1886.

Ratings are calculated on a scale of 0 to 3,000. Former world chess champion Kasparov, who was born Gary Weinstein in 1963 to a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother, has a rating of 2851 from FIDE, the international chess federation. (Competitive chess is overseen in America by the United States Chess Federation, which runs tournaments and assigns ratings in cooperation with FIDE.) Although he retired from competitive chess in 2005 to pursue a career in politics, leading the pro-democracy coalition The Other Russia to challenge then Russian President Vladimir Putin, Kasparov remains the highest rated chess player in the world.

According to the Ribalows, 15 of 17 players in the 1938 U.S. championship tournament were Jewish, while four of Poland's five players were Jewish in the 1935 chess Olympiad, a biennial international event organized by FIDE. Such was the known involvement of Jews when Germany offered to host 1936's chess Olympiad. FIDE rejected the offer because organizers knew Germany's anti-Jewish laws would keep away many of the top players.

For more than a century, something has drawn Jews to the game of kings, and they have triumphed.

## The Jewish-chess connection

Milton Finkelstein, a well-known player in the first half of the 20th century, wrote that “it was chiefly the Jews of Europe who became its chessmasters, for socially, economically, and psychologically they stood to gain most in this field. As it happened, it was in just those areas where Jews suffered most that chess prospered most, and it was there that the greatest chess masters arose.”

Boris Gulko of Fair Lawn holds the title of grandmaster from the international chess federation. Grandmaster is the highest title in the chess world, and Gulko's journey to the title began more than 40 years ago in the former Soviet Union.

He won the Soviet Union's championship in 1977, but his career was soon interrupted when he was jailed as a refusenik. From 1978 until he came to America in 1986 he did not compete.

Since then, he has resumed his career, winning the U.S. championship twice and holding a positive score



The Frisch School competed against Torah Academy of Bergen County in a Metropolitan Yeshiva League chess match in February. PHOTO BY JERRY SZUBIN

against Kasparov. (He racked up three wins, one loss, five draws.)

Chess has long been popular in Russia, which has turned out more grandmasters than any other one country. In particular, Russia's Jewish community was drawn to chess, Gulko said.

"When I started, chess was a big part of the Jewish affair," he said. "Almost all the best chess players in the world were Jews, generally from the end of the 19th century until the end of the 20th century."

After the Jewish emancipation in Europe, many Jews were drawn to chess, he explained. Gulko, who is Orthodox, said it was because Jews could apply the same skills they used to study Talmud and Torah to chess.

Both rely on "a lot of logic, a lot of challenge — finding difficult solutions," he said.

Beyond the critical thinking skills, chess mirrors the Jewish struggle in the world, Gulko said. The grandmaster has lectured at Yavneh Academy in Paramus and the Ramaz School in New York on just that subject.

"In chess we struggle and we hope a bad position will become good," he said. "In Jewish life, we also make what we can and hope a miracle will happen. In chess and in our Jewish lives [the miracle is] not always obvious but something is hidden."

Unfortunately, while Jewish chess champions dominated the 20th century, Gulko said, he sees fewer Jews now

among the world's top players. He offered two explanations, one he called rational and the other kabbalistic.

"Chess now has less challenges because of computers," he said. "There are many mystical parts of the chess game. Now it's not so mystical because it's solved by computers."

The collapse of the Soviet Union is the second, "more rational" reason Gulko gave for the recent decline in the game's popularity among Jews. Chess was to the Soviets what baseball was to Americans, he said. But for Jews, it also represented a path toward advancement in a soci-

ety that didn't always deal kindly with minorities. Jews who found themselves barred from or purposely disadvantaged in other activities realized that it was more difficult for them to be cheated out of victories in chess.

"Chess was an objective victory," he said. "It was a good refuge for Soviet Jews."

## Training new grandmasters

Like Gulko, Rabbi John Krug, dean of student life at the Frisch School in Paramus,



For ten years, the after-school chess club has drawn students from all grades at Gerrard Berman Solomon Schechter Day School. JOSH LIPOWSKY

## Bobby Fischer: the self-hating Jewish champion

JOSH LIPOWSKY

At 14, Robert James "Bobby" Fischer became the youngest person ever to win the U.S. chess championship, a feat he would repeat six more times by the time he was 20. When Fischer defeated the Soviet Union's Boris Spassky, then the current world champion, to become the world chess champion in 1972, he scored a symbolic victory for the United States in the Cold War by breaking the Soviet Union's hegemony in the chess world.

Fischer forfeited the title in 1975 when he refused to defend it.

"He changed the world with his personality," said grandmaster Boris Gulko of Fair Lawn. "He was very special because he was an unusual personality — the only American who destroyed the monopoly of Soviet chess players. Suddenly a person from the United States could beat the greatest players of the Soviet Union. He made chess an international struggle. He became a symbolic victory of America over the Soviet Union."

In 1987 the House of Representatives passed a bill recognizing Fischer as the world chess champion.

Despite his newfound status in American mythology, he became a fugitive in 1992 when he came out of his 20-year retirement to face his old foe Spassky in Yugoslavia. He defied an order from the U.S. Treasury Department not to play and faced 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for breaking U.N. sanctions on that country. Rather than pay the fine and hand over his prize money from the rematch — which he won — Fischer fled. He disappeared from the public eye after that but made several appearances on a Manila-based radio show beginning in 1999.

He had begun to deny his Jewish heritage and lash out at his Jewish mother and worldwide Jewry in the 1960s. Using his new soapbox in the Philippines, he blamed world Jewry for conspiring against him and called the U.S. government a "brutal, evil dictatorship." He accused former New

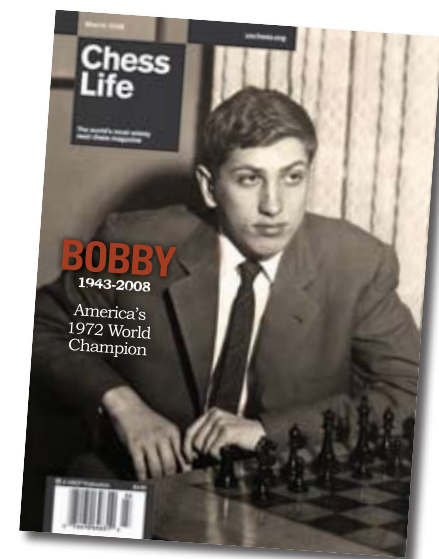


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York Mayor Ed Koch, Presidents George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush, and the Times Mirror Corp. of being "Jews, secret Jews, or CIA rats who work for the Jews."

Even the chess world was not immune from his rants. Fischer, who had once said on the Dick Cavett show that what he enjoyed most about chess was "crushing an opponent's ego," accused FIDE and then-champion Kasparov of rigging games to keep real challengers away.

On Sept. 11, 2001, just a few hours after the towers fell, Fischer said in a broadcast that the United States deserved the attack because it and Israel had been slaughtering Palestinians for years.

His views were as bizarre as those of someone "who believes in witches or ghosts," Gulko said. "He spent the last part of his life in a delusional world."

When Fischer's passport expired in 2004, he was living in Japan, and the United States tried to extradite him for violation of the Yugoslavian sanctions. After nine months in a Japanese holding cell, the reclusive grandmaster fled to Iceland, where he lived until his death from degenerative renal failure earlier this year at the age of 64 — the same number of squares on a chessboard.

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