

"FIDDLER ON THE ROOF"

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About six months ago, I had the opportunity to see a play which I hadn't seen in many years. The play, which I am sure is familiar to many of us, was "Fiddler on the Roof," and it was put on by the seventh and eighth graders at our local Solomon Schechter Day School.

I am sure that most of us remember the plot, but for those who may have forgotten, "Fiddler" is a play written in the early 1960's based on Yiddish stories written by Sholom Aleichem. The main character, Tevye, is a poor dairy-man who labors hard to support his wife and five daughters. As he struggles, his world is rapidly changing. Representative of this changing world, his first daughter, Tzeitel, decides on her own to marry a sweet but poor tailor, Motel Kamzoil, instead of her parents' choice, the rich though boorish butcher, Lazar Wolf. As if this slap in the face of parental authority isn't bad enough, his second daughter, Hodel, falls in love with Perchik, a free-thinking, secular, revolutionary.

Hodel eventually leaves her family for far-off Siberia where Perchik is a political prisoner, bidding farewell to her father in a particularly touching scene at the railway station, suitcase in hand.

As painful as that episode is, it hardly compares to Tevye's trauma when his third daughter, Hava, decides to marry a gentile. Tevye was willing to remain connected with his first two daughters, however far they symbolically turned from him and his authority. But Hava's choice is beyond his comprehension, and ultimately beyond the limits of his acceptance.

As the family drama becomes increasingly tragic, so too does the fate of the Jewish people as a whole. Having suffered a pogrom earlier in the play, at its conclusion the Jews are evicted from their homes in Anatevka, and dispersed to the four corners of the globe.



Now, the play certainly is sentimental, and its depictions of Eastern European Jewish life are somewhat caricaturish, but there are truths in this story which are powerfully conveyed.

Let's face it: a play doesn't become one of the longest running musicals on Broadway unless it can speak to the human condition. All of us are like Tevya. We all struggle with making a living, we struggle with being caring human beings, we struggle with our children's independence, we struggle to cope with change. In his laments, in his foibles, in his interior monologues and his arguments with God, we can easily identify with Tevya on a human level. For this reason alone, it would be worth talking about Tevya on Rosh HaShanah.

But as Jews, there is another fundamental way "Fiddler" speaks to us, because Tevya isn't just "Everyman," he is also, in a sense, "Every Jew." Tevya's struggle to find insight and meaning in his tradition to help him cope with his changing world is something Jews have faced throughout history.

How well does he do? When we watch this play, we are somehow, subconsciously I think, uplifted and encouraged by Tevya's devotion to Tradition and to the strength it seems to give him to face whatever may come.

And yet, if we really think about it, if we really think about the role Tradition plays in this drama, I think we actually conclude the opposite, that it hardly helps him at all.

On the one hand, (to quote Tevya), there is that wonderfully upbeat and rousing choral number entitled, "Tradition." Yet how useful, helpful or appealing is it? "Tradition," remember, tells the papas that their role, "as Master of the House," is "to have the final word at home." "Tradition" tells the Mamas that their role is to "raise a family and run the home/ so Papa's free to read the Holy Book." Tradition -- in the song, in that play, and in that world -- holds people back rather than leading them forward. Everything is falling apart in that play, and Tradition can't seem to stop it.

Think of the figure of the rabbi in the play. The rabbi is a peripheral figure, a comic figure. If he embodies Tradition, then Tradition really doesn't have much to offer. If you have any doubt about that, ask yourself what, if anything, the rabbi has to say which is at all helpful to his community as they face the break-down of traditional family structures, and, ultimately, the disintegration of their community. I read through the play very carefully, and the only statement that the rabbi makes which

is not comic occurs, toward the end, after the constable has announced that the Jews must leave Anatevka. The rabbi's rather understated response: "Let's start packing." Now, that happens to be good advice. But for this you need *smichah* (rabbinical ordination)?

The message of the play, then, seems to be precisely the opposite of its nostalgic tone: Tradition *cannot* help the Jews. Only those willing to ignore or reject it can move on. If the play is about the struggle between modernity and tradition, then modernity clearly wins -- *and not only in the eyes of the villagers but in our eyes, too. For we no longer accept the traditionalist, hierarchical assumptions regarding the roles of men, women and children held by the pre-modern Jewish communities of tsarist Russia!* That was also, by the way, a coercive society, in which Jewish observance was as much a socially mandated duty as an expression of religious piety.

We wouldn't want to go back to those days! However charming and amusing the depiction of that society is in the play, few of us would be comfortable inhabiting it. In this respect, the play's depiction of tradition probably expresses accurately the world view of its Jewish authors in the early 1960's, who believed that if the Jew was to enter the mainstream of American life -- which in the '60's was still a big "if" -- he or she had to look upon tradition as a quaint though impractical, charming source of amusement rather than a compelling moral voice.

"Tradition, Tradition." Has it always been this way? What have we Jews done in the past? What have we Jews made of Tradition in the past when a new reality challenged old ways of doing things?

We certainly have had plenty of experiences with upheavals or discontinuities in Jewish life. When the first Temple was destroyed, for example, the Land of Israel was conquered, and the Jews were exiled to Babylonia. It was a major calamity for our people, a major challenge to our Biblical faith, and yet we didn't walk away from our legacy, we didn't discard our past. "*By the waters of Babylon,*" yes, we Jews wept, but we also continued to "*sing songs of Zion,*" and we also built a new kind of community center to help us survive in captivity and keep our faith. Those centers, called *batei kneset* or synagogues, were at first probably pretty unusual but they eventually became "traditional" for subsequent generations.

After the destruction of the second Temple by the Romans, the Jewish people again responded. Instead of simply bewailing the loss of their national sovereignty and abandoning Judaism, which had centered on Temple worship and ritual, the Jews wrote down and codified all of their traditions and created a renewed, book-centered

culture. We evolved into a people which focused on the holiness of time rather than space. In the place of Temple sacrifices, regular prayer services were instituted. The Sabbath increased in importance as a national day of rest. In other words, we reached into our tradition for support and inspiration and adapted it. In time these innovations became "tradition" for later generations.

Let's look at our situation today. How are we, the generation of Tevya's grandchildren doing?

Well, the world has changed, and the way in which we Jews fit into the world has changed, enormously, since the days of Tevya.

First of all, as a community, we're not as oppressed economically as were our our ancestors in Eastern Europe. We may enjoy singing, "If I were a Rich Man," and we may sympathize or identify with Tevya's plight, but the kind of grinding, demoralizing poverty depicted in the play, though not absent by any means, no longer characterizes our community as a whole.

Second, we Jews in America are not on-the-run. Hence, we're not anxious, in the way that Tevya and his compatriots understandably were, about our physical security. Indeed, for the longest time, we haven't been. Yes, there is anti-Semitism in America, and yes, there is work for organizations such as ADL and the American Jewish Committee. Yes there are skinheads, and Ku Klux Klanners. But most of us are convinced that the American Jewish community is here to stay.

There is yet another major change in our status. In Tevya's day, in Eastern Europe, one lived and breathed one's Jewishness. Your ethnicity was your destiny. Now, in America, it is an option we can take or leave. Jewishness is much less a part of our identities than it was to our ancestors. Tevya lived in an entirely Jewish mileau, but none of *us* does. *We* have much more in common, in terms of the way we eat, dress, think and speak, where we live, and what we do with our leisure time, with our non-Jewish neighbors than with our Jewish ancestors of even only two generations ago.

That, by the way, is the primary reason why intermarriage rates among Jews have risen so steeply. It is the American way. Professor Jonathan Sarna of Brandeis University has stated that among European ethnic and religious groups in this country, intermarriage is now the rule. In contrast to, say, thirty years ago, Catholics now routinely marry Protestants, Italian Americans routinely marry those of Irish or German descent. Hence, rather than being a *cause* of assimilation, intermarriage is

a *symptom* of how accepted we have become in America, which was, after all, our goal for so many years.

There is no denying that we have arrived. We are no longer marginal the way Tevya and his community were in Russia.

The precarious situation of the Jews, then, the "*tsarat ha-yehudim*," in Ahad Ha'Am's words, or the state of "*Jewish tsouris*," has been ameliorated, and we in this country have gained immense personal and collective freedom during these past eighty or so years.

What, though, about the state of *Judaism*? What of *tsarat ha-yahadut*? Have we succeeded in fashioning out of our tradition a contemporary American Judaism that makes sense to us and which we can successfully pass on to our children?

Well, we have a major problem which Tevya didn't have. This is well-described by Barry Shrage, the president of Combined Jewish Philanthropies. Barry Shrage has written that the story of the immigration of Eastern European Jews to this country is, on the one hand, an incredible success story. From poverty and persecution to freedom and prosperity, we Jews have made the transition with flying colors. But on the other hand, as he reminds us, we left something behind on our journey. We brought with us a sense of ourselves as a persecuted people, but we left behind our *internal* sense of who we are and where we came from. Except in the most superficial sense, we left behind our national identity, our civilization. We are, in a sense, cultural orphans.

Barry Shrage is fond of reminding us that an average Jewish child today could surely tell you who William Shakespeare is, but he would probably not be able to identify Maimonides. A Jewish high school student could probably name five plays by Shakespeare, but probably not five books of the Bible. He might know that Columbus discovered America in 1492 but not have a clue that in the same year the Jews were expelled from Spain, ending a five-hundred-year period of prosperity and cultural expression.

Hence, we have the burden, which Tevya didn't have, of trying to figure out what our culture is all about, before we can even try to figure out whether and how it can speak to us.

Tevya, for his part, was fond of quoting from the Book of Esther, the Book of Psalms, Pirkei Avot, the Siddur -- works which he and his companions surely knew

virtually by heart. And although in the play these are usually depicted as comical malapropisms, in the original Scholem Aleichem stories they are usually rather clever and on point.

We, on the other hand, because of our tenuous link with our heritage, are very much unlike Tevya. We aren't *rooted* in a Jewish culture from which our children are deviating. On the contrary, *we live and breathe and share the same modern American culture as our children, and we share with our children the challenge of creating a meaningful Jewish life for ourselves in the very welcoming, accepting society which is late twentieth century America.*

What are we to do? First, we have to make up for lost time. We have to reclaim our cultural heritage. We must learn Hebrew; we must study Torah, Talmud, and Maimonides; we must study Jewish history and philosophy and literature, and learn what we don't know today. *There are no short cuts.* And then -- for that is only the first step -- we have to create a meaningful Jewish response to the world in which we live.

Each one of us -- anyone trying to live a Jewish life, raise a Jewish family or build a Jewish home -- shares this responsibility. That is why, for example, the Exploring Judaism course that our Keruv committee will be offering, which is primarily focused on helping interfaith couples learn the basics of Jewish life, will also be open to couples where both partners are Jewish and to individuals who are rediscovering and renewing their links to Judaism. We all share the need.

But I would be misleading if I suggested that this were just an obligation. Frankly, it is something we're yearning for. Professor Arnold Eisen, an scholar of contemporary Jewish life, has observed that, "Many Jews are hungry for sources of strength in a culture that does not provide many of them." There is truth to that. Why else are we here today? We are here today to gain strength, connection, meaning from our tradition and from one another.

This Rosh Ha-Shanah, therefore, it is not only our duty, it is also our opportunity to *respond* to the world in which we live, to the situation in which we find ourselves. We have to respond -- which in Hebrew is expressed by the word *teshuvah* -- as best we can. We may never have all the answers but the duty to respond, the duty to seek them, is ours. *And with the exercise of that duty comes the promise of the fulfillment we seek.*

Our response, though, cannot be yesterday's response. For if it is, we will eventually, if not immediately, discard it as surely as "Tradition" was disregarded and abandoned in Fiddler on the Roof.

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Let me conclude on a hopeful note. Let me share with you something about that school performance of Fiddler -- which made it, for me, even more powerful than the Broadway version.

Watching those seventh and eighth graders was not only a lot of fun, it was inspiring. The reason is, that play was different from the Broadway version. That play was performed in Hebrew. Young Jewish boys and girls recited line after line of that play in Hebrew and, you know, *they knew what they were saying, and so did much of the audience.*

That's very inspiring. I feel the same way when I see a group of adults studying in one of our adult education classes, or attending a family education program, when I hear of families attending the Ramah family camp, or when I see a dozen people at a learner's service. When I meet with people who, on their own, are reading serious Jewish works of history and philosophy, or when I hear of parents studying Hebrew themselves in order to keep up with, if not ahead of, their youngsters. And I certainly feel it when I see people who haven't been up on the bima in years -- if at all -- reading Torah and haftarah.

These are *responses*. These are *teshuvot*. And they promise growth and fulfillment. It is unfortunate that bringing ourselves "up to speed" demands so much effort from us at the same time that so many of us are busy raising families, but there it is. Not only our children, but we too must with determination and persistence acquire our cultural heritage.

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Do you remember how Fiddler on the Roof ends? The family is all packed up and ready to leave for America. And as they trudge off, and Tevya alone is left on the stage, the fiddler, who's been up there on the roof, tucks his fiddle under his arm, climbs down from the roof and walks off with Tevya and his family as they go off to their unknown (and unknowable) future.

An ancient midrash says the same thing. (B'midbar Rabbah, Naso, VII:10 and parallels) "*K'she'galu l'mitzrayim, shchinah imahem*" -- The midrash tells us that when the Children of Israel went down to Egypt, God's hovering Presence, the Shechinah, went with them. And the Shechinah accompanied them throughout their subsequent exiles: after the first Temple was destroyed and again after the second Temple was destroyed. And not only that, but the midrash goes on to say "*she'b'chol makom she-yiglu, shchinah imahem*" -- that whenever and wherever the Jews go into exile, the Shechinah goes with them.

That's a beautiful image. That to me says that there is hope. That not only will our *people* survive, but that our *culture*, and our *faith* will evolve and endure. With God's help, we can continue to mine and to transform our legacy and allow it to live in our own day.

Wherever we go, whether it is the economically oppressive and religiously inhospitable climate of Tsarist Russia or the open, seductive society of late twentieth century America, there is the opportunity, *if we seize it*, to create a usable, meaningful Jewish life. We can feel the Presence of God, and God can speak to us, wherever we happen to be.

A melody awaits us. Let's not lose that melody. Let us explore and integrate Judaism into our lives, creating variations on that melody, with determination and energy. Like Tevya, let's retain our sense of humor, proportion and balance, but let's do what he couldn't do: let's live in the world of today. Let us create a living, vibrant, meaningful Jewish way of life for ourselves, our families and friends, and lovingly, joyfully embrace it. Amen.