

Fiddler on the Roof

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Investing in a Broadway play is risky business. For every one successful smash hit, there are dozens of failures. Who would have imagined that a play that opened on Broadway exactly 50 years ago this week about a simple Jewish milkman with five daughters would be of interest to broad audiences and go on to become one of the biggest Broadway hits of all time. The endearing main character who we all know and love dreamt of having a slightly better life.

Set in 1905 Tsarist Russia the original Broadway production of Fiddler on the Roof, was the first musical to surpass the 3,000 performance mark, holding the record for longest-running Broadway musical for almost 10 years. This quintessential Jewish story about shtetl life in Eastern Europe became a sold-out international hit around the world. As Tevye would probably say, "*V'ayz nisht,*" meaning – "go figure."

The play was based on stories written in Yiddish by the beloved Yiddish writer and humorist, Sholom Aleichem, a penname for Shalom Rabinovich, who, during his lifetime was often referred to as the "Jewish Mark Twain." When he died in 1903, over 100,000 people filled the streets of New York for his funeral.

Created by secular Jews, the play is a celebration of Jewish culture. It fosters and ushered in a sense of pride in Jewish identity. The stories about Tevye's trials and tribulations which form the basis of the play offer a window into a world that is no more. Yiddish, the language spoken by Ashkenazic Jews spread across Europe for over a thousand years has all but vanished as a spoken language. The rural villages, known as shtetls are no more. The way of life, a place where Shabbat was celebrated by all, even skeptics and non-believers has also disappeared.

Tevye stood at the precipice of a new world. He confronted the challenge of balancing the conflicting demands of trying to preserve a world that had been sustained for millennia with a world that was changing radically and rapidly under his very feet and before his very eyes. He recognizes this, for as he says to his wife Golde right before asking her if she loves him, "Golde, it's a new world."

The challenges facing him reflect the situation of the Jews of the late 19th and early 20th century --- how to deal with the intellectual openness introduced to them by the Enlightenment. No longer was learning confined exclusively to studying sacred ancient texts. Jews were exposed to new ideas and a whole new world opened up to them as they discovered and delved into secular literature, philosophy, science and other subjects previously not accessible. How did these concepts and the new knowledge they explored so passionately mesh with classical Jewish teachings and its understanding of the world? In the original short stories and in real life people had to decide how much and what of Jewish tradition should be discarded and what should be preserved and perpetuated.

The outcome of the clash was the development of ideologies which competed for the hearts, minds and souls of the Jews. One response to the Emancipation, Enlightenment and anti-Semitism suggested that the answer to the Jewish problem lie in the creation of a Jewish homeland, the movement known as Zionism. Others believed Bolshevism, communism or socialism was the antidote to the pogroms and

anti-Semitism of the czars and surrounding society. In response to the impotency and powerlessness they felt, some advocated for Jewish autonomy. Hasidism as well as assimilation, at opposite ends of the spectrum offered radically different options. In many respects, all were inspired by the messianic vision and thrust of Judaism which inspires and enjoins us to work for *tikkun olam*, to repair the world.

The millions of Jews who lived in the Pale of Settlement for centuries had developed an insular community and institutions which took care of the needs of the members of the community. The beautiful Shabbos scene when children are blessed and candles are lit offers a glimpse of what our ancestors created and how they fortified themselves from a hostile environment by refusing to give in to the hatred surrounding them. We know our ancestors did not go around dancing and singing “*L’Chaim*” all day, and granted, some aspects may be sentimentalized. But who can see and not be touched by the beauty of the idyllic Chagall-like images?

I want to suggest this morning that the issues raised in Fiddler 50 years ago remain the critical issues and dilemmas facing the Jewish community today, both for us as individuals and as a community, and is therefore the quintessential Jewish work of literature for the modern era.

While the opening scene projects a society in which everyone knew their role and their place, this way of life was not to last. The evolution and societal shifts foreshadow the significant changes in Jewish and general society that occurred throughout the 20th century.

In depicting the decision of Tzeitel to marry Mottel the tailor instead of the butcher Lazar Wolf, Shalom Aleichem is chronicling the diminishing role of the *shadchen*, matchmaker and of parents in arranging children’s marriages. Reflecting the changing roles of society, authoritarian models were no longer sacrosanct. Struggling with all these competing forces and changes Tevye sought to maintain and preserve the way of life he and his ancestors had known, likening the situation of his people to the precarious and tenuous status of being like a Fiddler on the Roof.

Tradition was a source of strength which anchored him in the world and served as a point of reference that enabled him to process perceptions and to know how to relate to the world around him. Even when he did not know the origin of the custom he was doing, his faith and heritage grounded him. His devotion to Judaism was motivated in part by a sense of loyalty to the past, of not wanting to turn his back on the generations who had bequeathed to him his values, his essence, his reason for living. It dictated the way in which he understood his purpose in life and how he interacted with the world.

What about Tevye’s theology? How Jewish was it?

He misquoted the Bible, and has the chutzpah to do so when speaking to God, the author of the very texts he was misquoting. Nevertheless, he is at ease and familiar with their essence, even if his citations are inaccurate.

He spoke to God as if to a friend, a familiar character with whom he had a personal relationship. How Jewish is this approach? Very. Judaism speaks of God’s immanence and presence in the world and accessibility in our lives. When speaking with the Creator of the universe and playfully quoting from the “Good Book”, his wife Golde calls and interrupts him. Tevye tells God he has to go and that they will have to continue the conversation later.

The scene reminds me of Abraham after his brit milah, his circumcision in Parashat VaEira. When Abraham sees visitors, he leaves God to take care of the needs of those who are standing before him. About this Aharon of Karlin taught that when we turn our attention from God to tend to the needs of people, we do God's will, for human needs take precedence over welcoming the Divine Presence.

Yet Tevye's familiarity and comfort do not prevent him from questioning and challenging God and of speaking out against the injustice of the world. Alisa Solomon in her wonderful book about Fiddler which came out earlier this year called, "Wonder of Wonders", writes, "Enduring one catastrophe after another, the man with no power confronts the Highest Authority." Again, the notion of speaking out in this fashion is consistent with Jewish theology from the time of Abraham who questioned God over His plan to destroy Sodom and Gemorrah.

What about the portrayal of the community? The opening scene when all the townspeople take a side in the dispute over whether it was a mule or a horse that was sold by one to another reflect a way of life, for better or worse, far less individualistic than ours. While it may appear to be unrealistic, it isn't so far-fetched.

A number of years ago I felt as if I was in a scene straight out of Fiddler on the Roof when I was on an El Al flight. When I boarded the plane there was no room for me to put my carryon luggage in the overhead bin. The bin was relatively empty, except for a hat. This was no ordinary hat. It was a streimel, one of the large fancy, expensive fur brimmed hats worn by Hasidic Jews on special occasions. The Hasid who was the owner of the hat insisted that nothing else could be placed in the compartment because it would squish his hat. Before I knew it, the people around me were all weighing in and expressing their opinion as to whether I should be allowed to move the hat to make room for my carryon. I almost expected the entire plane to break out in an argument, with half the people on the plane shouting, "The Suitcase! The Suitcase!", and the other part of the aisle protesting, "The Streimel! The Streimel!" I imagined that we would all then get up and dance in the aisles and break out into a rousing chorus of "Tradition! Tradition!"

Tevye carefully weighs the decisions he must make, arguing with himself on the one hand about the consequences of one choice, while considering on the other hand the options presented by the opposite course of action. He is forced to make painful, agonizing personal decisions. Some of the changes Tevye accepts, such as his daughter Tzeitel's rejecting the predetermined choice of who she should marry. He confers his blessing when Hodel chooses to marry Perchik, a revolutionary atheistic freethinker. But there are some changes he cannot accept. Chava's decision to marry a non-Jew goes too far, and he fears that while tradition can bend, there is a point at which too much accommodation will cause all that he holds dear to break and be shattered. Feeling he has no choice, he refuses to accept the union. Yet we know he is torn and his heart is broken.

The play ends on an ominous note. The quaint good-natured divisions at the beginning, where the entire community argues if it was a horse or a mule, have given way to a new reality. Now their choices are more consequential with long range, life-changing implications. Where shall they go as the pogrom destroys their shtetl and the life around them is being shattered and uprooted?

The pogroms and Russian anti-Semitism compel Jews to leave Anatevka, the place they have known and lived in for centuries. Some set out for Palestine. Some will take up the Bolshevik cause, and some will journey to America. We are the descendants and heirs of those who came to America.

Even though it has been 50 years since the groundbreaking show debuted on Broadway, I believe its message is timely, profound, and relevant. Early on when working on the story line Jerome Robbins had a breakthrough when he told his collaborators that the play was not about a dairyman and his marriageable daughters, but “about the dissolution of a way of life.”

It has been a little more than 100 years since many of our ancestors made that journey across the Atlantic in search of better opportunity in the new world. It is reasonable to ask, how have we fared? What wisdom would Tevye have to offer us today, and how would he feel about the current state of Jewish life in America? What would Shalom Aleichem, his creator say about his adopted homeland?

One thing that is very different is we need not fear the constable or local peasants breaking in and disturbing our ceremonies or life cycle events. Today’s version of the constable, the Montgomery County police are here to protect and direct traffic for us. While anti-Semitism still exists in all too many quarters, and we must remain vigilant, it is not sanctioned, condoned or sponsored by the government. Just last week the US Congress unanimously passed a resolution expressing concern over rising anti-Semitism around the world and unequivocally condemning it.

We have been welcomed in America with open arms --- but it is precisely this openness which is what worries me. Assimilation and apathy, both of which feed ignorance and non-observance are the most serious threats to Jewish survival today.

Tevye dreamed of being a rich man. By any means of measurement, the American Jewish community is financially well off. But Tevye dreams of being rich so he could sit and pray and study all day long in the beit midrash, the shul. How about us today? Does prayer or study play a role in our lives? Do we value the importance of Jewish texts? Today when people say that Jews value education and are among the most highly educated segment of our population, they are not referring to our facility with Jewish texts. Unlike Tevye we cannot even misquote them. We are woefully ignorant of our own heritage. Almost 90% of American Jews do not understand or read Hebrew.

This figure comes from a comprehensive study conducted this past year by the Pew Research firm of the American Jewish community.

Even when angry, disappointed, or arguing with God about his fate and the destiny of his people, Tevye was comfortable with God, and you sensed his devotion and love for the Almighty. As central as the synagogue was for him, the Pew study found that Jews have the lowest rate of regular synagogue attendance of any major religious group in America.

Some said the report did not tell us anything we did not already know, while others said that it is a devastating and deeply troubling portrayal of a community with serious challenges facing it, confirming some of our greatest fears about our decline.

The Pew Report found that the percentage of adults in the United States who say they are Jewish has declined by half since the late 1950’s, with one in five Jews saying they have no religion at all. It found that more Jews have a Christmas tree than light Shabbos candles. When asked to define what it means to be Jewish, only 19% said it had anything to do with observing Jewish laws, while 42% said having a good sense of humor is an essential element of what it means to be Jewish. The intermarriage rate in the non-Orthodox community is 71% with most intermarried Jews not raising their children as Jews. Our birthrate is low and declining.

I could go on, and cite more statistics, but you have heard enough to be depressed.

On the bright side, 94% of US Jews say they are proud to be Jewish, and ¾ say they have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people. The problem is that two thirds of the Jews who identify as "secular or cultural Jews" do not raise their children as Jews. Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch concluded, "Practically none of the American Jews who say that their Jewish identity consists entirely of secular values will have Jewish descendants by the third generation. The Pew Study concluded that centuries, perhaps millennia, of Jewish life in those families will end within the next generation or two, no matter how strongly these Jews profess their Jewish identity, or sincerely want Jewish grandchildren."

This prognosis is as devastating as any pogrom committed by our enemies against us.

Should we resign ourselves to accept the new reality as revealed in the study of the Pew Report? While we are not going back to the shtetl, I for one, hope that the New Year with its message of teshuvah and return will inspire us to want to explore and express our Judaism in meaningful ways so that its eternal message will live on and because it has so much to offer us as individuals. The play compels us to consider how far we have come from our humble origins. While being economically and financially richer than our ancestors, we may be spiritually poorer. We should reflect upon about what we have gained in light of how much we may have sacrificed along the way.

Although two-thirds of Jews of no religion say they are not raising their children as Jews, over 90% of those who identify as Jews by religion are raising their children Jewish or partially Jewish. Rabbi Hirsch said the study shows how important it is to strengthen the synagogue. He wrote, "Of the central communal institutions, synagogues are the most important because they have proven to be the most enduring. The synagogue is the primary institution that caters to the family. It is the synagogue that best accompanies the family in its many life cycle moments of both joy and sorrow. The synagogue is the only institution that defines its mission as lifelong -- cradle-to-grave. Synagogues are the only place where American Jews can express their Jewish identity at all phases in their lives and for the gamut of values that American Jews say are important to them," and concludes, "Synagogues are the anchoring institution of American Jewry." The synagogues can be the place for Tzeitel and Mottel's children and grandchildren, as well as for Perchik and Hodel, and we must even find ways to reach Feydka and Chava and their children so they will not be lost to us.

We no longer live in a world governed by our traditions, traditions Tevye himself did not understand. But there is nothing preventing us from rediscovering them. Living in a free and open society that celebrates ethnicity and diversity allows us to recapture and reconnect with our heritage. It is not just predicated upon a nostalgic longing for a world that is no more. I have seen first-hand the emptiness of homes and families where Judaism is not practiced, and I have experienced the richness and fullness of families who incorporate Jewish practices into their lives. We can appreciate and recapture the meaning and purpose observance of Judaism can bring to our lives, and the synagogue can be your guide.

Last year in conjunction with the celebration of the 25th anniversary of our congregation we asked you to commit to 25 hours at the synagogue. This year I would like to ask you to commit to doing just one mitzvah. That's all. Choose one. Pick a mitzvah and do it. Do it regularly. Do it seriously. Do it with kavannah.

Given the opportunity to invest in Fiddler some declined because they were concerned that the play was too Jewish. One of the potential investors asked, "What will we do after we've run out of Hadassah groups?" They failed to recognize the universal appeal of Fiddler. Unanticipated was the widespread international appeal of the show. A local producer of the show in Japan, where Fiddler was a tremendous success wondered how the show could be such a big hit in America since it was so Japanese.

The truth is we Jews are most human when we are most Jewish. Or put another way, we are most universalistic when we are not afraid to be particularistic.

Stuart Schoffman recently wrote in a Jerusalem Report column, "I like to think of Judaism as a rare violin, handed down in a family for centuries. Not every generation will have the talent or desire to play it, but no one would dream of selling or hocking it. You never know who might want to learn to play." Yes, each of us as Jews has a legacy that has been handed down to us for generations.

On this Rosh Hashana I hope you realize it is your responsibility, and our obligation, even if we can't play it, to hand over to future generations that violin, that fiddle, in the hope that they will bring its melody to life and sing it's song.

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