

Dvar Torah – Temple Beth Tzedek – Balak

Rob Goldberg

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Ukrainian born Solomon Rabinovich, better known by his pen name Sholem Aleichem, was among the greatest Yiddish authors and playwrights. The beloved musical *Fiddler on the Roof* is based on his story *Tevye the Dairyman*.

I just learned that me and Sholem are kin, sort of. My kids bought me a DNA kit for Father's Day and as instructed I spit into a tube and mailed it to Ancestry. Five weeks later I got a text indicating that my results were ready to view. Excitedly I opened my app, and lo and behold: I'm 100% European Jewish!

Which brings me to my connection with Sholem Aleichem. While I was waiting for my results, I began to build my family tree through Ancestry.com. I learned that my great grandfather Wolf Goldberg was born in Belarus and my grandmother Sarah, who died before I was born and who my sister Susan is named for, was from Berditchev. An area about 75 miles southwest of Kiev in the Ukraine, Berditchev is in the same region as Sokolivka, where so many Jewish Buffalonians have their roots.

In Russian and Jewish literature, Berditchev served as the model for the town depicted in the writings of my kin Sholem. And, in early 1919, nearly 20 years after my grandmother was born, the Jews in Berditchev became victims of a devastating pogrom perpetrated by the Ukrainian army.

So when I saw the Yiddish version of Sholem's *Fiddler on the Roof* (*A Fidler Afn Dak*) this summer (first with my friend Leslie Kramer when we were in NYC for a Federation meeting and a second time with my wife Shira last month), I was overcome with emotion and transported to Anatevka, in a way, my ancestral home.

Has anyone seen the new Fiddler?

This new production is presented in stark contrast to the Broadway version from the 60's and 70's; while the music and characters are the same; the set is colorless, the Yiddish raw, and the way the story is told is anything but kitschy - like the original.

To American Jews, "Fiddler" is comfort food. Jackie Hoffman, the actress and comedian who plays Yente the Matchmaker in the new Yiddish production, said it beautifully: "I had an obligatory love for Fiddler. I thought it was always a little cornball. But it was like when black

people saw Lt. Ohoura on Star Trek, they said, 'Oh look, there's a black person on the bridge of the Enterprise.' For me, it was like: 'Wow, there's a Jewish musical!'"

Back in 1964 when Zero Mostel debuted as Tevye, the investors and some in the media worried that the play might be considered "too Jewish" at the time to attract mainstream audiences. I spoke with Amherst born actress Cheryl Stern who appeared in the production starring Hershel Bernardi and she told me that Jerome Robbins, the show's director, insisted that no Yiddish be used – including ad libs – all in their desire to make Fiddler universal.

So ironic then that 55 years after the debut of Fiddler the musical, it is the Yiddish that makes this production more accessible, more engaging, and more Jewish.

Many of you are more familiar than I, but for example, when you ask someone how they are doing in Yiddish: Vos Mach-stew? - a perfect reply is: "Cain Bris mach-ich-nisht" – I'm not making a bris! Or, another answer could be: "Aza Yoref Main-un-sonem." My enemies should have a year like mine!

The new Fiddler comes to life because of the Yiddish: it is guttural and rich and expressive. The Yiddish strips away all the campiness of the original; the story this time felt wrenching, tragic and deeply personal. Tevye the Diaryman and his neighbors were members of my family.

There is a concept often connected to mass tragedy called "emotional proximity," the way one feels connected to an experience. For instance, when the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue happened last October, so many of us felt connected emotionally. Shira and I were in Israel so that shooting was geographically distant, but it felt close because the victims were fellow Jews, because Pittsburgh could be Buffalo, because it took place at a synagogue on Shabbat. All these elements made the experience "emotionally proximate."

I felt the same way when on Broadway twice this summer. Anatevka was somewhere close. Familiar.

We all know that Shtetl life was far from perfect, but there was a deep sense of community. In large part of course because villages were segregated and the people had no other choice but to depend upon each other.

We just read in this week's Torah portion Bilaam's praise of the community of Israelites during their wanderings.

The Cantor beautifully read the story of how King Balak summons the prophet Bilaam to curse the Children of Israel and in the end God transforms those curses into blessings. When Bilaam looks down upon the tents of the Jewish nation – their shtetl if you will - he recites one of the

most famous verses in Torah: “Mah Tovu O halecha Ya’akov -- How good are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel.”

As to why we actually use this blessing despite its source, the Midrash quotes R. Hiyya bar Abba as saying "The admiration of a woman is not when she is praised by her friends, but when she is praised by her rivals." (Deut. Rabba 3,6). Respect from friends is one thing, but being commended by your enemies puts you in a most positive light.

These tents – that Shtetl– our roots...

Anatevka

Sokolifka

Berditchev.

These were places that our people flourished, celebrated, struggled and died. And in the “new” Fiddler, the tents are lifted through the use of Yiddish.

Which brings me back to Sholem. Tied at the hip through our DNA, I love that my “cousin” Sholem changed his name from Solomon Rabinovich to Sholem Aleichem, the Hebrew and Yiddish phrase that literally means "peace upon you." After seeing *A Fidler Afn Dak* I feel even more connected to my ancestors from Berdichev, from the Kiev region of the Ukraine, where if I was walking in that shtetl with my Great Grandparents, I’d so naturally say to Motyl the Tailor or Laizer Wolf the Butcher, or my grandmother’s friend Tzeitel, “Sholem Aleichem.” Peace be upon you, my family.