The Value of Tradition… and Other Spiritual Lessons from *Fiddler on the Roof*

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"What does it mean, this fiddler on the roof who fiddles every night and fiddles every noon? Why does he pick so curious a place to play his fiddler's tune?"

Fiddler on the Roof premiered on the evening of September 22, 1964, at Broadway's Imperial Theater. The original Broadway production was the first in history to surpass 3,000 performances and held the record for longest-running musical for nearly a decade. In the more than half-century since that auspicious debut, there have been five Broadway revivals of the show. In addition, every year at least five hundred productions of *Fiddler* are staged across the United States by both professional and amatuer theater companies, as well as by high school and college theater programs. *Fiddler* has also been translated and performed in 16 languages, including Spanish, German, Turkish, Greek, Russian, Hungarian, Hindi, and Japanese.

The origins of this iconic musical about the poor, humble dairyman named Tevye and his five unmarried daughters begins with Sholem Aleichem, undoubtedly one the most famous and beloved writers of fiction in the Yiddish language. Sholem Aleichem – whose name simply means "Peace be with you" in both Yiddish and Hebrew – is the penname of the Russian Jewish author whose real name was Solomon Rabinowich.

Often described as the "Yiddish Mark Twain," Sholem Aleichem conceived the character of Tevye on a summer holiday in 1894, when he had the good fortune to meet a dairyman of that same name who sold butter, cheese, and milk off his horse-drawn cart. Charmed by this roving salesman, Sholem Aleichem took notes on their conversations and transformed them into stories over a 20-year period.

Also a dramatist, he tried his hand at turning these stories – which had been enormous successes among the Jews all over the world -- into plays for the booming Yiddish theater in New York. Ironically, Sholem Aleichem's plays about Tevye were dismal failures, each closing after only a few weeks. Apparently, recollections of life in the shtetl – "shtetl" being the Yiddish word for the small villages in Eastern Europe where many Jews lived – held few charms for members of the immigrant generation. For them, engaged as they were in the struggle to build a new identity in a strange land, the world of Tevye was one they had chosen to put behind them.

More than 45 years after Sholem Aleichem's death, the story of Tevye was again taken up, this time by a talented group of theater artists, including Jerome Robbins, the director and choreographer associated with such hits as *Gypsy*, *Funny Girl* and, most famously, *West Side Story*. Though some Jewish historians, literary critics, and religious leaders may argue about the authenticity of *Fiddler on The Roof* as an

expression of the Jewish tradition, both theater critics and audiences have been unanimous in their deep and abiding fondness for this play.

I'm happy to confess that I'm one of those many audience members who've been in love with this play since it first opened on Broadway. *Fiddler* showed up in my life at a significant moment in my spiritual development. The musical opened the year after my Bar Mitzvah, that Jewish rite of passage through which a young person is supposed to take on the responsibilities of adult religious life.

My family, like many other Jewish families, embraced Fiddler soon after it premiered. The original cast recording of the show was played repeatedly in our home. My sisters and I memorized the lyrics and music to many of the shows now-famous songs and sang them together. Living near New York City, we were also fortunate enough to see the original production a few years after it opened. Though I've been blessed to see a fair number of wonderful Broadway musicals in the years since – and have seen both other versions of Fiddler as well as the 1971 filmed version -- there will always be a special place in my theater-going heart for that first experience of *Fiddler* on the stage.

While it's hardly surprising that so many Jews have found spiritual significance in *Fiddler on the Roof*, it is remarkable that so many non-Jews have been just as powerfully drawn to this story. Among the many spiritual questions asked by this play, the most central concerns the role of tradition in human life. Indeed, it is this concern that is most central to the peculiar image of that fiddler endlessly playing his fiddle up on the roof.

In the first scene of play, the entire population of the shtetl of Anatevka, Tevya's village, is dancing slowly around a house on top of which sits a fiddler playing the now famous tune I sang at the beginning of today's homily. Tevya then steps out of the circle of villagers and addresses the audience:

Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. Here we have traditions for everything…. You may ask, how did these traditions get started? I'll tell you – I don't know. But it's a tradition… Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as… as a fiddler on the roof.

That said, it soon becomes clear that many of these time-honored traditions are also teetering, teetering on the brink of social change and political upheaval. Symbolic of all of the community's traditions under siege, the play focuses on the custom of arranged marriages. Given that Tevya and his wife, Golde, only have daughters and cannot provide proper dowries for any of them, the problem of getting them married occupies much of plot of the play.

Employing the traditional method of securing husbands, the village matchmaker, produces only trouble for Tevya and Golde. First, the eldest daughter, is betrothed by the matchmaker to a middle-aged, relatively prosperous butcher, a man she does not wish to wed. Adding to this problem is the fact that she also has fallen in love with a

penniless young tailor, a man who she wishes to marry instead. Then the second daughter falls in love with a young Jewish revolutionary and decides to throw her lot in with him, another violation of tradition.

Most problematically, Tevya's third daughter falls in love with a young Russian man, a Christian. While Teyve reluctantly agrees to the first two marriages, in one of the most heartbreaking scenes in the play, this third break with tradition is one he painfully decides he cannot accept. As a result, he chooses to disown his third daughter rather of accepting her marriage to a gentile.

Not only are the traditions of these people being threatened by change from within, but it's also clear that larger forces are at work imperiling their way of life. Between the poverty of most of the inhabitants and the constant threat of violence from the Russian authorities, it seems that everyone in the village is increasingly teetering up there on the roof with that fiddler.

One reason this musical feels so relevant to my own experience is that my family history has multiple ties to this theme of how to deal with tradition. Like many American Jews, my family were also immigrants fleeing from persecution and poverty in Eastern Europe. My father's parents were strictly-observant Orthodox Jews who continued to live in accordance with the old traditions here in America, while my father rebelled against them. In turn, observing my father's rejection of many aspects of Jewish belief and practice encouraged me to question and evolve my own relationship to Judaism and its traditions.

Another deep connection I feel with Fiddler's theme of the relationship between tradition and change concerns my maternal grandmother. In an example of life imitating art, my maternal grandmother was also an eldest daughter betrothed as young girl to a middle-aged merchant she didn't wish to marry. Unlike the daughter in the play, however, my grandmother chose instead to emigrate to America at the tender age of 17 rather than accept the tradition of the world she was born into. As a result, my grandmother was the first of her large family to come to America. Because of her refusal to accept tradition, she was later able to help the rest of her family leave Europe and, as a result, escape destruction in the Holocaust.

While I don't have time today to speak at length about all of the other spiritual lessons contained in *Fiddler on the Roof*, I would like to briefly consider two of them.

The first concerns the value of religious community. At the end of Fiddler, we know that many of the time-honored traditions of these people will not survive the transition to life in America. Yet what is most moving about the final scene of the play, as the villagers bid each other farewell and head off into a life and world they cannot yet begin to envision, is the deep sadness of knowing that many of these people may never see each other again. After spending generations bound together as a religious community, they are now left to fend for themselves as they head out into an unknown future. Having spent much of my life without any form of religious community, I can easily

identity with the plight of these people. And having finally found that gift here at Live Oak, I can doubly empathize with sadness of the departing villagers.

Ultimately, the spiritual lesson I value most in Fiddler – indeed, the spiritual lesson I most value in the Jewish tradition – is the one contained in my favorite song from the show: “To Life.” Because Judaism has no set belief as to what happens after we die, no promise of a heavenly reward or threat of a hellish punishment, the entire focus of the Jewish religion is on *this* life. The idea that “joy and woe are woven fine,” indeed that happiness may be found even in the midst of suffering and sorrow, is as central to the Jewish perspective as it is to *Fiddler on the Roof*.

To end this celebration of the spiritual wisdom of *Fiddler on the Roof*, the choir will sing now sing what is undoubtedly the most beloved song from this show, *Sunrise, Sunset*. Over the course of the past 50 years, this beautiful and haunting song has been sung at countless weddings, both Jewish and non-Jewish alike. Like the song “To Life,” “Sunrise, Sunset” celebrates both the fleetingness of life as well as life’s capacity for the most profound joy. As such, it’s hardly surprising that singing this song at weddings has now become a tradition in its own right. In a lovely example of tradition adapting to change, several years ago, Sheldon Harnick, *Fiddler*’s librettist, happily gave his blessing to some revised lyrics to this song so that it could also be sung at same-sex weddings.