

SESSION ONE



Father and His Daughters: *Fiddler on the Roof*

Feature film, 1971
 Director: Norman Jewison
 Screenplay: Joseph Stein
 Music: Jerry Bock
 Lyrics: Sheldon Harnick

Tevye: Topol
 Golde: Norma Crane
 Yente: Molly Picon
 Rabbi: Zvee Scooler
 Tzaytl: Rosalind Harris
 Mottel: Leonard Frey
 Hodol: Michele March
 Chava: Neva Small
 Perchik: Michael Glaser
 Fyedke: Raymond Lovelock

Length: 3 hours

As a Broadway play and a feature film, *Fiddler on the Roof* achieved great popularity in the United States as well as abroad. The story of Tevye and his daughters – the work of the great Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem – has become part of American culture. But it's unmistakably Jewish.

In the world of *Fiddler on the Roof*, the delineations between who is and is not a Jew are quite clear. *Fiddler on the Roof* looks back to Eastern European Jewish life at the turn of the century and brings it to the screen through the eyes of the 1960s, with a Hollywood flourish. Here are “Jewish roots” presented in their most wholehearted and appealing form. Tevye the dairyman, as played by the Israeli actor Topol, is an earthy yet sensitive fellow, drawn to ideas and idealists as much as he is to a good meal or a stiff drink. Dedicated to his God and to his family, he has a large heart that's easily stretched.

Fiddler's Tevye personifies what many American Jews would like to think of as their Jewish souls. Tevye knows how to pray and how to listen, how to laugh and how to weep. Although he respects learning, he is no scholar; mostly, he loves the idea of loving his books. He believes in God, but he does not overly concern himself with fulfilling every iota of Jewish ritual, and he engages in an ongoing conversation with his Creator, arguing, thanking him, asking hard questions. His environment is one in which Jews are Jews, although, even in Anatevka, the village where Tevye and his family live, Jewish values are beginning to be challenged by modernity. The marital choices of his daughters are the metaphors for change.

Fiddler on the Roof is a carefully crafted and self-conscious teaching tool about Jewish “traditions.” From the opening musical scenes, which amount to a primer on the traditional Jewish way of life, to the melancholy closing

Tevye: *Here in our little village of Anatevka, you might say that every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his back. . . . And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word – tradition.*

scenes that send a dispirited but resilient Tevye off to the promise of distant America, this epic seems created to show Jews where they came from and what their essence is still. The characters are depicted as having minor, but never disturbing, flaws: Some are a little vain, some a little greedy, some timid, some too weak to oppose an evil decree.

But by and large this is a world inhabited by good people; it is a charming world in which many of the difficulties of shtetl life don't seem to exist. We don't see whole families huddling in one room wondering literally where their next meal will come from. No one is so greedy or so pious that they lose their compassion for other human beings; no husbands desert their wives to sit at the feet of a distant rebbe; no women languish as abandoned wives, *agunot*. In this world, no one starves or dies in childbirth or perishes from childhood diseases or pneumonia.

Within this film, the milieu of Tevye's family and their friends and neighbors is a loving and bucolic world, as colorful, physical, and appealing as the world of the Amish farmers portrayed in *Witness*. Tevye and his family have the freedom to wander through the forest and spacious countryside, only occasionally terrorized by their usually well-meaning Christian neighbors. Most of the action takes place when their village is green and flowering and cloaked in a golden haze. Only when orders come from evil but far-distant officials does doom descend on their largely idyllic world.

This is not to say that *Fiddler on the Roof* is not a wonderful movie. It is in many ways a kind of miracle. The depictions of families united in warmth and love as well as piety on the Sabbath, the community-wide outdoor wedding with young and old carrying tapers and filled with yearning hope for the new couple and for themselves, the passionate and nurturing parenting of many Jewish fathers as well as mothers, the unarticulated love and loyalty between many husbands and wives – all of these elements are touchingly and accurately portrayed. *Fiddler on the Roof* does not lie about Jews and Jewish life in Eastern Europe. It simply does not include some rather unpleasant truths. Nevertheless, it retains the power to educate and

Yente: *Such diamonds. Such jewels. I'll find a husband for every one of them. But you shouldn't be so picky. Even the worst husband, God forbid, is better than no husband, God forbid.*

to move viewers, and to make them think about issues of change and continuity in Jewish life.

In Depth: A Tale of Three Tevyes

There have been several recreations of the intriguing Tevye and his family.

The character of Tevye the dairyman originated a century ago in a series of stories by Shloime Rabinovitz (1859-1916), the immensely popular Yiddish writer who went by the pen name of Sholem Aleichem. Some of the Tevye episodes were selected and adapted for the New York stage and the silent screen by Sholem Aleichem before his death. However, when Maurice Schwartz adapted the drama for the 1939 Yiddish film which he directed and in which he starred, the concerns of Schwartz and the people around him colored the film. More than two decades later, very different kinds of changes were made to the Tevye materials in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

The original Tevye stories, published between 1894 and 1914, reflect both the individual world view and the broader historical times in which Sholem Aleichem lived. The stories show that the author's thinking was profoundly affected by historical events. Each of Tevye's daughters represents a different challenge modernity presented to traditional Jewish life.

In Sholem Aleichem's stories, each daughter meets personally with a tragic fate. Tsaytl marries Motel, a simple young tailor with whom she has been in love for many years, instead of a wealthy but vulgar older butcher. While her children are still young, Tsaytl becomes a widow when Motel dies of tuberculosis. Hodel links her fate to Perchik, an intensely idealistic young revolutionary who is subsequently arrested; she marries him and follows him to Siberia and is never reunited with her family. Chava is won over by Fyedke, a Russian intellectual, and she abandons both her family and her religion to marry him. When pogroms increase and the Jews are exiled from the shtetl, however, Fyedke abandons Chava and she returns to the household of her father and her widowed sister. Shprintze falls in love with Ahronchik, a wealthy but irresponsible young charmer; when he jilts her at the urging of his family, the distraught young woman drowns herself. Beilke,

perhaps responding to the miseries that have befallen her sisters, marries Podhotzur, a vulgar, pretentious, supposedly successful but ultimately fraudulent and failed businessman. Although Tevye pleads with her from the very beginning not to marry Podhotzur, whom he knows to be utterly unsuited to his daughter, she insists, saying that the time for idealism has passed and she must think of the material good of the entire family. Podhotzur, however, fails to provide the material salvation Beilke had hoped for. Tevye regards Beilke, chained to a despicable creature, as the most unfortunate of all his daughters.

Sholem Aleichem's Tevye is deeply devoted to the Jewish people, and although he is no pietist, he cannot conceive of the Jewish people outside the context of the Jewish religion. He is full of quotes from scriptural and rabbinic writings; although many of these seem to be misquotes, malapropisms, or nonsequiturs, recent scholarship has demonstrated that Tevye knows exactly what he is saying, and his quotes often stand in ironic or satiric relationship to the context. His sense of humor is both sharp and warmly human.

Indeed, Sholem Aleichem's Tevye has an enormous generosity of spirit, which reflected that of his author and endeared him to thousands of readers. His conversations lurch forward with a kind of manic energy, in which he catapults from references to humiliations and tragedies that have happened or that may be waiting around the corner, to articulation of the comedic elements inherent in many of the same situations. His realism, born of hard experience, is tempered by hopefulness and optimism.

Tevye of the Yiddish Screen

Filmed on a farm in New Jersey, Maurice Schwartz's film, *Tevye*, follows the lead of Sholem Aleichem's stage play in focusing almost exclusively on the story of Chava. Tsaytl is Tevye's only other daughter in this film, appearing as a widow with two young children. But both Tevye as a character and the emotional tenor of the story have changed. Produced in the late 1930s, with the threat of war and Nazi conquest on one side of the ocean and the realities of assimilation and intermarriage in the United States, *Tevye* is more uniformly somber than Sholem

Aleichem's stories. Tevye is a sober, aging patriarch; Golde is a prematurely old woman, a loving but anxious "bubbe" with little physical strength left. Visually, in the 1939 film *Tevye and Golde* look and act like Old World grandparents – an American vision of pious "old folks," not like the vigorous, fiftyish couple whom Sholem Aleichem depicted. To be sure, Schwartz's Tevye is a profoundly moving figure. He loves his children and grandchildren deeply, and his only moments of sheer, transported exuberance come in his irrepressible joy with his grandson and granddaughter.

In Schwartz's film, the contrasts between Jews and non-Jews are sharply drawn. Only the non-Jews celebrate agricultural nature. The Jews live in dark interiors, in modest dwellings. Even the wedding scene in this film is a non-Jewish wedding, that of Chava and Fyedke, as the Christian peasants compete in dancing and musical antics in a state of rising inebriation.

In a particularly moving scene, Tevye recites the Havdalah prayer which separates the Sabbath from the weekday world; this Sabbath was the day Chava married Fyedke. Maurice Schwartz's face as he slowly recites the prayer is a breathtaking study in what "who is a Jew" meant to Tevye. As he recites God's name, his belief in God and God's laws vibrates from every fiber of his being. When he comes to the phrase celebrating God's separation of Jews from non-Jews, the quiet pain Tevye projects is almost unbearable. This is a man caught in a vise of God's making, bound by loyalty to a Creator whose ways he does not understand. Schwartz seems to be saying that this is who a Jew is: Tevye, a man who endures the unendurable and still believes.

The Jews in the film relate to the non-Jews with discomfort and fear; many of the non-Jews seem to delight in the Jews' misfortune. When Tevye and Golde try to reclaim Chava from the village priest on her wedding day, he is not only immovable, he is clearly delighted to have captured the girl whom Tevye described as his tender lamb. And when Tevye is ultimately driven from town, the townspeople extort his belongings for a pittance and even steal from him outright. As Tevye, his two desolate daughters, and his two grandchildren wend their solitary

way out of the shtetl, they are poignantly symbolic of the vulnerable remnants of Europe's decimated Jewish community.

In *Tevye*, with its melancholy, often gloomy mood, the vibrant musical numbers from *Fiddler on the Roof* would seem utterly out of place – literally from another world.

Tinseltown's Tevye

A different atmosphere and different concerns pervade *Fiddler on the Roof*. Looking to their own American community, the musical's authors emphasize not the enemy from without but the conflict from within. In *Fiddler*, Tevye's daughters are taken from him by modern ideas of romantic love, by socialism, by individualism, by universalism, by secular intellectualism. In so doing, *Fiddler's* authors are not foisting foreign elements onto Sholem Aleichem's work, but emphasizing different pieces of the work than Maurice Schwartz had chosen to emphasize. Sholem Aleichem was in fact very interested in the social and intellectual unrest that had already begun to break up traditional Jewish family life and society in Eastern Europe. Large parts of the musical feature dialogue taken almost verbatim from the original stories.

However, *Fiddler's* Tevye is a different man than the one described by Sholem Aleichem or the one depicted by Maurice Schwartz, and the context into which *Fiddler on the Roof* puts this struggle is very much the context of the United States in the 1960s. Here, religion is not God-given law, but is, instead, a "tradition." The authority of the religion derives not from God, but instead from human, patriarchal authority, "the papa." All of the conflicts are fitted into this interpersonal context. The young women who rebel are defying "tradition" and their "papa." The idea that they may, as individuals, have a direct moral commitment to God and to Judaism that is not filtered through their father is not part of the ideological framework of the film. Similarly, *Fiddler's* Tevye sees their various defections as an affront to his parental, patriarchal authority. While Chava's apostasy is of a different degree than Tsaytl's romance and Hodel's socialism, it is not clear that it is also of a different kind.

Fiddler's non-Jews, as befits the musical's ecumenical

Tevye: *On the other hand, our ways were once new, weren't they. . . . On the other hand, did Adam and Eve have a matchmaker? Yes they did, and it seems these two have the same matchmaker.*

Tevye: *Dear God. It's enough you blessed me with five daughters, the life of poverty. . . . Sometimes I think when things are too quiet up there, you say to yourself, "What kind of mischief can I play on my friend Tevye?"*

American mindset, are an attractive lot. Blond, clean-featured, pink-cheeked, the local Christians are slightly ominous because they are strong and free, but they are mostly well-meaning. The wicked Christians are not the townsfolk, not the healthy boys and the manly chief of police, but an excruciatingly thin, pathologically antisemitic official from a distant big city. Only at his orders are the locals incited into a carefully controlled pogrom. When the town's Jews are expelled, Chava's gentile husband Fyedke tells her that they cannot remain in a place in which people act so inhumanely to one another. Chava and Fyedke, looking for all the world like cross-country hikers with back-packs, come to Tevye, who is departing along with his townspeople, and receive his grudging blessing, "God go with you."

In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye and Golde are feisty middle-aged sparring partners once again, as they were in the early Sholem Aleichem stories. Topol enacts Tevye as a 1960s man for all seasons. Charming, energetic, a fun-loving *kibitzer* (teaser, joker), he is coarser than either Sholem Aleichem or Maurice Schwartz depicted him. In truth, his optimism is closer in some ways to Sholem Aleichem's Tevye than the sober uprightness of Maurice Schwartz's figure, but Topol's Tevye has lost much of the sincere religiosity of the original. This is a Jew most American filmgoers could recognize. With a cigar in his mouth, this Tevye would be at home in the Catskills.

While you watch, consider:

- ◆ What does "tradition" mean to Tevye?
- ◆ What are the father's and mother's roles in Tevye's family?
- ◆ What holds together the Anatevka Jewish community?
- ◆ How are the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds compared and contrasted?

Tevye: *As the good book says, each shall seek its own kind. A bird might love a fish, but where would they build a home together?*

Chava: *The world is changing, Papa.*

Tevye: *No, Chaveleh, some things do not change for us. Some things will never change.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ How does Tevye try to transmit his sense of Judaism to his daughters? What might he have done differently if he had sons?
- ◆ What elements of Tevye's value system have we preserved? What do we wish we had retained?
- ◆ Can "tradition" be updated? Is it possible to have new forms of tradition that are still authentic?
- ◆ Why is marriage such a fertile subject for examining continuity and discontinuity of Jewish tradition?
- ◆ What are some of the responses of Jewish parents today to a daughter (or son) marrying a non-Jew? How far have we come from sitting shiva? Is it too far, or not enough?
- ◆ How do we try to reconcile the encounter of Judaism with the non-Jewish world today?
- ◆ What kind of life do you imagine Tevye having in America?

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING**Books and stories**

- ◆ Sholem Aleichem. *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*. Translated by Halkin Hillel. New York: Schocken Books, 1987.
- ◆ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Earth Is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in East Europe*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.
- ◆ Samuel, Maurice. *The World of Sholem Aleichem*. New York: Macmillan, 1986.
- ◆ Wisse, Ruth. *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.
- ◆ Zborowski, Mark, and Elizabeth Herzog. *Life Is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl*. New York: Schocken Books, 1962.

Films

Tevye (1939)

Yentl (1983)