

Fiddler on the Roof: A Post-Charlottesville Reinterpretation of *Fiddler on the Roof*

STEPHEN STERN AND STEVEN GIMBEL

Fiddler on the Roof, the stage and screen adaptation of Sholem Aleichem's stories about Tevye the dairyman, is a cultural touchstone of the non-orthodox American Jewish community. Debuting on Broadway in 1964 and on the big screen in 1971, the story of the residents of the small Russian-Jewish town, or shtetl, of Anatevka appeared during a time of cultural pride movements from Black Pride to women's liberation to Puerto Rican Pride and the beginning of Gay Pride. As groups of all sorts embraced their identities, *Fiddler* presented Jews with the opportunity to celebrate their heritage in the public mainstream and was celebrated by many Jews.

But not by everyone. Many Jewish Studies scholars have long disparaged the work. The complaints are numerous and justified. It misrepresents Aleichem's stories, presenting an Americanized and sterilized version, thereby stripping it of his literary genius (Wisse 61-64). It grossly misrepresents the eastern European lived experience and contains major historical inaccuracies (Solomon 3). It gets Judaism and cultural elements wrong (Wolitz 356). As a vehicle for connecting with the lived experience of fin de siècle country Jews, the Ostjuden, it should not be taken seriously, the scholars tell us. It is shallow and saccharine and not fit for serious discussion.

We disagree. True, *Fiddler on the Roof* should not be taken as a documentary. Yes, it is importantly different from Aleichem's profound work. But we engage

STEPHEN STERN is the Chair of Jewish Studies and Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Gettysburg College. He is the author of *Reclaiming the Wicked Son: Finding Judaism in Secular Jewish Philosophy* with Steven Gimbel (Anthem) and *The Unbinding of Isaac: A Phenomenological Midrash of Genesis 22* (Peter Lang). He can be reached at sstern@gettysburg.edu.

STEVEN GIMBEL is Professor of Philosophy and an affiliate of the Jewish Studies program at Gettysburg College. He is author of *Reclaiming the Wicked Son: Finding Judaism in Secular Jewish Philosophy* with Stephen Stern (Anthem) and *Einstein: His Space and Times* (Yale). He can be reached at sgimbel@gettysburg.edu.

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with it Talmudically. The Talmudic tradition prides itself on the ability to find meaning through creative reinterpretation of text (Steinsaltz 40). What creates the context for this new understanding are the events of the last several years.

In 2018, a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* in Yiddish, what would have been the actual language of the residents of Anatevka, opened to great acclaim. At almost the same exact moment, congregants in Squirrel Hill, Pennsylvania's synagogue Or L'Simcha and Tree of Life were being shot to death by a Jew-hating gunman. Less than a year earlier, White nationalists marched in Charlottesville, Virginia giving the Hitler salute in unison and chanting, "Jews will not replace us." They held torches, intentionally reviving the imagery of the pogroms that drove the forbearers of many current American Jews from their shtetls, onto ships, past the Statue of Liberty, and into American life. Now, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those Jewish immigrants were being told by a White nationalist mob that they were not welcome in this country either. These unfortunate events of 2018 give us a new perspective that provides a missing piece to solve a riddle connected to *Fiddler*.

We can see *Fiddler* as a retelling of the story of the Exodus, resituated in early 20th century Russia. Before the 20th century, the Exodus narrative was one of the most important in Judaism. While Judaism is, by its nature, multifaceted, it finds its roots in being "the Chosen People," that is, Judaism is based upon a covenant wherein by agreeing to abide by the commandments of God, Jews receive Divine protection through creating an ethical world. Among those requirements is the retelling of the story of the Exodus. At the Passover seder, Jews recount the leaving of Egypt by their ancestors. This story is not told in the third person – what God did for them. Nor in the second person – what God did for us. Rather, it is told in the words of Exodus 13:8 in the first person – "It is what the Lord did for *me* when I came forth out of Egypt" (Goldschmidt 29, emphasis added). The Exodus is the central narrative of traditional Judaism because it offers the proof to each and every Jew that the founding covenant remains in place.

Yet, there was the Holocaust. Post-mid-20th century Jewish thought had to look beyond its longstanding axiom of being the chosen people and wrestle with the deepest questions of Divine abandonment (see, e.g., Levi). This led to an existential turn starting with the *Lehrhaus* writers after WWI which became central to Jewish philosophy after WWII, maintaining to this day an ethical urgency focused on human obligation to ensure "never again" (Brenner). Forsaken, Jewish thinkers held that we must turn inward, we alone must be the ones who create the way out, who construct our own redemption. As Victor Frankl put it, "Man does not simply

exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment” (132). God is not to be relied upon as a rescuer, but this does not mean all these Jewish thinkers abandoned their covenant with God. Writers from Martin Buber and Emanuel Levinas to Judith Plaskow, Deborah Lipstadt and even Judith Butler show the covenant now demands praying with our feet (to use Abraham Joshua Heschel’s phrase), not merely liturgically, but socio-politically. The story of the Shoah replaced the story of the Exodus at the center of Jewish philosophy. Judaism as a whole, and in particular Jewish thought, had to radically re-understand itself given that it had been empirically demonstrated that its core covenant could be breached.

But less than two decades after the closing of the camps, one cultural touchstone of 20th century American Judaism, *Fiddler on the Roof*, arrived on Broadway to be turned into a box-office hit seven years later. How is it that less than twenty years after the Holocaust, with the wounds still open, American Jews could ignore the obsolescence of the old Exodus narrative? How can a celebration of the covenant be accepted when its violation stood so starkly and recently before us?

In the period of its initial release, American cultural discourse was giving rise to identity politics. From the Black Power movement to the Stonewall riots to the National Organization for Women’s push for the Equal Rights Amendment, groups that had been made Other in American life were claiming their identity with pride (Breines 6). James Brown sang, “Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud,” while Helen Reddy crooned, “I am woman, hear me roar,” and throngs of protesters chanted, “We’re here. We’re queer. Get used to it.” After doing their best to be invisible for two generations to fit in, Jews could now participate in this exciting movement of publicly proclaiming their identity by singing their own version, “Tradition!” Tevye and Golde were familiar to the audience of the time, they were Zaide and Bubbe. Having successfully assimilated, *Fiddler* offered Jews of the period the opportunity to regain what they thought of as authenticity that they thought they had to jettison in fitting into the White world. It also seemed to put a period on the horrors of Europe. By flaunting their identity, by explicitly proclaiming the continued existence of Jews, they proved that Hitler had failed, as commanded by Emil Fackenheim’s 614th commandment, “Do not give Hitler a posthumous victory.”

This may be true, but the events of Squirrel Hill, Charlottesville, and the general marked rise in antisemitism across America at the end of the 2010’s also coincided with a violent anti-immigrant movement aimed at other more recent immigrants,

mostly those from Mexico and Central America. This resurgence of White supremacy gives us a chance to re-interpret *Fiddler* anew for a new generation. This re-interpretation has the advantage that it does not have to ignore the problem of the Shoah, again, how can a celebration of the covenant be accepted when its violation stood so starkly and recently before us? Indeed, this new understanding of *Fiddler* offers an answer to the question.

The key to this re-interpretation comes from a different work, Philip Roth's novel *The Plot Against America*. It, too, must be re-interpreted considering the shocking increase in Jew-hatred shortly following Roth's death. When we see how Roth's book acquires an additional layer of meaning the author never could have intended, we can make the same move with *Fiddler*, which no longer needs to be thought of as ignoring the Holocaust and reasserting the moral of the Exodus story that we will be delivered to the promised land. Instead, by looking at the contemporary social-political context with a different group of immigrants seeking safe passage away from violence, we can thereby see *Fiddler* as embodying Abraham Joshua Heschel's famous aphorism, "few are guilty, but all are responsible" (19). If these current refugees are not safe, it is because we did not welcome them as strangers in a strange land. We are responsible. As it says in Leviticus 24:22, "You shall the same rule for the stranger and native, for I am the Lord your God," that is, the God who brought the Israelites out of Egypt, a strange land for the Jews.

Viewed in this way, *Fiddler on the Roof* forces us to realize that the Holocaust did not have to happen. We could have prevented it. If America had accepted those European Jews whose lives were known to be in peril from the Third Reich in the same way that we accepted those fleeing Anatevka, Yom HaShoah may still be a day of remembrance, but it would be a day remembering the hatred that forced millions of Jews into exile while celebrating them as contributors to the building of America. The current treatment of immigrants seeking asylum in the United States must make us understand *Fiddler on the Roof* anew. It need not exclude the Shoah but make us understand our own responsibility for it as Americans.

It Could Have Happened Here (Indeed, It Still Might)

In 2004, Philip Roth published a fictional work entitled *The Plot Against America*, a counterfactual historical reimagining of what could have been the case had the Republicans nominated Charles Lindbergh to run against Franklin Delano

Roosevelt in the presidential election of 1940. Running on a platform of peace and prosperity through isolationism, the fictional Lindbergh campaign mirrored the actual right-wing America First movement of the period. The desire to avoid being dragged into what would become the Second World War does not stem from the sort of pacifistic inclination of the resistance to the War in Vietnam that was seen in the 1960's, but rather from sympathies toward the National Socialist government of Hitler. It is well-known that Lindbergh harbored such sympathies and that Hitler had recognized and rewarded him for it (Berg 414).

The question of identity for European Jews in the first half of the 20th century was quite different from that of American Jews of the same time period (Stern 104). While European Jews internalized the antisemitism of European culture and thereby felt that their Jewish identity conflicted with and impeded their inclusion in French, German, British, Austrian [...] society, American Jews experienced this to a much lesser degree. American Jews largely experienced an organic melding of their Jewish and American identities. The hyphen in "Jewish-American" denoted something akin to a chemical bond into a single organic molecule of identity. One may argue that the majority of American Jews have fulfilled Moses Mendelssohn's prophecy, transitioning from living Jewish civilization (where no distinction between tradition and public life existed) into Judaism as a religion of the home (94). Roth portrays this through the lived lives of the eponymous narrator and his older brother. They are Jewish and know they are in some sense different from the gentiles around them, but in their desire to play baseball, to watch Hollywood movies, and to attract the attention of young women, they are recognizably American through-and-through.

Yet, while they considered themselves thoroughly American as modern Jews, the world outside the Jewish community still saw them as strangers. Businesses and social organizations of the period did have overtly exclusionary policies intended to keep Jews out or their numbers minimized. While they were not as prevalent or explicit as southern Jim Crow laws of the time, they were intended to serve the same purpose. Partly a result of these policies and partly a response to immigration patterns and the needs of those who arrived a generation earlier, Jews of the early 20th century tended to live in clusters. In large cities across the country, there were Jewish enclaves that were home to most of the Jewish population. While life in these areas was largely assimilated and differed little from that of the surrounding regions much less the rest of the country, Jews generally lived amongst Jews.

This fact would be exploited by the America First movement in Roth's fictional America. The existence of the Jewish communities allowed there to be sufficient population density of this minority group to support vibrant congregations that kept Judaism alive amidst the assimilating congregants. Coupled with the maintenance of their Jewish identity was a commitment to liberal Democratic ideals. These communities knew of the threat of their strangeness and supported the political movement that supported their inclusion in American life, led and symbolized by FDR. Right-wing populism during this time, explicitly identified Americanism with Christianity. Jews were another minority group perceived as a threat to the American way of life and the propaganda of American conservative anti-Jewish bigotry mirrored and, indeed, borrowed from that of the rising tide of fascism in Europe (Hedges 137). Counter to the lived experience of Jews, the America First movement asserted an existential distinction between a Jewish and an American identity. One could not be both. Judaism is distinct from Americanism and therefore its presence in America is a threat to Americanism.

The scourge of Judaism would be diminished, it was argued in Roth's fictional America, if Jews were transformed into "real Americans," for this would be an Exodus away from the Jewish Exodus, that is, a move away from being chosen to create Jewish civilization. This would be accomplished by removing them from their enclaves and distributing them throughout the country. By exposing them to the Protestant ethos in rural America, Jews would truly be able to assimilate. Their clustering reinforces the differences that alienated them from America. By distributing them, they will be culturally re-educated in a fashion that ethnically cleanses them of their strangeness.

Of course, the real, but unstated purpose of the program is to destroy Judaism. If Jews will not convert to Christianity on their own, by spreading them thin enough, they will not have the support systems contained in their communities that transmit the necessary elements for a Jewish identity. Without enough Jews to have a minyan, there will be no services. Without vibrant congregations, there will be no services. By diminishing the population density of Jews under the ruse of acquiring a fully American identity, the Jewish aspect will disappear because Judaism requires community and community requires proximity.

The person leading the effort for the Lindbergh administration is an America First charismatic rabbi. Putting a Jewish clergyman out front as the face of the resettlement program, any claim of Jew hatred can be dismissed. The destruction of Judaism through racist ethnic cleansing requires a Jew who will work hand-in-

hand with the administration. Putting the policy in place, coupled with increasingly antisemitic rhetoric which is always thinly cloaked in pro-American, pro-peace, pro-economic growth messaging, allowed those who harbored antisemitic beliefs to feel emboldened in expressing them publicly. Antisemitic policies by businesses would be upheld by Jew-hating police officers. Openly hurtful remarks could be made in public spaces, like diners, without being challenged – indeed, being approved of – by onlookers. All of this was illustrated in Roth’s character’s experiences.

The title’s “plot against America” is taken by the reader throughout the book to be the insidious unAmericanism of American Jews. However, at the end of the novel, it is revealed that the real plot against America is the Lindbergh administration’s true essence, which is as a puppet regime for Nazi Germany. The Germans had infiltrated American conservative political organizations and were fully in control of the presidency. The President was a traitor who received help in being elected by and then orders shaping policy from a hostile foreign government that sought to undermine American democracy.

Reading with Three Minds

The central conceit of Roth’s book is that the readers do not live in the fictional America of Roth’s imagination, but in the real world, fully aware of what was actually going to happen in the fictional Germany under fictional Hitler because it happened in the real Germany under real Hitler. We read along knowing what some characters are chided for asserting, that the Third Reich would ultimately seek to commit genocide out of its racist bigotry. And the whole time one reads along, we know that the lack of opposition to Hitler, indeed the embracing of him, would lead not only to the unimpeded success of Hitler in his murderous rampage, but that it would use the conduit of the America First movement and the complicity of the Lindbergh administration to arrive at our shores. The moral of the book is “it could have happened here.”

This requires a sort of dual-track reading, that is, reading with two minds. The first mind, what we will call “the immersed mind,” is the stance that one adopts whenever reading fiction. It is the mind that suspends disbelief and is willing to accept the premise of the tale and ways of the created fictional world. If the book says that animals can talk or the ring can make you invisible or Dorothy is no longer

in Kansas, then the immersed mind provisionally holds these to be true of the world it is observing through the words and images of the book.

But Roth is not creating simple fiction, that is, he is not creating his own world out of whole cloth in which to stage a story. Rather, it is counter-factual historical fiction. Historical fiction locates a story in some actual historical context. "Counter-factual" is the philosophical term for "what would have happened if something that was not the case had been the case." "You would have passed the course, if you had studied harder," and "We wouldn't have won the game, if you hadn't put in all that time and effort over the off-season" are counter-factual propositions. They state what would be the case in this world, if past events in this world were different.

There are two important places in the history of philosophy that engage this sort of counter-factual reasoning. The first is the *Theodicy* of Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz. Leibniz, who was deeply influenced by Baruch Spinoza (Mates 12), wrestled with the problem of evil from a Christian perspective. If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, how could there be evil in the world? If God is omniscient, He would know of the evil. If God is omnibenevolent, then He would want to eradicate the evil. And if God is omnipotent, then God would be able to rid the world of the evil. Yet, there is evil in the world.

Leibniz's solution is to contend that what follows from God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence must be the best of all possible worlds. The flawed presumption is that the best of all possible worlds would be a world with no evil at all, when, in fact, the best of all possible worlds is actually a world of minimal evil. To know which of the possible worlds is the best of all possible worlds, one would have to have complete counter-factual knowledge. In other words, one would have to know the complete histories of all possible worlds to be able to compare them. God, before the Creation, stands outside of time, able to compare all possible worlds and actually only the one that is the maximally good one.

To make sense of his story, Roth requires us to possess a limited Leibnizian God mind, that is, a mind that stands outside of history to be able to compare two possible worlds. When reading *The Plot Against America*, Roth requires us to occupy the place of the immersed mind, living in the slightly fictional world he creates and following the exploits of the various characters. But he also requires us to have the limited Leibnizian God mind that has us consciously standing outside of the fictional, but possible world he creates knowing the whole time what we know about Hitler, the Second World War, and German atrocities. To get the

desired effect, Roth manipulates the reader by playing these minds against each other.

How can we infer from the real world to the fictional world? Here is where we employ the second philosopher whose work is relevant to possible worlds, Saul Kripke. In his seminal work *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke considers the distinction that can be traced back to Leibniz between necessary and contingent truths, what Leibniz calls “truths of reason” and “truths of fact.” We think of mathematical truths, for example, as necessary. One plus one could not but equal two. It does not just happen to be true, it has to be true. But other truths are contingent, that is, they could have been otherwise. Elvis Presley could have chosen to wear something other than the white, rhinestone-studded jumpsuit for his Las Vegas special in 1970. But that is what he chose. It is true that Elvis wore that outfit, but it is not necessarily true because it could have been otherwise.

Kripke argues that necessary truths are sentences that are true in all possible worlds, whereas contingent propositions are true in some possible worlds, and contingent truths are the case in this specific possible world that we inhabit. When you take the set of every possible world and lay them out in front of you like the Leibnizian God, the truths that appear in all of them are necessary and those that appear in this one, but not all are contingent. But for this mechanism to work, we need to be able to map things onto each other across possible worlds. We need to know when an object in possible world₁ is the same object as an object in possible world₂. For this, we use what Kripke calls “rigid designators” (3). A designator is a term that names something. A designator is rigid when it names not only in one possible world, but across possible worlds.

It is true that in the actual world, that is, in the possible world we inhabit, Louis Brandeis was male and the first Jewish Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. Now, there is a possible world in which Louis Brandeis was born Louise Brandeis, that is, female. We could discuss whether in any of the possible worlds in which Brandeis was born female, whether Brandeis would also have been made a Supreme Court Justice. For this discussion to make any sense, we need to use the designator “Brandeis” rigidly, that is, the name picks out the same object in the different possible worlds.

We can see a Jewish sensibility in this notion of rigid designation. Talmudic discourse treats biblical commands, for example, in a fashion not dissimilar to rigid designation, that is, the command itself is true in all possible worlds although instantiated differently based on the context. A Talmudic worldview takes possible

contexts as the analog of possible worlds. For example, “you shall not steal” is a rigid rule, true in all possible situations. But what is stealing in one context may not be stealing in another, necessitating a correspondence between God’s biblical command and how one lives or carries out the command, which means that not stealing is understood rigidly in this sense, but how to live this from situation to situation, or from one possible world to another varies. This awareness identified by Leibniz and unfolded by Kripke is part of being human and just as Torah/Talmud imminently relies on it in teaching Jews how to live the covenant, Roth can rely on the reader’s present lived world while playing with the reader’s knowledge of possible worlds, i.e., that things may have turned out differently.

In *The Plot Against America*, Roth intends for many of the names to be rigid designators. At the end of the book, he includes an entire section explaining how Franklin Roosevelt, Charles Lindbergh, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and others were not only real people in our real world but intended to be the same people in his fictional world. Not all names in the book are rigid designators. For example, the narrator is named Philip Roth. While there are surely similarities between the author Philip Roth in our actual world, the narrator Philip Roth in the fictional possible world is not the same person. Roth’s father in the story is not Roth’s father in our world. So, some of the names are Kripkean rigid designators and some are not.

In understanding Kripke’s mechanism we can see and thus conceptualize that we can operate with two minds while reading the book – the immersed mind which belongs entirely to the fictional world and the limited Leibnizian God mind that imposes certain knowledge about our actual world on the fictional possible world that the characters and the narrator could not possibly know. If we used only the immersed mind, then we could not know more than the narrator tells us, but we do because we import counter-factual knowledge into our understanding of the story through rigid designation.

That complex structure exposes how Roth manipulated us, his readers. The structure and use of rigid and non-rigid designation makes his work architecturally intricate and technically fascinating. But what he could not have foreseen in 2004 was the set of events that would make his story stunningly prescient after 2016. After the Charlottesville march, the massacre near Pittsburgh, and all of the other hate crimes that have exploded in recent years, we look at the plot points in the book as eerily foreshadowing current events.

Readers in 2004 had the luxury of thinking that Roth’s narrative is alarmist. In 2004, we could have reasonably believed that certain parts of the plot are unrealistic

because there are structural, governmental, and cultural safeguards in place to protect our political infrastructure and institutions from being seized by white nationalists. It is a paranoid fantasy that does serve some purpose in pointing out that there is simmering, low-level antisemitism remaining in pockets of America in 2004, even if Jews in 2004 do not really experience it directly very often. But it should not be taken too seriously. We are not saying it could happen here in 2004, just that it could have happened here when it was happening in Germany.

Readers after 2016, of course, will have a very different experience of the story. The idea of a hostile government surreptitiously aiding a conservative candidate for President of the United States and then holding high-level secret meetings that had a direct influence on policy designed to help the enemy of America became fact, not fiction. The embrace of an autocratic, self-serving foreign leader would have been thought to be absurd, yet it came to light that notes with meetings with Vladimir Putin would not be kept, contrary to protocol, so there would be complete privacy for the strongman to influence the American President who explicitly said that he believes what Putin tells him over the word of America's own intelligence services.

Roth could not have seen what would come to pass after the last year of his life. Yet, his descriptions of the process are uncanny. When we read *The Plot Against America* post-2016, we cannot but reinterpret what we read considering the context in which we currently find ourselves, seeing Roth as a sort of Jewish Nostradamus. A new set of designators exists that Roth could not have envisioned. Post-2016 readers cannot but see Donald Trump in Charles Lindbergh, Vladimir Putin in Adolf Hitler, Sergey Lavrov in Joachim von Ribbentrop, Steve Bannon in Henry Ford, and Stephen Miller in Rabbi Bengelsdorf. Roth wrote the book employing techniques designed to bifurcate our minds and play the immersed mind against the limited Leibnizian God mind, but when we read the book post-2016, we must now add a third mind, the extended limited Leibnizian God mind. It is a limited Leibnizian God mind in that it makes sense of reality by standing outside of the world and making judgements about a limited number of worlds from a god-like position outside of the limited number of possible worlds which it can compare. But it is extended because it now has knowledge of possible worlds that Roth had no clue we would have. In the same way that the reader knows more than the narrator did in 2004 because the narrator was stuck in his possible world not knowing of the Shoah, we in the post-2016 world know more than the 2004 author Philip Roth about the very world he was creating.

It is this new third mind, the extended limited Leibnizian God mind that not only allows, but forces us to reinterpret Roth's work in a way that Roth did not foresee just as Torah/Talmud discourse may require us to address novel situations the Talmudic Rabbinic discussants could not have imagined, such as what happens to the "rigid designators" at Auschwitz. Roth's message was intended to be "It could have happened here, too." What we now take away from the book is a more ominous moral, "Is it happening here, now?"

From Tevye to *Fiddler*

Sholem Aleichem, born Solomon Rabinovich in the Ukraine, was deeply influenced by the great Russian writers of the previous generation like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Gogol and sought to be the next great author, the first Jew among the Russian pantheon. He tried Russian and Hebrew before deciding to try to write serious literature in the pidgin language of Yiddish, spoken by the population of small, rural villages stuck in the old ways, uneducated, clinging to old ideas and superstitions, or *bubbe mieses*, like the evil eye (Dauber 32).

Seeking to create high culture art in the language of the Jewish rabble was incongruous enough that it lent an air of comedy to his work, even if serious. In writing his masterpiece, *Tevye, the Dairyman*, he further engaged in incongruity by mixing the traditional forms of tragedy and comedy. Tragedy usually begins with a hero, someone whose greatness set them above ordinary humans, and the plot then chronicles their tragic fall. Comedies, on the other hand, focus on a comic figure whose properties render them inferior to most and the story shows how through misunderstanding or machination, the lowly can rise above their natural place.

Tevye is clearly a comic figure: desperately poor, unreliable as a narrator, and taken to speaking about biblical matters in ways that are not only factually wrong, but absurdly so. He is what Harry Frankfurt termed a "bullshitter," one for whom true and false are irrelevant, he is "unconstrained by a concern with the truth" (38). But unlike, say, the used car salesman whose lack of regard for the value of truth is selfish, Tevye generally has a good heart, enduring misfortune after misfortune – some of which he brings on himself and others not. The reader is sympathetic with the character to whom life constantly seems to be rewarding, only to have things fall apart in the end. He is what Jews term a "*schlimazel*," a loveable loser. So, contrary to the classical forms, we start with a comic figure and rather than a plot describing his rise, instead we have a series of tragic falls.

Tevye's daughters desert the way of life that is dear to him in increasingly problematic ways until his youngest, Shprintze, pregnant out of wedlock commits suicide. Tevye is the shtetl everyman, starving and uneducated, hardworking and *kvetching*, dedicated to being Jewish even if he creatively cuts corners or misunderstands from time to time. As the symbol of the Jewish people collectively, he suffers and when the suffering abates, it is sure to return in a more calamitous fashion.

Joseph Stein, formerly a comedy writer on Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*, adapted Aleichem's stories for the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. It was, as Aleichem scholar Dan Miron put it, "one of Broadway's schmaltziest musicals" (xii). Many of the characters and plot lines of Aleichem's short stories are adapted, but with an American instead of a European sensibility. For example, Tevye's daughter Chava converts to Russian Orthodox Christianity to marry the Russian Fyedka. In Aleichem's original, she is disowned for the conversion. If she is no longer Jewish, she no longer exists in the eyes of the family. In Stein's musical, on the other hand, Tevye has a change of heart and eventually, under his breath, blesses her because he loves his daughter.

To a mid-20th century American audience, considering a child dead to the family because she has made her own decision considering her spirituality is seen as closed-minded, bigoted, and contrary to the liberal ideals of individualism and self-determination. But from the European standpoint, the conversion is to contribute to the eradication of the Jews. The Russians were trying to eliminate us, to destroy Judaism, and you go and help them? It is not seen as an individual choice, but as a contribution to the destruction of the whole. Contemporary scholar Ruth Wisse contends that this alteration turns the story from a Jewish into an American work of art:

It must have felt perfectly innocent to change a Jewish classic into an American classic, making the team of Chava and Fyedka, rather than Tevye into the moral anchors of the play. But if a Jewish work can only enter the American culture by forfeiting its moral authority and its commitment to group survival, one has to wonder about the bargain that destroys the Jews with its applause. (63)

The most significant difference between Aleichem's stories and *Fiddler* is the ending. In the book, Tevye makes plans to relocate to *eretz Yisroel*, the land of Israel. But when his son-in-law Motl Komzoil unexpectedly dies in his sleep, leaving his eldest daughter Tzeitel a widow with no means of support, Tevye

cancels the plans and remains in Russia to live his life as he always has. Judaism as a messianic religion is implicitly hopeful for a better future, no matter how bad things are at the moment and at every moment for Jews they are always bad. At the end of the Passover seder, every year Jews have always said, "Next year in Jerusalem," which, especially before the founding of the modern state of Israel, was an unrealistic aspiration, but one, nevertheless, was hoped that the Messiah would deliver. That pipe dream to return to the Temple of Solomon and hold the seder there with all other Jews was the collective fantasy of a diasporic people, the wish for peaceful reunification of a scattered people who experience antisemitism as minorities around the globe. But, these are Jews. It never happens. Instead, life with its miseries and struggles, *tsuris* in Yiddish, goes on as it always has. Aleichem's ending is, in this way, very Jewish.

But Stein's ending is very different. Motl not only survives, he embraces modern technology and buys a sewing machine making his and Tzeitel's lives better. They have a baby. Then pogroms drive the entire shtetl, including Tevye's family away from their homes. The village will be destroyed and its inhabitants are forced into exile. Some, like Yente the matchmaker, go to the Holy Land. Most, like Tevye, on the other hand, go to America. *Fiddler* gives its Jews a future that is different from their past. The world around them is changing and their lives change too. This sense of collective progress through technology and geo-politics is not endemic to Jewish thought but is the bedrock of 20th century American thought. It was the dawn of the American century when atomic weapons and technological advancement took the United States from an isolated backwater to global dominance. The different ending reflects *Fiddler's* deep Americanism.

Fiddler, after all, was aimed at an assimilating Jewish audience, a group that benefited from the GI Bill to become economically upwardly mobile, relocating to the newly constructed suburbs and partaking in what was seen as the American dream that it launched. In doing so, Jews, for the first time were being seen as white.

Although changing views on who was white made it easier for Euro-ethnics to become middle-class, economic prosperity also played a powerful role in the whitening process. The economic mobility of Jews and other Euro-ethnics derived ultimately from America's post-war prosperity and its enormously expanded need for professional, technical, and managerial labor. (Brodkin 36)

The changing economy and culture of America in the 1960s had spots that needed filling and given the turmoil of the Civil Rights struggle of the period, Jews

parlayed their position as a “good” minority to slip into the ingroup (Brodkin 71). Jewishness was reduced to Judaism and Jews were, for the first time, no longer of a different race as they were in Europe, but white people of a minority religion.

Being safely included among the privileged, meant that Jews now acquired an interest in maintaining and fortifying the status quo, that is, the social structure and the limited pluralism that was blossoming in the mid and late 1960s/early 1970s. It also meant that for the first time, it was safe to publicly declare one’s Jewishness and to celebrate it. As other pride movements gained steam, so too did Jewish pride and *Fiddler* became the centerpiece of that cultural movement in which Jews saw themselves as Americans who happened to be Jewish. *Fiddler on the Roof*, as Wisse points out, is not a Jewish work but an American work in that it does not buy into the traditional Jewish worldview, but rather goes out of its way to extoll the liberal democratic virtues of mid-20th century America.

The Bittersweetness of *Fiddler*

When non-Jews watch *Fiddler on the Roof*, they think it is a tragedy. The final scene is sad. The shtetl’s occupants, whose lives we have spent the last three hours getting to know and sympathize with, are being maliciously ejected from their homes. Everything they have known is being taken away from them for no reason other than bigotry. Their way of life, as tough as it was, was theirs, and now every rock, every tree, everything that is familiar is about to be gone and the singing of “Anatevka,” the final number in the musical, is a slow, mournful drone reflecting this sadness.

But for Jews, the ending is more emotionally complex. It is bittersweet. This is because *Fiddler on the Roof* is like *The Plot Against America* in requiring viewers to have multiple minds. Just as Roth played the immersed mind against the limited Leibnizian mind to have readers import knowledge about what would happen in Germany in the 1940s, so, too, did Stein, playing the audience’s immersed minds against their limited Leibnizian God minds.

In the case of *Fiddler*, the immersed mind follows the characters of Anatevka as modernity threatens the traditional way of life at the same time the antisemitism of the Czar and Orthodox Christian Russians threaten their lives and well-being. If the literary device at the heart of *The Plot Against America* is that we know better than the characters the real depth of evil inherent in the Nazi regime, then the analogous device in *Fiddler* hinges on the fact that we know what happens

generations after the closing credits appear on the screen. The conflict requires that the immersed mind must see the story as a tragedy. The immersed mind empathizes with everyone forced from their home, way of life, joys, connections, and friends by bigotry and violence. If the story was simply what the story was, it would be extremely sad.

But as assimilated American Jews after the 1960s, we cannot see the plot simply as a tragedy because we know what happens afterward. American Jews must watch the end of *Fiddler* with a bittersweet sense of internal conflict. What happened to the characters is not only upsetting, but representative of their own family's experience, the suffering of our own forebears. It is unfortunate that the quaint characters we have come to love are losing their home and way of life.

The Jewish people in the seats watching it know that the grandchildren and great grandchildren of those very characters will be successful doctors, lawyers, and college professors, living in a comfort that Tevye could never conceive of. They know it because when they leave the theater, it is them. The grief of leaving Anatevka is, in fact, the gateway to the life enjoyed by contemporary Jews. When we compare our current standard of living to those of our great-grandparents in the shtetl, there is no question where we would rather be. We are sad, even anguished that they had to leave, but glad that they did fully aware that their Jewish story did not end in Anatevka but continues in how we are living today.

The film has a tragic ending, but the story (which extends beyond the film) has a happy ending. That conflict is created because like Roth's book, *Fiddler* plays these two minds against each other. At least, that is how it was for viewers in 1971.

It Didn't Have to Happen There: The New Meaning of the Leaving of Anatevka

Wisse's concerns about *Fiddler* being American but not Jewish are legitimate, but with a re-interpretation through a third intellectual vantage point, some of the worry may be assuaged. As with Roth's book, we contend that for post-2016 viewers, there is a third mind, an extended limited Leibnizian God mind, that must be employed to create a new meaning for the film and musical.

In our current political context, we must import new truths of our post-2016 world into our interpretation of the meaning of the events of the fictional world of Anatevka. With Roth, the extension to the limited Leibnizian God mind is the knowledge of Russian interference in our elections and Russian influence on

governance. With *Fiddler*, the extension of the limited Leibnizian God mind is the hysteria around caravans of immigrants, the branding of those fleeing as murderers and rapists, the separation of children from their parents without any means put in place to reunite families, and the erection of fenced-in camps to hold asylum seekers at the border without the means to meet basic needs. In vilifying and denying entrance, America is now doing to them, exactly what America did to Europe's Jews right before and during the Second World War, demanding that they be kept out.

We are not suggesting the experience of immigrants at our southern border is that of the European Jews run down by an unwavering state dead set on their extinction as human beings, but the expressed fears in the United States about today's immigrants are the same fears, in many cases couched in exactly the same language, that Americans felt toward and spoke about European Jews wanting to come here in the 1930's. One cannot but see in these two very different political worlds, the same anti-immigration arguments.

Except that we are now the us. We Jews, *kvelling* over the Yiddish production of *Fiddler*, have become America. We now understand how most Americans thought about Jews who were fleeing Hitler because they said the same things about us that they are now saying about them – that they are dirty, stupid, a drain on society, and a threat to American culture. That Americans would go on to do this again was knowledge the viewers of *Fiddler* did not have and that the writer did not count on in 1971. We American Jews now find ourselves looking at those from south of the border fiddling on their roof, perched precariously, hoping not to fall off. As we watch the new Yiddish production, we cannot help but think of those experiencing hatred and fleeing violence today.

And the Jewish mind, conditioned by unrelenting calls to never allow the Shoah to drift from our consciousness cannot but connect the dots. The lives of millions were lost because the doors were not opened to them, just as we are not now opening our doors. It did not need to happen there. Today, from where we stand – by employing the extended limited Leibnizian god mind, the new understanding of *Fiddler* does not ignore the Holocaust. Indeed, it speaks directly to it, giving us the blueprint for preventing it. Just as the third mind changes the meaning of Roth's book from "It could have happened here" to "It might be happening here, now," the third mind changes the meaning of *Fiddler on the Roof* from "their suffering led to our comfort" to "we shouldn't have to say 'never again' because it did not need to happen in the first place."

World leaders at the time could sense what was coming. In July of 1938, the US government organized the Evian conference to address the growing European Jewish refugee problem. Little happened except for The Dominican Republic agreeing to take in 100,000 Jewish refugees. There was nothing done for the others. By November of 1938, the future was forecast: “Nazis Warn World Jews Will Be Wiped Out Unless Evacuated by Democracies,” declared the front page of *The Los Angeles Examiner*. Still, in 1939, 89% of Americans felt that accepting European Jewish immigrants would threaten American security while taking away American jobs. As noted, *Fiddler* gave American Jews pride while still reeling from the aftershocks of the Shoah. Today, *Fiddler on the Roof* is part of the American Ashkenazi Jewish worldview, part of our North American Jewish tradition(s).

In the opening number of *Fiddler*, “Tradition,” we are introduced to Tevye who not only introduces us to his shtetl and its occupants, but to their way of life which is bound by the covenant with God. He accounts for the reasoning behind the various peculiarities of Jewish life – sometimes correctly, sometimes not – until he tries to explain the wearing of the kippah. When he realizes that even he cannot make something up to meaningfully explain it, he shrugs his shoulders. The meaning behind this humorous moment is that the contract the Jews have agreed to is not one they enter into because they find each clause advantageous, but because they find the contract as a whole advantageous.

That advantage to be gained through adhering to the covenant, of course, would not be found until the end of the film when those villagers we first met during “Tradition” would be scattered to the wind by Russian Jew-hatred. The characters leave under the duress of uncertainty, but the audience is watching with two minds – the naïve mind of the passive, external observer being told the story and the Leibnizian god who understands the unfolding of the story in the larger context not available to those involved in the narrative.

From the point of view of the immersed mind, the expulsion from Anatevka is a tragedy. From the point of view of the second mind, it is a happy ending because we know that Tzeitel’s baby will have no memory of the old country and will grow up to have children and grandchildren who will be us – with central heat and air conditioning, a car, writing and reading articles in prestigious Jewish Studies journals. The point of the film is the engagement of the second mind, the Leibnizian god-mind. But, of course, the plot that connects “Tradition” to “Anatevka” poses a challenge to the second mind. We know that the Russian pogroms did not destroy

all of Judaism – Jews are still here watching the movie, after all. But what about the other challenge: modernity?

We see in increasing steps, the daughters of Tevye pulling away from the traditions that defined the Jewish covenant and embracing a new modernist view of life. Jew-hatred cannot destroy Judaism because of the covenant with God, but modernism is in the process of undermining that covenant. Could modernism be the real force that eradicates the Jews? Martin Buber rightly worried about this in his discussions of technology. In the shadow of the Shoah, how can one say (1) that the covenant is in place and (2) that the real threat is modernism? Saying that modernism is the biggest threat to Judaism right after the Shoah is like telling a cancer patient that you are worried that their chemotherapy may give them diarrhea.

When we adopt the third viewpoint, the extended limited Leibnizian God mind which now imports knowledge of the Holocaust, all Jewish narratives, including *Fiddler*, have to be reconstructed. No longer can we rely as the rabbi from Anatevka imploring us to believe that God will provide. In light of the Shoah, responsibility for the protection of Jews falls back onto the Jews themselves. Jews have always known that they live in a dangerous world full of cultures and civilizations who seek their destruction, but now there was no longer a guarantee of survival. It was and is up to us to ensure “Never again!”

What this entails, and what means, divides the American Jewish community. Jews understand that the world is not a safe place, but the appropriate measures to address this differ radically among the community. Should Jews fight fire with fire and always work to be more powerful than their enemies? Should they be on the forefront of social liberation movements that have nothing to do with Judaism, or now do they? What is the obligation to non-Jews being dehumanized? But whatever the understanding of how it was incumbent upon Jews to ensure “never again,” that would be the newest commandment, a commandment not from God, but despite God. We are thinking here of Emil Fackenheim’s 614th commandment commanding the continuance of Jewish life and culture, living a Jewish life to prevent Hitler a posthumous victory, the community see themselves somewhat arguing from it.

The radical revision of the core of the Jewish narrative is ignored by *Fiddler* in the standard interpretation which reasserts the old narrative of the Exodus and the inviolable covenant in a sweet cutesy fashion that is fully out of touch with the brutal post-Shoah and post-2016 reality on the ground. The message of *Fiddler*, in its embrace of pre-World War II nostalgia is, in fact, dangerous.

This nostalgia as a jumping off point for concern about the effect of modernism on Judaism is not without strong precedent in 20th century Judaism. The writings of the *Lehrhaus*, for example, are very much in this vein, wherein figures, like founder Franz Rosenzweig, were afraid that modernity was undermining the living heart of Judaism, pulling Jews away from Judaism (89). The rationalism of modernity that had become vogue in western and central European Jewry could include Jewish life, but Jews needed to learn how to do this.

In the literary works of Shmuel Y. Agnon, one finds this could be done with a nostalgic appeal to the irrationalism embodied by the lifestyle of the eastern shtetl Jews. We had not to reject the old *bubba meises* but embrace and celebrate them. Where their cultured, assimilated western cousins saw the naïve beliefs of their eastern brethren as backward and embarrassing, Agnon shows they should be celebrated, while illustrating their *Simple Story* is not so simple (170). Like Buber, Agnon's appeal was aimed at the liberated, urban and urbane Jews of the West, where *Fiddler* was aimed at the doctors and lawyers whose grandparents had lived packed into tenement houses on the Lower East Side, but who now lived in American houses. Jews were now at home in North America, no longer strangers in a foreign land, but comfortably assimilated.

Fiddler was originally meant as a romantic bridge back to those who suffered to get modern Jews the seeds whose fruit they were now enjoying. But such reminiscing was seen as gauche when it eclipsed the horrors that led to the reconstruction of the Jewish narrative. The sweetness of *Fiddler* is not a luxury Jews can afford after the Holocaust.

This debate takes place in the second mind, the limited Leibnizian God mind. But as we saw with our reading of *The Plot Against America*, there is a third mind, the extended limited Leibnizian God mind, which we now use to interpret what we see. When we reconsider *Fiddler* through the lens of this third mind which has seen Charlottesville, Pittsburgh, and the images of children fleeing war and violence taken from their parents and forced to exist in overcrowded cages, we have to see Tevye and his community in a different light.

The ending of *Fiddler* is bittersweet because the first mind sees the sadness in the ending of a way of life while the second mind sees the wonderful future for those who are forced to flee. But we also have to think about it with the third mind and that one problematizes the problematizing of *Fiddler*. Yes, there is the sweetness necessary for a bittersweet ending. We watch *Fiddler* with the Leibnizian God-mind knowing that their American descendants will be okay, because they will

arrive at Ellis Island, standing beneath the Statue of Liberty's welcome. These people fled hatred and violence and were granted asylum from it and allowed to begin life anew, lives that would create community, art, science, and industry.

But the second mind also knows that just twenty years later, others who were caught in the grip of similar hatred and violence were not welcomed in. We all know the story of the St. Louis. We know that we could have opened our doors to those Jews trying to escape the Nazis and if we had, the extermination camps would not have been the answer to the Nazi's cruel, game changing use of two thousand years of Christendom's hateful scapegoating of Jews, the murderers of God deserving to be absented from civilization for being a conspiring, devilish threat to all.

The third mind looks at the new camps. It sees Jews, even those in charge of the U.S. National Holocaust Museum, the institution dedicated to "never again," arguing that we cannot compare what these immigrants fleeing violence for their lives only to experience bigotry and hatred that leads to inhumane treatment are experiencing with what was experienced by Jewish immigrants fleeing violence for their lives only to experience bigotry and hatred that forced them into inhumane treatment (Snyder). The third mind sees the hate-filled rhetoric of "send them back" and verbal depictions of them as monsters and cannot but see the parallels.

This third mind sees how Roth's cautionary tale presents how it not only could have happened in the United States, but still might. In the same way, the third mind can reinterpret *Fiddler on the Roof*, with the sweetness of its bitter sweetness considering the Holocaust as saying that it all could have been avoided if only the German Jews were treated like the Russians ones. If Americans had opened their door as Jews do every Seder, millions of those six million dead could have been immigrant success stories. No one needs to see *Fiddler on the Roof* as having ignored the lesson of the Shoah. Rather, everyone could understand it as trying to teach us a different lesson of the Holocaust. Yes, they executed the unspeakable, but it also happened because we allowed it. We did not do what we needed to do to stop the preconditions for its possibility.

The reinterpreted Roth's *The Plot Against America* tells us that the Shoah could have happened here. The reinterpreted *Fiddler on the Roof* tells us that the Shoah did not have to happen there. The Jewish community could have kept the old narrative. Yom HaShoah could have turned out to be a day of somber recognition of yet another exodus. *Fiddler on the Roof* is naïve and maudlin. It does oversimplify. But it holds within it a deep lesson, one we are now able to understand

with an American Jewish mind. It is one that we risk our souls and the bodies of others by ignoring.

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