

Let's begin with a Multiple Choice...

Which classic Yiddish descriptor would you use to characterize the current state of our world?

[Don't know Yiddish? Not to worry.

The mere inflection will convey its meaning.]

[HOLD UP POSTER WITH MEANING AS SAY EACH OPTION]

- a. MESHUGANEH...Crazy
- b. VERTUMELTE...Confusing
- c. VERSHLEPTZIK...Weary/Burdensome
- d. VARBLONDZHET...Lost/Aimless

HOW do we respond to the reality of a world whose Meshugas—craziness so often seems beyond us, yet whose imbalances and injustices compel us to do more than just sit and "SCHREI GEVALT—[Cry Oy-Vay.]" ...One path for Jews past was to follow what we could call "*The Fiddler Plan*," Yes—as in the one "*On the Roof*..."

Set in 1904-05, Shalom Aleichem's original *Tales of Tevye the Dairyman* seem, at first glance, worlds away from our lives today. [Anybody's cow parked outside?]

But as Joe Berger wrote [in his NY Times feature in mid-July],

"No matter the language, the musical still conveys its poignant themes:

The tension between tribal loyalty and the need to break free;
the pain of separation whether compelled by personal choices
or the decisions of a cruel government..."

Huh!...I think I can hear that Fiddler playing now...

Actually, what we hear in the groundbreaking new staging of this paradigmatic play

By the FOLKSBIENE—The People's Theatre,

Is not simply music that will touch your NESHOMA—your Soul,

But a production that will forge a path through which we might
reframe our perspective in responding to our world.

SO how many of us have—at some point—seen the iconic musical

Fiddler On the Roof?...[Show of Hands]

Broadway? Off-Broadway?...High School?...Camp?...College?...

When it debuted back in 1964,

Fiddler took Broadway by storm,

Winning 9 Tony's including Best Musical,

In large part due to its fearless foursome: Sheldon Harnick[Lyrics],

Joseph Stein [Book], Jerry Bock [Music], and last but certainly not least,

Jerome Robbins renowned [Director/Choreographer]

Together they reshaped what was an adaptation of "*Tevye Der Milkhiger*"
Into a homogenized, somewhat pasteurized, all too-sanitized,
Fat-free production.

As the early 60's Fiddler-foursome's pre-production notes reveal:
"Needs high-humor and tenderness without any Second Avenue schtick!"
Through their mid-twentieth century lens of what would be "Broadway-worthy,"
The authors triumphed at the Tony's at the great cost of being true
To the question at the core of Tevye's being:

HOW should a Yid make sense of such a world?

Posing the life-problems every Jew was facing
at the entryway to a fast-changing 20th century,
Tevye confronted reality through the language of our people,
Jewish "Soul-Speak—YIDDISH."

You could feel his inner angst as it churned in his Kishkes,
As the Culture Editor of Jewish Week put it:

"Tevya balances his own soulful yearnings for what could be
with the fragility of the moment."

And, thus, the key to the current, pioneering production
as it informs this moment in time...

For the first time ever in America, FIDDLER just premiered
In the language which Tevye would have called Die Mama-Loshen,
Our Mother Tongue—Yiddish...Which, somehow, transforms its purpose.
For "Wonder of Wonders," it is through our perceiving the unique power
Of *Fiddler Afn Dakh*—the new National Yiddish Folk Theatre presentation
That we can learn the language through which to understand our Jewish Being
as an approach to the tumult of this meshuganneh world.

And, irony of ironies, it all spins on a common skill that sounds quite simple
But is, in fact, the key sensibility enabling us

To translate our people's Soul-Speak into a sacred awareness:

HOW to Live in Jewish Time.

Our general approach to time is consumerist,

Since "time is money" [Ben Franklin's metaphor, not mine]

Each day is then a commodity;

Hours that can be wasted or time "well-spent."

I remember years ago, before every facet of our lives was tech-controlled,

How excited I was to begin the Temple calendar year with a new blank Day-Runner

The name implies the goal, as our teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman

Only half-jokingly commented: [Jewish Week, 1.27.17]

"The whole point of this calendar was to fill in as many lines as you could...As if life
were a game in which the person who dies with the most appointments wins!"

But keeping a Jewish calendar is decidedly different, as R' Hoffman continues:
"While secular calendars come empty; Jewish calendars come loaded."
For every day is not the same. Jewish Time is a sacred unfolding:
The cycle of weekly renewal—a collection of Sabbaths * sacred seasons
Which reflect a superstructure: the special moments imparting life-lessons,
Time's passage punctuating life with a higher purpose,
Even implying a Grand Design...

So come with me to Anatevka
And reconsider what it might mean to the life-scene we daily inhabit
If, taking the Yiddish translation to heart,
We could actually learn to live in Jewish Time.

Three Fiddler Time-Transformation Takeaways,
The sacred sensibility we need for this *vertumulte* world...

Time-Takeaway I...

Back in September 1964 as the Broadway production premiered,
the universalization of Fiddler brought a sterile script. In the opening monologue,
Tevye says he wears: "a little prayer-shawl," rather than a "tallis."

As opposed to the expressive Yiddish, "Gott Soll Sein,"

Tevye speaks a stale "If the Lord Will it."

As Fiddler culture-expert Allison Solomon points out

"the smoothest path in the mid-60's to presenting a B'way Tevye seemed to
require, paradoxically, clearing all Yiddish away."

But today, talking in the language of the original,

The main character **becomes** "Tevye der Milchiker,"

the heimish, ever-hopeful spokesperson of the Jewish Spirit.

And we, invited into his world, become part of his life,

sensing the daily tsoris & simchas, and the heartbeat which sustains us.

For no matter the world he confronts, the rhythm of Jewish Time is Tevye's refuge.

Indeed, Shabbes comes as a comfort at the end of a trying week

where it has not been so easy to make ends meet;

a week where the intolerance of reigning powers

reaches even the remote little village of Anatevka, as does the clash

of worldviews challenging Tevye's operative Jewish-life assumptions.

And as darkness descends on Friday night, the arrival of Shabbes radiates light.

The world outside stops, as inside, everyone enters a "*Palace in Time*,"

A brief respite from life's struggle. Yet, holy rest though it may be,

Shabbes is no place for us to hide.

Struggling to earn a living yet still giving gifts to the neediest in town,

Tevye meets Perchik, the Socialist Jewish revolutionary on the run,

And, opening his home, promptly invites him for Shabbes...

Gathered round the table all set for Friday Night [we can see the scene]
His 5 daughters on either side, Tevye—Kiddush Cup in hand, & Golde,
Sing "*The Sabbath Prayer*," not the traditional blessings,
But a plea for parental perspective....
"May the Lord protect & defend you..." The English lyric is lovely.
But the Yiddish, so much deeper, is transformative!

I wanted to run my theory of the uniquely inspired impact of FIDDLER in Yiddish
By someone who'd really know, so, thanks to Fredda [Cantor Mendelsohn]
I had an extended conversation with Zalmen Mlotek,
the Music & Artistic Director of the National Yiddish Folk Theatre.
He told me: "The Sabbath Prayer is a whole different world in the Yiddish
as compared to the English." Only in the Yiddish does Tevye dream:
"Grant me so many grandchildren there won't be room enough around my table."
AND only in Yiddish does he hope:
"Grant me enough so I can see to it that no one in our village goes without."
The Yiddishe Neshoma makes Shabbes a time for Tevye to dream
of a more humane and compassionate world.

Stepping back from life's daily inequities,
Shabbat provides the time, not to deny them,
but rather, to refocus our vision.

*Jewish Time is the refuge that renews us
so that with our life-perspective clarified and refreshed,
We can respond to the reality we live the other six days of the week
through a more pro-active, empowered Jewish lens...*

Time-Takeaway II...

Who among us does not have a vivid picture of the place we were raised,
The town or village, that city block or street, the neighborhood where we grew up?
You can picture the old middle school hangout; Village hall...
The field or court you learned to play ball.
More idyllic than real, that place exists for many in the storehouse of our memories;
Imperfect but prized, because for us, it was home.

Great Conservative teacher/thinker, Rabbi Ed Feinstein
frames Fiddler in much the same fashion:

*"Every American Jew knows Fiddler on the Roof"...for it has become
the American myth of origin we'd like to believe about our beginnings.
Tevye is our imaginary collective ancestor...our wise and loving Great Grandfather.
Anatevka the place we all wish we came from—a world of uncomplicated truth...
Where everyone knows who he is and "what God expects him to do."*

...Anatevka offers us the reassurance that, once upon a time, in a land far away... we knew lives of purity & purpose...a life lived in accord with timeless wisdom."

[The Chutzpah Imperative, Rabbi Edward Feinstein, pgs 119-120]

Of course, **that** Anatevka, just like the picture-perfect place where we grew up, Exists only in our dreams.

The actual backdrop of "*Fiddler Afn Dakh*" is a Jewish tradition in turmoil:

The foundations of our past challenged by an ever-changing present.

Living in Jewish Time must then somehow mean

Perceiving a past which is ever present—never relegated to a distant yesteryear

But rather, a past which informs the meaning of this moment...

Sholom Aleichem's setting for his treasured tales was the Pale of Settlement, Not some dreamy scene, but, thanks to Tsar Catherine II, The governmentally ordained western border area of Lithuania, Moldova, Poland and Belarus where Jewish Shtetl life brought severe social and economic restrictions and, at times of greatest tension, even sanctioned attacks on Jewish businesses, synagogues and homes—the dreaded pogroms.

The scene towards the end of the First Act is haunting...

For even though Tevye knows it is coming, he is powerless to stop it.

There, as the wedding gifts and their givers are presented,

eldest daughter—the bride, Tzeitel and Motl, receiving them, side by side,

when suddenly Russian soldiers turn the celebration upside down.

Jews are randomly beaten; bloods flows. Holy vessels are tossed to the ground.

Yet, feeling the fear as if I were there, watching the Yiddish production,

I well up as one of the Cossacks cruelly stabs the 2 pillows

the young couple just received, scattering the goose-down all around.

WHY?...Because there, just off-stage,

I could see my grandfather Solly as a 7-year old boy, who fled,

along with his younger brothers and his father, from that same Kishinev Pogrom

in 1904 which Sholom Aleichem depicted through Tevye's tales,

tearing the heart of the Jewish spirit apart...

BUT for us as Jews, the past ever lives in the present, as it lives in us...

So, fast-forward to 1965, my two-family childhood home in Haverhill, Mass.

With us upstairs and my grandparents down...It is Saturday evening,

My parents are heading out to dinner and I could not be happier.

For there you'll see 7-year-old me in Bobba & Solly's bed, watching TV,

Snuggled up like a king on the most-heavenly goose-down pillows,

The ones Solly's mother managed to take from the old-country,

And eventually gave as a wedding gift to her eldest son...

Living in Jewish Time we sense that all our life-stories are connected;

The story of one animated by the next...

What transpired yesterday, or 100 years before or more, and what happens tomorrow, are linked in a living continuum...Our collective past becoming a prism through which we perceive the present.

Make no mistake,

The suffering of every immigrant family today is a Fiddler Tale;

The plight of the powerless, seeking safe-haven, facing the will of nations;

Disregarding or in denial of their basic human rights...

The inhumanity of children separated from their asylum-seeking parents

Faces of 7-year olds, filled with fear...

Their stories the newest entries in the chapters we started...

Linked by the core teaching in the Code we live by,

As Rabbi Saul Berman

[Modern Orthodox teacher of Biblical Jurisprudence at Yeshiva/Stern] wrote:

"No one ever said that adherence to biblical law in protecting the immigrant/stranger would be easy. "You shall love the stranger as yourself for you were strangers..." But if it is not our conscious aspiration, as individuals and as a nation, to achieve its moral teaching, then we forfeit our claim to be faithful servants of the God of Abraham [and Sarah.]"

[Jewish Week, July 13, 2018]

Remembering from whence we came; hearts torn and thus, ever open,
we cannot be blind or indifferent to where our world is going.

Egypt is no place for any of us to have to call home...

Time-Takeaway III...

If we distributed small pads and pencils for you to draw your life-journey
From last New Year to the present, including your steps over the next ten days,
Using only images [no words] what shape would your life-journey make?

This is, in part, a trick-question,

for the very fact that it is the new year almost answers it for you.

Though many might draw a life-line,

high points and low, projecting a linear trajectory...

the shape our life should make must somehow be a circle.

Which is just what this moment in Jewish Time implies.

For in contrast to a timeclock measuring our speed and distance,

We don't tell Jewish Time by the ticking off of seconds,

But by the beating of our hearts...Thus, the significance of Fiddler's Yiddish framing:

As Steven Skybell who plays Tevye asserts:

"The Yiddish has more muscularity. It goes deeper...down to the earth,
telling you what it might mean to be a Jew in 1905 Russia,

and it also goes up [somehow] to God." [NY Times, Joseph Berger, 7.14.18]

The language leads the way...

For it is not a *Yiddische Kopf* [point to head] you need to understand,

But rather, a Yiddishe Neshoma—a Jewish soul...

Instead of “muscularity,” I’d suggest the power of the Yiddish is its circularity, reconnecting us to our core, bringing us back to where we began.

What, after all, are we doing here?

Celebrating the World’s Creation, we aspire to walk the path marked “TESHUVAH” Every year we come back to the same place, yet, because life has changed, we are not the same. Reviewing our life-steps, reconsidering our life-direction, We recreate ourselves to be better, more *menchshlich* in embracing tomorrow. Facing 5779, we feel as if we come full circle, but not quite.

And so, the secret of our third sacred sensibility

To Living in Jewish Time.

If there’s a high-emotion mark in Fiddler [OK, there are many...]

It would be the wedding moment as Golde & Tevye,

on either side of the chuppah, sing back & forth as their baby becomes a bride.

How many fathers of the bride have danced and cried to the famed Fiddler lyric?

“*Sunrise, Sunset...*” Almost a self-caricature in the English...

BUT the Yiddish version is a revelation of a hidden life-rhythm.

As the original is entitled, **not** “*Sunrise-Sunset,*”

But rather, “*Tog Eyn—Tog Aus—Day In—Day Out.*”

WHY the difference?

It is not to imply a ‘Groundhog’s Day’ futility— “OY, not this again!”

But our awareness that in the mundane flow of days,

Something magical is happening..... *Tog Eyn—Tog Aus*

Something largely unseen, but felt, deep inside.

As any Jewish calendar-keeper will tell you:

We Jews are not so in love with the Sun!

As opposed to solar, our Jewish cycle is lunar.

Indeed, every 29 ¼ days, give or take, we celebrate the new month with Rosh Chodesh—a sacred ceremony of renewal led traditionally by women whose monthly cycles likewise mirrored the moon.

SO, the actual Yiddish lyric reveals a totally different verse:

“The seedling has brought forth flowers & overnight, given birth to a tree.”

Like the gift of life newly planted, we, as Jews, celebrate the moon when we can barely see it in the sky. WHY?

Because *Living in Jewish Time is an act of audacious hope!*

The sun remains ever the same. The moon waxes & wanes, and when its light is but a sliver, we have faith that it will glow yet again.

We who’ve known the darkest of times still believe our sharing of spirit can ignite a spark that will move our hearts and illumine the night...

The moon’s cycle reflects the reality of our lives.

Like the Fiddler's enchanted tune, we're transported to a vision beyond the horizon.
We sense it beyond seeing. With hope alive, it is already growing light.

Thus, the Yiddish chorus rings true:

Day in—Day out...Dos iz unzer loyt—This is our reward

Day in—Day out...Dos iz deyn basher—This is our destiny

Our reward—to discover in the regularity a hidden rhythm.

Our destiny—to unearth with time's passage our greater life-purpose.

Master teacher Rabbi Yitz Greenberg understands:

"Judaism taught that time has a positive direction...Other cultures taught that the sequence of history was a gradual decline, from a Golden Age to a Silver, a bronze to a copper...But Judaism, as it were, invented forward progress." [The Jewish Way]

Talking Jewish Time, he may be right.

For living in Jewish Time

makes our life-journey not a circle but rather an upward spiral;

the path we walk towards the promise of our world's tomorrow...

But it all depends on how we keep Jewish Time.

For most of us are so struck by the sun, we seldom notice the moon...

...Its not that our clocks are broken. On the contrary, Jewishly speaking,

They work just fine: Shabbat falls every seventh day;

Festivals come and go as the seasons unfold—all like sacred clockwork.

But most every day, most of us live in a different time-zone;

Largely unaware of the flow of the Jewish year...

Pursuing a profession...pre-occupied with that *life to-do list* that fills our days,

sunrise to sunset, knowing we'll never be done...

We are convinced we're doing all we can to make the most, to manage our time...

But time is managing us.

Still...If we can listen with heart enough to hear...

"Tog Eyn—Tog Aus" Time is speaking to our souls. A hidden rhythm resounds.

Gathered here to welcome our New Year,

we are rewinding our Jewish Clocks with the sparking of our hearts...

Choosing Life, stepping into the stream of sacred time, the seasons flow...

This Temple year, as our Covenant Learning theme,

following the model of our featured fall Author-in-Residence,

Abby Pogrebin, [October 12-13]

we'll try to do as she did, detailed in her book [My Jewish Year](#),

Experiencing the flow of Jewish Time by entering it

as fully & authentically as we can...

We will even process our journeys in *Time-Sharing* small groups,

[gifting My Jewish Year to the first couple hundred who sign up]
Reading and talking and walking the path of Jewish Time together...

Now, you certainly don't need me to tell you:

This world is a *meshuganeh* place!

It is really nothing new, as Tevye's opening monologue makes clear:

"A Fiddler on the Roof. Sounds crazy, No?

But in our little village, you might say

every one of us is a Fiddler on the Roof,

Trying to scratch out a pleasant tune without breaking his neck...

You may ask, why do we stay up here if it's so dangerous.

We stay because Anatevka is our home.

And how do we keep our balance?

That, I can tell you in a word..."

YIDDISH-ZEIT—[by] Living in Jewish Time, helping us face/embrace our world...

Perched precariously,

trying to keep our footing when the earth beneath seems unsteady,

and our faith in this world feels on very shaky ground,

Jewish Time can help us affirm our life-purpose.

Guiding our steps, "Day-in—Day Out" ...[Music starts soft...]

A soulful rhythm that brings renewed perspective,

even when life's path seems dark,

strengthening our hands with compassion,

illuminating our hearts with hope...

[Cantor Scher sings, Yiddish: TOG EYN—TOG AUS]...

