

Fiddler on the Roof and the Fight for Trans Lives

“A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no? But here, in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn’t easy. You may ask, why do we stay up there if it’s so dangerous? Well, we stay because Anatevka is our home. And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word: Tradition!”

These are the opening words of the 1971 movie, *Fiddler on the Roof*, spoken by the film’s main character, Tevye. The film was an adaptation of the 1964 Broadway show by the same name, which was itself an adaptation of the famous Yiddish tales of Sholom Aleichem. *Fiddler on the Roof* tells the story of Tevye, a pious milkman, his wife Golde, and their five daughters in the town of Anatevka. They live in a shtetl in 1905 under the Tsar’s rule. The family and the whole town grapple with changes in their religion and culture, as well as with the antisemitism around them.

Fiddler on the Roof won nine Tony Awards. It has been performed all over the world in many languages and has had five Broadway revivals since its

opening in 1964.¹ In this past year, Chaim Topol, the Israeli actor and singer who played Tevye in the film and Broadway show, and Sheldon Harnick, one of the lyricists of Fiddler on the Roof, died. Both of their deaths made news, in large part because Fiddler on the Roof still has an important place in American and Jewish culture.

At its core, Fiddler on the Roof is a story of parents and children, of generations trying to find their way in a world that was rapidly changing.

Each of Tevye's three oldest daughters eschews tradition in her choice for a husband. Tzeitel rejects the wealthy butcher to marry the poor tailor she loves.

Hodl marries Perchik, a Marxist revolutionary who get sent to Siberia for his activism.

Chava falls in love with Fyedka, a Christian Russian from town.

The story ends before we know what becomes of Tevye and Golde's youngest daughters, Shprintze and Bielke. They move with Tevye and

¹Robert Berkvist, [Sheldon Harnick, 'Fiddler on the Roof' Lyricist, Dies at 99](#), The New York Times, June 25, 2023

Golde to live with Uncle Avram in New York, so maybe their descendants are sitting here with us today.

Perhaps Fiddler on the Roof has been a phenomenon for over half a century now because we have all been Tzeitel, Hodl, and Chava, striving to find our way in a scary, dangerous world and to do so in a way that both honors our parents while forging our own paths.

Perhaps Fiddler on the Roof has been a phenomenon for over a half a century now because we have all been Tevye, struggling to understand a world that seems hell-bent on changing faster than we can process it. Tevye gives a voice and a face to the pain that comes with change; he makes us feel less alone when we wish that the world would slow down and that things would stay as they are.

As we sit here today at the beginning of 5784, we are as many years from the first production of Fiddler on the Roof as the first production was to 1905, the year Tevye and his family leave Anetevka. We are 59 years from 1964; 1964 is 59 years from 1905. When we think fondly of Fiddler on the Roof, are we feeling nostalgia for the 1960s that produced this musical or perhaps even our imagined life of the shtetl?

If we are looking back with only nostalgia, we have missed the central message of Fiddler on the Roof.

Its message is that Judaism and Jewish life changes.

That every generation struggles with the way the next generation evolves.

That Jewish tradition is dynamic, not static. That all tradition is dynamic, not static.

Creativity, and therefore imagination, have kept Judaism and Jewish peoplehood alive.

And such creativity and imagination can also bring the feeling of fear and pain as well.

What will this changing world look like? Will I feel comfortable in it? Will I belong in it?

Change is scary. We have a saying in my family: anyone who says they like change is lying. Stability makes us feel safe, comfortable, and sure of our place in the world. When we're confronted with change, especially huge, potentially life-altering shifts, we often have an impulse to attack new ideas and silence those who are calling for them.

Attacking change, silencing the voices advocating for change puts us on the wrong side of history.

In May of 1933, only three months after Hitler was elected as the Chancellor of Germany, a group of students from the German Student Union occupied and ransacked the Institute for Sexual Research in Berlin.² Founded by Magnus Hirschfeld, a gay, Jewish doctor and activist, the Institute pioneered gender-affirming care and advocated for the decriminalization of homosexuality in Germany. When the Nazis removed all the Institute's books and burned them, most of the Institute's groundbreaking research was destroyed.³ At Bebelplatz, the square where the Nazis burned some 20,000 books in May 1933, there is a memorial—beneath a sheet of glass, sits an empty room with empty bookshelves. Next to it, lays a plaque with a quote from Heinrich Heine, a Jewish poet whose books were burned alongside the Institute's: "Where they burn books, in the end they will burn humans too."

As Jews, we know the pain of being seen as outsiders, as 'not-normal,' as threatening. It is a pain more recent than Tevye and his family knew; the

² Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, [6 MAY 1933: LOOTING OF THE INSTITUTE OF SEXOLOGY](#)

³ Irene Katz Connolly, [It was a pioneering trans library — until the Nazis burned it](#), The Jewish Forward, June 7, 2023

memory of the millions who died in the Holocaust will not soon be forgotten, and we know that antisemitic acts in America are on the rise today.

It is also a pain as old as when the Israelites were in Egypt and the Pharaoh told his advisers, "Look, the Israelite people are too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so they may not increase. Otherwise, in the event of a war they will surely join our enemy and fight against us" (Exodus 1:9-10). The Exodus story is probably more than 2000 years old, and yet it continues to send shivers down our spines because the tactic at the heart of it is still one used today. "See those people over there?" someone in power says. "They could become dangerous, and if they *could* become dangerous, they are a threat to us. Therefore, it is justifiable to control, detain, and ultimately eliminate them."

The God of the Exodus, the God I most deeply believe in, is the God who hears the cries of the oppressed, wherever they are. Not only does God hear the cries of the Israelites, but after the Israelites have left Egypt, God tells them: "You shall not mistreat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me, and my anger shall blaze forth" (Exodus 22:21-23).

God hears the voice of the most vulnerable and the most marginalized.

Before God commands the Israelites not to mistreat widows and orphans, God gives them the most repeated commandment in our Torah: “You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21).

Whoever we are, wherever we have come from and wherever we are going, this will always be true: we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

This is core to our identity as Jews, and it must drive our response any time we witness oppression, stigmatization, harassment, and discrimination against any of our fellow human beings.

Our foundational story—that we were slaves in Egypt and God freed us so we could build a world of justice—is why I care so deeply about what is happening to transgender and non-binary youth and adults around this country today.

Judaism calls on us to concern ourselves with what is happening to our neighbors around the world. I am angry about the legislative attacks on

the LGBTQ community in this country, and I am particularly worried about the impact of the increase in this kind of legislation on transgender youth.

Suicide is the leading cause of death among people aged 10-24 in this country. LGBTQ youth are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers. Transgender and non-binary youth are 2 to 2.5 times more likely to experience symptoms of depression, to seriously consider suicide, and attempt suicide compared to their cisgender peers.⁴

This is a matter of life and death, and as Jews, we take that very seriously.

Rabbi Elliot Kukla made history in 2006 when he became the first transgender person ordained by a major movement. In an article about Rabbi Kukla in June of this year, the author wrote:

⁴ The Trevor Project, [Facts about LGBTQ Youth Suicide](#)

For Kukla, seeing trans issues take center stage following a wave of anti-trans legislation across the country is both heartening and devastating. On the one hand, it means that trans and nonbinary people have become “so visible that we can’t be ignored anymore,” but on the other hand, this moment of backlash to the level of prominence is “a really vulnerable and dangerous moment for trans people to be in, because our humanity is being so debated.”⁵

In an article Rabbi Kukla authored this summer, he summed up his feelings, saying: “No one is free while trans kids are in danger.”⁶

None of us is free while trans kids are in danger.

2023 marks the fourth consecutive record-breaking year for the total number of anti-trans bills considered in the U.S.⁷ This fact alone should terrify us.

⁵ Lior Zaltzman, [Trans Rabbi Elliot Kukla Wants a Better World for Queer Jewish Youth](#), Kveller, June 30, 2023

⁶ Rabbi Elliot Kukla, [OPINION: None of us are free when trans kids are in danger](#), Openly, June 29, 2023

⁷ Trans Legislation Tracker, [Tracking the rise of anti-trans bills in the U.S.](#)

In Oklahoma, the state legislature considered a bill that would ban gender-affirming care up to the age of 26, even though every major medical association has supported gender-affirming care and stated that medical decisions should be between physicians and patients.⁸

In Wyoming, the state legislature considered a bill that would make gender-affirming care considered child abuse. In 2022, Texas Governor Greg Abbot issued a letter to state health agencies saying that gender-affirming medical care constituted child abuse and should be investigated as such.⁹ A judge in Texas has granted a temporary restraining order against this directive, but understandably, this has left Texas families fearful of the future.

These bills, of course, are not limited to the medical realm. In Arizona, the state legislature considered a bill that encouraged parents to report and ban books which “promote gender fluidity or gender pronouns.” Also in Arizona and other states, we’ve seen a wave of “drag bans” that seek to limit an individual’s ability to dress how they would like and perform in public.

⁸ GLAAD, [Medical Association Statements in Support of Health Care for Transgender People and Youth](#), June 21, 2023

⁹ Trans Legislation Tracker, [What about Texas?](#)

Because we were strangers, we must be on the front lines of making this world a safe and joyous world for trans and non-binary youth and adults.

We do not have to understand everything about what it means to be transgender to loudly and repeatedly affirm that everyone has the right to live in dignity, free from persecution.

Everyone has the right to live in dignity, free from persecution.

I imagine that Tevye and his family, on their way out of Anatevka, were dreaming about this world.

The reason I love Fiddler on the Roof so much is that without denigrating our past, it doesn't romanticize it either. It doesn't say, "If only we could have stayed in Anatevka, everything would be okay." Even in Anatevka, change was coming for Tevye, whether he liked it or not.

And the thing I love about Tevye is, that after wringing his hands and singing about how he can't handle change—he changes. Tevye didn't

understand his daughters or how they chose their spouses, but he doesn't let his uncertainty or his fear get in the way of his love.

Sometimes I wonder, beneath all the hate that fuels the anti-LGBTQ legislation, how much fear is there that the world is going to look different tomorrow than it did yesterday?

How much fear is there that the next generation knows and perhaps understands something about gender that we couldn't access because of the limitations society built around us?

And yet, beneath that fear, we could tap into boundless creativity and imagination. The world is going to look different tomorrow than it did yesterday. We must choose to be part of making that new world a better one.

We have the power to imagine a better world, a world in which everyone is safe to be themselves and in which all God's creations, in their full glory, live in peace.

We can choose to build tomorrow's world with love and human dignity at its center.

We have to boldly and repeatedly declare that we celebrate the lives of transgender folks, especially our youth, and then strive every day to act on that declaration.

Our ancient prophets remind us that there has always been a tension between yesterday and tomorrow. Our prophet Joel says: "And the youth shall see visions" (Joel 3:1). He was talking about the return of prophecy in the land of Israel, but also about how the next generation will see things differently than we do. It is our job to let them lead us.

For our young visionaries to lead us effectively, we must build them a safer world in which to exist and thrive.

To be Tevye, who despite his fear of change, embraces it.

I imagine that Tevye might say something like, "I didn't pack up my family and leave Anatevka so we could be closed-minded about gender and close our eyes to persecution."

And 59 years from now, in 2082, when our descendants look back at us,
what will they say about the kind of world we built them?

As Jews, our birthright is a commitment to freedom and human dignity.

Our inheritance is a creativity that allows us to constantly reimagine the
world for the better.

It is our obligation to build the world we all deserve to live in.