

By Sarah Wildman

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A few years ago, I bought my father a T-shirt printed with the Yiddish words “Shver tsu zayn a yid” (“It’s hard to be a Jew”). The expression is something between a joke and a boast.

“Shver tsu Zayn a Yid” is also the title of a Sholom Aleichem comedy, which speaks to the great Yiddish author’s particular sort of sly love for the Jewish story and weariness at its burdens. It’s the kind of phrase that might have come straight from the mouth of Sholom Aleichem’s best-known creation, Tevye the milkman, the central character of “Fiddler on the Roof.”

I thought of the expression last week, when I learned that the Israeli actor Chaim Topol, who performed using only his last name, had died, at age 87. Zero Mostel was the man on the original cast recording of the Broadway musical version of “Fiddler,” but in the 1971 film, it was Topol, with his bass baritone and barrel chest, who forever imprinted his conversations with God into the memory of Jews and non-Jews alike.

It is Topol I see in my mind’s eye as the father of five who worries over money and tradition, navigating the last days of a shtetl in the Pale of Settlement, grappling with the forces that would ultimately upend centuries of Jewish life in Eastern Europe — and that led, some 110 years later, to my triple-checking the Yiddish on that T-shirt.

I rewatched the film last weekend for the first time in many years, and marveled at just how Jewish it is — the depictions of the Shabbat table; the huppah, or marriage canopy; the casual fervency and religious observance — and yet, ultimately, how universal.

“Fiddler” neatly ties Jews into a larger story of expulsion and emigration

and hope that is, in the end, one of the best versions of the story that a part of America tells itself: We are a nation of immigrants, the ingathering of the world's exiles.

When the film was released, Topol told *The Times* he hoped it would help minorities “understand they have rights and not to be pushed around by majorities, and hopefully someday majorities will understand it too.”

“Fiddler” also offers a theme that transcends any one culture: a father struggling to understand how his children are challenging tradition. None of that is an accident. While Tevye entered the world as Sholom Aleichem’s man in the author’s tale “Tevye and His Daughters,” with “Fiddler” he was reborn as an American creation. The character, the play and the movie nestled Jews into the American story in a way that, arguably, nothing had done quite so successfully before it.

“Fiddler on the Roof” made its debut in 1964, in the heyday of the American musical, with book by Joseph Stein, music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick and ecstatic direction (and, of course, choreography) by Jerome Robbins, whose big group dancing scenes recall the zest of “West Side Story.”

“Fiddler” “touches honestly on the customs of the Jewish community” in Russia, Howard Taubman wrote in *The Times*, and “lays bare in quick, moving strokes the sorrow of a people subject to sudden tempests of vandalism and, in the end, to eviction and exile.” But the play did so in the style and exuberance of musical theater, bringing us a book of songs that quickly became staples of the American canon.

It was not even 20 years after the Holocaust, and, though it is set in 1905 amid the pogroms of czarist Russia, the play had an unmistakable subtext of the Jewish apocalypse that would come three decades later. The Russian constable, after all, is only following orders to set off a pogrom, and later drive the Jews from the town. But the play’s Roman

Vishniac-style misty-eyed view of a lost world is somewhat sanitized. We witness antisemitic violence, but they all get to leave. No one is murdered or raped.

This was a retelling of Jewish fear and struggle and tradition and triumph that American audiences could grasp.

“When ‘Fiddler’ opened, it was a really big deal for Jewish Americans to go to a Broadway theater and see people lighting Shabbos candles onstage or having a wedding under a huppah — and it wasn’t a joke,” Alisa Solomon, the author of “Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of ‘Fiddler on the Roof,’” told me. Before “Fiddler,” she said, Eastern European and Ashkenaz representation onstage was limited to 1950s-era borscht-belt reviews. “It was the first big work of popular culture that represented the old country with a kind of affection and warm regard,” she added.

And yet it may also have been the ultimate act of assimilation. Ruth Wisse, a Harvard professor emerita who created an eight-part series of online classes about Tevye, pointed out that one of the biggest differences between the Tevye of Sholom Aleichem’s short stories and that of the more American tellings hangs on the character’s response to the daughter Chava, who is cast out of the family for marrying a gentile. In the film, she returns to say goodbye as the family flees, and Chava’s husband chides Tevye on his crime of silence against his child — hinting at a moral equivalence between those driving out the Jews and Tevye himself. Tevye softens slightly, offering a parting blessing. Sholom Aleichem, Dr. Wisse said, would never have countenanced intermarriage, nor such a comparison.

It is ironic that it was Topol, a robust 36-year-old, who became the most famous face of shtetl-weary Tevye. Topol was so vigorous, he could easily take over for his horse when the animal was tired or injured — a very purposeful recasting of Jewish masculinity, Ms. Solomon noted. Vincent Canby, writing in *The Times*, accused Topol of being more of a

“youngish Moses instead of a rueful Job.” Topol would go on to play Tevye thousands of times throughout his life, until he was far older than the character. “How many people are known for one part?” he asked The Associated Press in 2015. “How many people in my profession are known worldwide? So I am not complaining.”

It was something between a joke and a boast.

My father loved the shirt, by the way, even though the Yiddish was, in fact, misspelled. It’s hard to be a Jew, even in translation.

Sarah Wildman is a staff editor and writer in Opinion. She is the author of “Paper Love: Searching for the Girl My Grandfather Left Behind.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/18/opinion/topol-tevye-fiddler-tradition.html>