

Mindy Grosser Song Analysis

I chose to analyze the lyrics to the song “Tradition” because I feel a special connection to “Fiddler on the Roof” as I am Jewish. In the play “Fiddler on the Roof” Tevye the milkman is a Jewish peasant in pre-revolutionary Russia, dealing with the day to day problems of shtetl life, his Jewish traditions, his wife and daughters, and state-sanctioned pogroms. Tevye is trying to cope with the changes that are taking place in his family life, with his daughters and wife, and with his country, while at the same time trying to continue living his life according to his age old traditions. A central theme to the play and this song is that the old traditions are disintegrating under the pressure of a world culture that is being re-shaped by industrialization and mechanization.

The song “Tradition” speaks about the fact that Tevye and all of the people of his village have survived due to their customs and ways of life, “...and how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word . . . Tradition!” The community relies on their traditions and uses their traditions as guidance to help them live their lives to the fullest. The most common reaction to these song lyrics is that they are old fashioned and sexist. However, except for a few details, many modern Orthodox Jews today live their lives according to these very traditions that are mentioned in this song while at the same time live in a completely modern world with little or no contradiction existing between the two.

Tevye states in the lyrics, “Here in Anatevka we have our traditions for everything. How to eat, how to sleep, even how to wear clothes. For instance we always keep our heads covered and we wear these little prayer shawls. This shows our constant devotion to G-D! You may ask, how did this tradition get started? I’ll tell you, I don’t

know! But it's a tradition! Because of our traditions everyone here knows who he is and what G-D expects him to do.”

At first glance one might think that this sounds abnormally restrictive to have traditions for everything, especially how to eat, sleep and wear clothes. One might inaccurately assess that these traditions, are symptomatic of the time period that the play takes place in, just after the turn of the 20th century in Russia. These traditions however are still followed today by Orthodox Jews in the United States and all over the world.

The Torah or the five books of Moses acts as a direction booklet for Jewish people that instructs them how to live their lives. The Torah even instructs on seemingly minor things like how to eat, sleep and wear clothes as Tevye mentions. The Torah teaches a person to say a blessing before and after eating and asks that only kosher food be consumed, teaches what side is best to sleep on, and contains many laws about how to wear clothing and what types of clothing should be worn. For instance, women more so than men, are instructed to dress modestly. Tevye goes on to say that they always keep their heads covered and they wear little prayer shawls. The custom that is being described is that Jewish men always wear a special head covering or a beanie called a kippah (Hebrew) or a yarmalke (Yiddish) on their heads. The significance of wearing a kippah is that there is always a reminder that G-D is above a person. The next custom that Tevye describes is that of wearing prayer shawls or Tzitzit. Tzitzit is the four cornered, tasseled jersey worn by Jewish males as part of the Jewish dress code. “Tzitzit” means fringes because technically any four cornered garment worn by males is required by the Torah to be strung with tassels. The tassels represent the 613 biblical

commandments and serve as a constant reminder of them. These days generally four cornered shirts are not worn so instead men wear a four cornered jersey all the time, and tassels are put on that. The jersey is usually made out of wool or cotton and is put under the shirt.

As a simple milk man Tevye was most likely not highly educated according to Torah or Jewish law. This explains why Tevye says he does not know how these traditions got started or where they came from. Tevye just accepts the traditions without any questions as to where they came from or what they are about. This can be a dangerous thing to do however, because if one does not know the reasons behind what he is doing, it becomes easier to give up on these traditions. Many of the poor Jewish immigrants who came from Russia to the United States were like Tevye and not educated in Jewish law. They were only keeping the traditions because their ancestors did. When the immigrants came to the United States many of them gave up their traditions to assimilate to the new American ways of life.

The song continues enumerating each of the family member's roles according to tradition. "Who, day and night must scramble for a living, feed a wife and children, say his daily prayers? And who has the right as master of the house, to have the final word at home?" The Papa's main purpose is to work hard to feed his family, say his daily prayers and be the boss of his house. Today in Orthodox homes it is common for both the husband and wife to work as this has become the norm for the general public as well. In some cases the men study full time in Yeshiva, a special Jewish school for learning Torah, earning a minimal salary so the women must supplement their family's income and work a full time job in place of the husband. It is becoming increasingly

common for men not to have the sole responsibility of “scrambling for a living” just the opposite of what the song suggests. The song gives the idea that a lot of pressure exists for the man to make a living, and have time to say his daily prayers in addition. The man’s obligation to pray that the song discusses has not changed. According to Torah Judaism a man is obligated to pray at specific, designated times, three times a day. A women is encouraged to pray as well but she is not bound by time in order to fulfill this obligation.

A final idea that is different today in Orthodox homes compared to the song is that of the father having the final word at home. It was most likely simply a sign of the times that Tevye had the final word at home. These days in Orthodox homes as is common in the general public the father and mother have equal say in family affairs.

According to the song the Mama’s role was “to make a proper home, a quiet home, a kosher home, to raise the family to run the home, so Papa’s free to read the holy books.” These days in Orthodox homes the responsibility of home life does usually fall on the mother but that does not mean that she does not have many other responsibilities as well such as work. Today, the father helps the mother with things at home such as cooking, changing diapers, and taking care of children. Although roles do still exist and are important today as well, the roles are not as strictly defined as they are in the song “Tradition.” Not everything is as black and white as it is in the song, rather the roles are more blurred.

In the song the roles of the children were similar to those of the parents, the daughters were taught like all women were to “mend, and tend, and fix” while the son’s job was similar to that of their fathers to “learn a trade” and go to Hebrew school. The

song suggests that it was also important for the children to be ready to marry whomever the father picks. It is becoming increasingly common for Orthodox children of both sexes to go to college today. Arranged marriages are not longer done in Orthodox circles, although matchmakers are still used in some capacity. Modern matchmakers are simply used to suggest possible matches, from the single people they know or the singles that are in their databases. This is comparable to the new ways in American society that people meet each other. For example websites like E-Harmony and Match.com help to match people up in much the same way a modern matchmaker would. It is important to note that matchmakers are only one of many ways that Orthodox Jews use to meet their potential mate.

In some ways Orthodox Jews of today still follow many of the same age old traditions that are sung about in this popular hit song from the Broadway play “Fiddler On The Roof,” such as the clothing that one wears, the way one eats, and the way one prays. There are however, many ways that the lives of modern, Orthodox Jews differ from the descriptive, often restrictive roles such as the roles of the Mama, Papa, daughters, and sons, that are enumerated in “Tradition.”