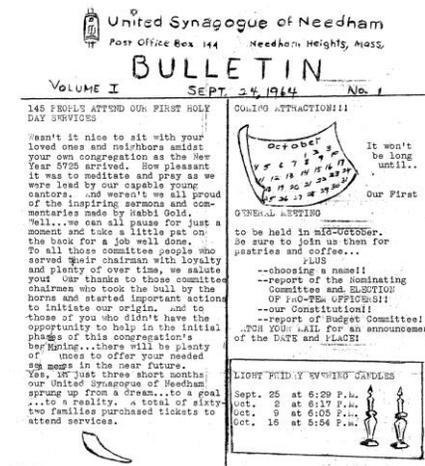


**Creating Community and Celebrating Tradition
During Temple Aliyah's Jubilee Year
Yom Kippur 2014
Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham**

Last Sunday, we kicked off our celebration of Temple Aliyah's jubilee year with a wonderful event. I hope you were there; if you weren't, I'm sorry you missed it. It was great to hear from some of our founding members, those pioneers who established our shul in 1964. I found it quite moving.

Why did they do it? Why did they get together, arrange to rent space at the Presbyterian Church down the street, and the Unitarian Church in the center of town? Why did they hire a rabbi, and a couple of cantors, and gather for the high holidays in September of 1964? And what motivated others to follow in their footsteps and contribute their time, energy, expertise and resources at key moments over the years, to help our shul develop and flourish?

What came up again and again, as I listened to the founders speak, and as I looked through some of group's early material such as this first bulletin of what was then called the United Synagogue of Needham, can be summed up in one word: **tradition**. The group that founded Temple Aliyah wanted to create a shul to sustain Jewish tradition in their families and to pass it along to their children.



That's why so many followed in their footsteps, and that's why we're here today. Because we value Jewish tradition. We not only value it, we *cherish* it, and we want to share it with the next generation.

Now, of course, that word, "**tradition**," reminds us of another great Jewish cultural event that took place in September 1964, just two days before the publication of this bulletin. I'm referring, of course, to the opening on Broadway of the great American musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*.



If you've looked at the schedule of events for the coming year, you'll understand why many of us are really looking forward to this coming January. Why? Because we are going to be putting on *Fiddler*. Why are we excited? Well, first of all, it's a great play. Millions of people have seen it. As Zalmen Mlotek, artistic director of the National Yiddish Theatre-Folksbeine puts it, "There's not a day [when] somewhere in the world *Fiddler* is not performed."¹ Apart from the Bible, it's probably the best-known Jewish cultural offering in the world.

There's another reason: That play can help us understand better why, fifty years ago, Temple Aliyah came to be. And it can help us better understand ourselves, today.

Fiddler is based on a series of stories by Sholem Aleichem,² the Yiddish-speaking Jewish humorist who lived in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Its very familiar story concerns the Jews of the fictional town of Anatevka. At the beginning of the play, we learn what keeps the community

together. What is it? **Tradition**, of course. Everyone—the papas, the mamas, the sons and the daughters—knows his or her place.

Now, if the play ended there, it would leave us with an idyllic portrait of a happy community, centered in their way of life, united around their faith. But as the play progresses, we see that the hold of tradition is weakening. Tevya the Milkman, the protagonist, struggles to raise and marry off his daughters in the wake of enormous changes in his society.

First one, then another, and then a third daughter defy their father and pursue partners who are increasingly difficult for their father to accept. At the same time, we learn that the idyllic town is under pressure from outside as well. The Czar (who, in the first few moments of the play seems simply to be the harmless butt of a joke) turns out to have sinister designs on the Jewish community. The play ends as Tevya and his family and all the Jews of Anatevka are expelled, dispersed to the four winds. Some head off to Palestine; others to America. It isn't clear that any of the townspeople will see one another again.

“Well,” you might say, “this play can tell us about 1905. But what does this have to do with the 1960's—or, for that matter, with the 21st century?”

Well, as much as the play purports to depict the experience of Eastern European Jewry during the first decade of the 20th century, it also reflects the sensibilities, concerns and anxieties of the play's creators, who were 2nd and 3rd generation Jews living in New York. The play is about *them* as well as about their parents and grandparents.

What was happening in the American Jewish community in those days? Well, things were changing. When Jews left places like Anatevka to come to the United States, if they arrived in the Boston area, they settled in places like Chelsea, or, eventually, Dorchester and Mattapan. They lived in close proximity to lots and lots of other Jews. They were comfortable living together—but it's not like they had a choice. Many towns didn't welcome Jews. Moreover, there were quotas restricting Jewish attendance at the prestigious colleges and universities in this country, and Jews had difficulty entering the professions.

But by the late '50s and early '60s, change was in the air. It became easier for Jews to get into college and into professional schools. And the suburban frontier opened up, too. As it did, Jews began to move from areas of dense Jewish population to suburbs like, well, Needham. Now, on the one hand, this was

wonderful. Many Jews were happy to leave their triple-deckers and move to homes with garages and lawns.

But these changes were also a source of concern.

Let me give you an example: There is a street in Boston that to this day is named, “Blue Hill Avenue.” To long-time Bostonian Jews, the name “Blue Hill Avenue” evokes a rich Jewish environment filled with synagogues, kosher restaurants, bookstores and kosher butcher shops up and down the street; it was a veritable beehive of Jewish activity. As someone put it to me, if you walked down the street on a Friday morning you’d smell the aroma of challah and babka coming out of a half dozen bakeries.

As the suburbs opened up to Jewish migration, Jews found themselves moving to new communities in which there were no Blue Hill Avenues. There were no city streets or squares with intense Jewish presence, with “thick” Jewish cultural expression. This raised a question: as Jews were leaving the very highly concentrated Jewish communities in which they had first settled when they arrived in America, what would become of their Jewishness? What would become of the Jewish tradition? Would they retain it, or would they lose it?

This concern, which was so real to the founders of Temple Aliyah, was captured by *Look*, a then-popular national magazine. Right around the time that *Fiddler* was in rehearsals,³ *Look* came out with a cover story entitled, “The Vanishing American Jew.” “[T]he story described how the Jewish community’s very success in America could be spelling its doom.”

Would Judaism and the Jewish people continue to flourish in America, or not? That was the question.

The mostly secular Jews who wrote, choreographed and produced *Fiddler on the Roof* weren’t simply adapting Sholem Aleichem’s stories to the stage; they were working out these very issues. They projected mid-20th century anxieties onto Tevya, *Fiddler*’s protagonist. If you look carefully, you can see that the forces that confront the people of Anatevka in the play aren’t that different from the forces sweeping America in the 1960s.

The ‘60’s was the height of the civil rights era, which broke down traditional barriers between ethnic, religious and racial groups. It was in 1967 that the film, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner,” starring Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn

as a white liberal couple whose equilibrium is challenged when their daughter brings home a black fiancé, was produced. (Coincidentally, that play is in revival this very weekend at the Huntington Theatre.) Cultural mores were changing: young people were listening to music that their parents couldn't stand. And there was an increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam, which was stimulating radical political thinking and action among the young, and provoking children to rebel against their parents.

You can see all this acted out in *Fiddler*. Who does Hodel fall in love with? Perchik, a radical. Yes, he teaches her socialism, and he also teaches her that in the big city of Kiev, young men and young women can dance unchaperoned. (As in the 1960s, radical politics and sexual liberation are depicted as deeply intertwined.) And Chava's betrothal to Fyedka, the Ukrainian, though set in 1905, is clearly a projection of a growing American Jewish phenomenon that, according to one observer, "was rattling the mainstream Jewish community in 1964."⁴

So yes, *Fiddler* is about Jews in 1905, but it's also about Jews in 1964.

It isn't surprising that, fifty years ago, a small group of Jews here in Needham decided that what they needed on the suburban frontier was **tradition**. They needed a Jewish community grounded in **tradition** in order to keep Judaism alive for themselves and their children. They understood that that homey and endearing scene at the beginning of *Fiddler* was not going to reappear on some suburban town common, any more than Blue Hill Avenue was going to be a reality in a 20th century suburb. But perhaps a shul anchored in Jewish tradition could help nourish a community of Jews eager to maintain their connections with one another, with Jewish tradition and with their future.

Synagogues were vital on the suburban frontier because what they created was community – **and community is essential for sustaining Jewish life**. Jews founded and joined synagogues in huge numbers in the 1950s and 1960s. Shuls proved themselves to be very well-suited for nourishing Jews and Judaism in this new American environment.

And, in fact, they still are.

Perhaps this is why so many of us are here today. Perhaps because there is this unspoken consciousness of the shul's importance in preserving community in the face of change.

On this, of all days, I think it is easy to understand why Jews build shuls. Can you imagine being alone on Yom Kippur? As Rabbi Reuven Hammer has written, “Prayer recited in community has a special dimension. Religion is not simply what we do with our aloneness, but what we do with others. Through prayer we discover how important the community is for sustaining our own salvation.”⁵

It’s paradoxical: on this day, which is probably the most personal day of the year, a day on which we focus so much on ourselves and how we need to correct our deficiencies, we feel the greatest need to be among others.

But community is not just about prayer, and it’s not just about Yom Kippur.

To live a full Jewish life requires community. We grow, we learn, we raise kids in community. There are many, many things we just can’t do alone. The Jewish way of “doing Jewish” is through community. As Rabbi Amiel Hirsch has written, “Synagogues are the anchoring institutions of American Jewry. The synagogue is the only institution that defines its mission as lifelong—cradle to grave.” Actually, I would say that it’s from *before* the cradle to *after* the grave.

Shuls, at their best, are inclusive communities: they include, in the language of *Fiddler*, “the Mamas and the Papas, the sons and the daughters;” folks who are single, and those who are married; those with children and those without; those with parents and those without; Jews by birth and Jews by choice, and people who aren’t Jewish at all, but who want to be here, whether because they are part of a Jewish family, want to learn about and experience Judaism, or for some other reason.

Whoever we are, we’re always welcome in shul. If home is where they have to take you in, well, in that sense shul is home, too. And that’s exactly what the founders of our shul understood.

So here we are in 2014, 5775, fifty years later. Looking around, some things are the same, and some things are different. And that wouldn’t surprise Tevya, would it? He certainly came to realize that when change is in the air, we need to adapt.

We’re a larger community in a nicer building, and we are fully egalitarian. We’re different. We’re a more diverse community in lots of ways. But through it all, we have remained focused on our mission, which is to be faithful to tradition, as it evolves and as it changes. And that is something that even Tevya would recognize

and celebrate. For tradition is not static. Reverence for tradition is not nostalgia. Tradition grows and evolves as we do.

Jewish tradition, at its core is about responsibility.

When Tevya fantasizes about what it would be like to be wealthy, he describes how he would look forward to spending seven hours each day studying in shul. In the first of the Sholem Aleichem stories on which *Fiddler* is based, he talks about donating a new roof to the shul, and a school for children, building a hospital for the sick and a shelter for the poor, and, in a line that was eventually omitted from “If I Were a Rich Man,” he muses about giving lots and lots of money to *tsedakah*.

If Tevya came around our shul, I don’t think he’d see many people studying seven hours a day, but he *would* see people who daven, people who are devoted to adult learning, children who are studying, and he would see people devoting themselves to many, many acts of lovingkindness.

He would also see that we are playing an important role in sustaining the Jewish people.

There is an openness in our synagogue—and in many other contemporary synagogues as well—that might have surprised Tevya but I think would have pleased him as well. To Tevya, intermarriage represented a terrible rejection of Judaism and Jewishness. And in 1905 it probably did.⁶ But in our America, the America of the late 20th and early 21st century, that usually isn’t the case. Think of the many people within our community who happen not to have been born Jewish. So many of them are people who have sought out Judaism and been enriched by Judaism and who have strengthened our community in turn. And this is true in synagogues around the country.

One thing has become clear in the past fifty years: there is no one model for how an interfaith couple relates to Judaism. There is a range of approaches that individuals and interfaith couples and families take toward Judaism. Some have little interest in Judaism; others may be curious and eager. Our shul sees it as part of our mission—our *core* mission—to be warm and welcoming and open as a resource to whoever would like to learn about and experience Judaism.

Our community is enriched in so many ways by changes that have occurred in the last fifty years: by the equal participation of men and women, by our openness, by

our diversity. That is something that probably neither Tevya nor, for that matter, the creators of *Fiddler*, could have imagined.

At the end of *Fiddler*, the poor villagers are exiled from Anatevka, But we know that they did go on to rebuild Jewish life and rebuild tradition in places like—as they say in *Fiddler*: “Chicago, America;” “New York, America;” and, even, eventually, “Needham, America.”

The folks who came here built a synagogue. And we who came after them have shaped it and molded it to reflect who we are, fifty years later.

Whatever role we are going to play in *Fiddler*, come January—whether we’re going to be in the cast; on the stage crew; handling the concession stand; selling tickets; or sitting in the audience—we are all part of the story, the evolving story, of Temple Aliyah.

That’s what we’ll be celebrating in January: namely, how first our predecessors, and then we, have adapted to the new realities in which we have found ourselves, how we continue to adapt, and also how we have sustained and strengthened Jewish tradition.

I would like to conclude with the words of Tevya himself. Not from *Fiddler* itself, but from the concluding lines of the last of the stories written by Sholem Aleichem on which *Fiddler* is based. That story is called, “Get Thee Out!” (in Hebrew or Yiddish, “*Lech L’cha*,”) and is the source for that last scene in the play when the people of Anatevka are heading out on their journey. In the story, Tevya is the narrator; he’s talking to Sholem Aleichem, whom he met on a train:

Farewell, my friend, and forgive me if I have talked too much. I must go—my grandchildren are waiting for me. And grandchildren, you must know, are a thousand times dearer and more precious than one’s own children.

If God wills it, we shall meet again. . . . Today, you and I happened to meet here on this train, tomorrow we might see each other [some place else], next year I might be swept along to Odessa or to Warsaw or maybe even to America.

(Unless, of course, the Almighty, the Ancient God of Israel, should look about him suddenly and say to us, “Do you know what, my

children? I think I'll send the Messiah down to you" [and all your troubles will be over].)

Wouldn't that be a clever trick? In the meantime, though, good-bye, go in good health [in Yiddish, "*gei gezunt*,"], and give my greetings to all our friends. Tell them not to worry: Our ancient God still lives!

On that note, let me wish everyone a year of deepening engagement with our tradition, within our community; a year of Jewish learning within our community; and a year of performing many, many *mitzvot* and acts of lovingkindness together with others within our community.

May this be a year in which we strengthen our community—and we are strengthened in return. *Shanah Tovah!*

¹ See: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/janelevere/2014/06/09/50th-anniversary-of-fiddler-on-the-roof-to-be-celebrated-in-new-york-tonight/> .

² Shalom Rabinovitz; 1859–1916.

³ Alisa Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof*, Metropolitan Books, 2013, p. 172.

⁴ See *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵ *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, p. 202 (adapted).

⁶ In the original stories, Chava indeed does abandon Judaism.