

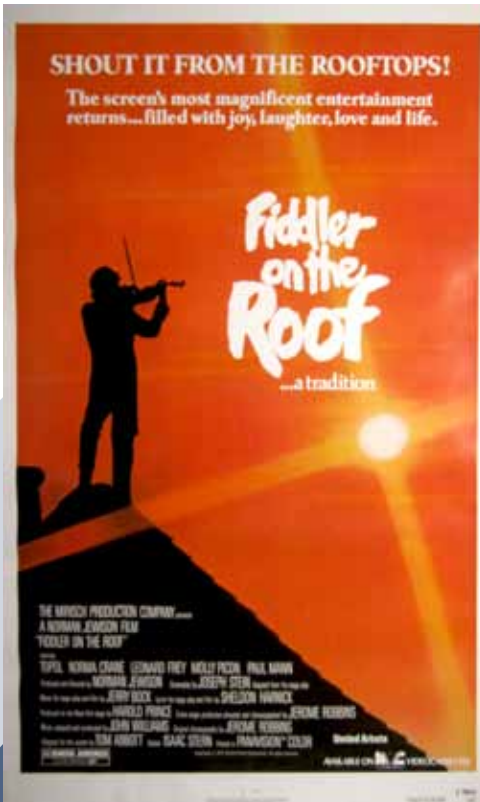
Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

HA'AZINU SEPTEMBER 7, 2013

Recording the Past

By Rabbi Richard Hirsh



Artifact:
Poster, *Fiddler on the Roof*
National Museum of American Jewish History

Recording the Past

Sacred Stories **HA'AZINU**

Chapter 32 of Deuteronomy depicts Moses offering his final words of wisdom to the Israelites in poetic verse, forty years after leaving Egypt. He struggles to do what so many leaders do nearing their deaths: convey the significance of his experiences to those who themselves never experienced them. Moses is trying to put into a few succinct phrases the essential things that an older generation has to teach to a younger one: "Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past..." [Deuteronomy 32:7] But perhaps equally important is that Moses charges the younger generation with the responsibility to do the same when they have reached maturity: "Enjoin (these words) upon your children, that they may observe faithfully all the terms of this Teaching." [Deuteronomy 32: 46]

"Even when the words may fade, melodies often invoke memories and associations that convey shared identity."

While ancient prose could have been used to convey what was witnessed by an earlier generation, the fact that the Bible records these final words of Moses as poetry, even as song, suggests that there is a special power in music that touches the soul and activates our memory. Even when the words may fade, melodies often invoke memories and associations that convey shared identity.



Music and song help create as well as convey a culture. In the Museum on the second floor there is an area devoted to late twentieth century TV and film clips that include a few musical numbers such as Barbra Streisand's dramatic finale in *Yentl* and "Tradition" from *Fiddler on the Roof*. We also find what the Museum wisely recognizes as so much more than "kitsch:" vinyl records of the Barrie Sisters, *Yiddish Songs Mama Never Taught Me*,

Two Sides of Pinchik, and more. Looking at these album covers we see in musical shorthand much of the story of the experience of twentieth century American Jews attempting to maintain their identity and also integrate into American



society. When our parents and grandparents placed these vinyl discs on their record players they were able to evoke through song and music their connection to far-away Israel, and their recollections of Shabbat and holiday melodies from the dinner table as well as the synagogue. And when their children listened in, they heard their elders passing down to them experiences, hopes, and dreams—not necessarily in the sacred chant of the synagogue service, but in the

popular folk melodies and words of everyday Jews increasingly confident in their place in a new land.

When we stand in front of a poster from the movie version of *Fiddler on the Roof*, we are witness to the re-telling of a time and a place and a way of Jewish life that has long passed, but remains resonant and even familiar. Just like Moses in this week's Torah reading, we assume the challenging task of conveying the significance of things once seen to those who themselves never experienced them.

Rabbi Richard Hirsh is the Executive Director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and teaches at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. He currently serves as co-chair of the Clergy Task Force on Domestic Violence of JWI (Jewish Women International), on the editorial board of Sh'ma magazine, and on the boards of the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia, the Religious Leaders Council of Greater Philadelphia, and the National Council of Synagogues.

ARTIFACTS:

The Barry Sisters in Israel

The Barry Sisters

National Museum of American Jewish History

Gift of Rosalie Barnett Willis

Yiddish Songs Mama Never Taught Me

Patsy Abbott

National Museum of American Jewish History

Records are located on the second floor in the Israel gallery and “suburban living room”

(cover) Poster, *Fiddler on the Roof*

National Museum of American Jewish History

Located in the large case to the right of the three large film screens on the second floor



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About this partnership:

Both the Jewish People and the United States of America are rooted in a quest for greater freedom and human dignity. Inspired by this parallelism, the National Museum of American Jewish History is collaborating with Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and its Rabbis Without Borders program to launch a new initiative, **Sacred Stories: A Living Commentary on the Hebrew Bible and American Jewish History**.

Sacred Stories weaves together Judaism's foundational sacred text, the Torah, with one of the most successful expressions of freedom in human history, the story of Jewish life in America. **Sacred Stories** explores our shared values by linking these two vital and compelling stories through contemporary commentary and 21st century media.

The **Torah** is a central feature of Jewish tradition. Used to refer generally to Jewish wisdom, it also refers specifically to the 5 Books of Moses which makes up the Hebrew Bible. A portion of the Torah text, a **Parsha**, is read on **Shabbat** (Sabbath). The whole Torah is read sequentially over the course of the year. Shabbat is the Jewish day of rest and begins on Friday evenings and ends Saturday night. Many Jews observe Shabbat to emulate God's resting on the seventh day of Creation. The fourth commandment is to keep Shabbat holy which Jews do with festive meals, resting, and learning.



The National Museum of American Jewish History, on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, presents educational programs and experiences that preserve, explore and celebrate the history of Jews in America. Its purpose is to connect Jews more closely to their heritage and to inspire in people of all backgrounds a greater appreciation for the diversity of the American Jewish experience and the freedoms to which Americans aspire.



Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership is a think tank, leadership training institute, and resource center. Bringing Jewish insights to a wide American audience, Clal makes Jewish wisdom an accessible public resource. A leader in religious pluralism, Clal builds bridges across communities to encourage diversity and openness. Linking Jewish texts and tradition with innovative scholarship, Clal promotes Jewish participation in American civic and spiritual life, reinvigorating communities and enhancing leadership development.