

**Waiting for the Messiah:
A Jewish-Buddhist Reflection on *Fiddler on the Roof***

Richard Oxenberg

I. Introduction: A Fiddler on the Roof

Tevya: “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 our neck. It isn’t easy. You may ask, why do we stay up there if it’s so dangerous? We stay because Anatevka is our home. And how do we keep our balance? That I can answer in one word: Tradition!”

So begins the story of Tevya and his three daughters, immortalized in the popular Broadway musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Upon hearing this first speech by Tevya one might well receive the impression that the show is an ode to the importance of tradition as a way of life. But actually the show dramatizes the breakdown of one tradition after another. The fragility and evanescence of tradition is the show’s theme. This evanescence is not in itself a bad thing. Traditions must shift, grow, and adapt to changing developments, sensibilities, and circumstances. The fluidity of life itself demands this. It turns out that rigid adherence to tradition is *not* what keeps the fiddler balanced on the roof. What then?

The answer to this question, I believe, comes only at the end of the show. The Jews of Anatevka are being evicted from their homes by their Russian overlords. We are never really told why. The Russian Constable who delivers the news merely says, “There is trouble in the world. Troublemakers.” They are to lose their homes, their worldly possessions, their community, their very way of life. Certainly many of their cherished traditions will not survive the upheaval. Faced with the prospect of losing so much, one of the villagers turns to the Rabbi and cries:

“Rabbi, we have been waiting for the Messiah all our lives! Wouldn’t this be a good time for him to come?” The Rabbi responds simply: “We will have to wait for him. . . someplace else.”

Just what it may mean to “wait for the Messiah” – and why it is ever necessary to be able to wait for him “someplace else” – this is the topic of my little essay.

II. Anatevka

Anatevka is the home of the Jews, and yet, at the same time, it is not their home – at least not theirs to possess once and for all. It is far from a perfect place, and yet they love its very imperfections. As they leave they sing of how, in Anatevka, they are “underfed, overworked.” Anatevka is “tumbledown, workaday.” “It isn’t exactly the Garden of Eden,” says one of the villagers. Still, it is their home and they love it: “Where else could Sabbath be so sweet,” they sing. They love it and must leave it.

If we lift our sights even just a little we can recognize that to live in Anatevka – this place of simple beauty, hardships, anguish, love, community, birth, death, struggle, triumph, defeat – this home that is ever insecure, and which, eventually, we will be forced to leave – is the human condition. We are all in Anatevka. It is in this Anatevkan world that we struggle to scratch out our pleasant, simple, tunes – and try to avoid breaking our necks.

The question of how to do so is the question at the heart of every religion and every authentic philosophy.

We love what we are forced to lose. There is a continual dialectic between love and loss at the heart of human life. Loss is an inevitable feature of the changeable world we live in, a feature of the impermanence of life, which the Buddhist’s call *anicca*. Loss is easy enough to understand. Love, on the other hand, is life’s great mystery: What do we love, why do we love it, what

should we love, and how do we cope with the heartache that the loss of what we love eventually brings?

Life, as we ordinarily live it, says the first Noble Truth of Buddhism, is *dukkha*; that is, it is troubled, pained, full of anxiety, heartbreak, and misery. The reason for this, says the second Noble Truth, is that we cling to what, by its very nature, is fleeting. We are anxious to acquire the passing things we need to live a satisfactory life, we are anxious to hold onto them once we've acquired them, and we are anxious again, and heartbroken, when we lose them, as we inevitably must, if only in death. This, and all the violence and suffering we inflict upon one another in our efforts to control what cannot be controlled, is *dukkha*.

The solution, says the Third Noble Truth, is to cease to cling. But just what this means is a great question. Can we love without struggling to hold onto what we love? Can love be content to lose what it loves? Or is Buddhism saying we must cease to love altogether? These are some of the questions raised by the Buddhist solution.

Judaism also presents a solution, which, also, is more than a little enigmatic. At the heart of the Torah is its central command: "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." The things of the world are passing away, but the One God over all endures forever. So God, presumably, is something we can love without loss.

But *who* is this God we are to love so entirely? And just *how* are we to love this God? And how is our love of this God to qualify our other loves? These are some of the great questions of Judaism.

III. Tradition

“How do we keep our balance?” asks Tevye at the start of *Fiddler on the Roof*, “That I can answer in one word: Tradition!”

The irony of the show is that the traditions Tevye looks to for stability are shifting constantly beneath his feet. His oldest daughter pleads with him to allow her to marry the man she loves rather than the man he arranged for her to marry, as tradition would dictate. At first Tevye resists this new innovation of romantic love. What will happen if they abandon their traditions, he worries: “One little time you pull out a prop, and where does it stop, where does it stop?” But his heart melts when he sees his daughter’s love for her beloved shining in her eyes, and he relents. Love triumphs over tradition.

A similar breach of tradition plays itself out, even more radically, with the second daughter. She declares her intention to marry the man she loves with or without Tevye’s permission. She asks only for his blessing. Again he resists, and, again, finally, relents. Again, love supersedes tradition.

Tradition is pushed to the breaking point, however, by Tevya’s third daughter, Chava. She falls in love with a gentile Russian man from the wider town surrounding the little Jewish village. When Tevye hears of this he forbids her to see him again. She too professes her love for her beloved. But this time love is not enough: “A fish may fall in love with a bird,” Tevya warns, “but where will they make a home?” Still, Chava defies her father and secretly marries the man she loves. After the wedding, she pleads with her father to accept them. Tevya is in turmoil: “Accept them? How can I accept them? Can I turn my back on my people, my faith? If I bend that far I will break. No!” He storms away and tells his wife that henceforth they must regard

their daughter as dead. The chorus stridently sings the single word “Tradition!” as Tevya storms off.

Tevye’s inability to accept his daughter’s Russian marriage is mirrored in the Russians’ inability to accept the Jewish presence in their land – an inability that ultimately leads to the Jews’ expulsion from Anatevka. We are left to wonder whether adherence to tradition – on all sides – secures home, or destroys it.

IV. Waiting for the Messiah

And so, as the Jews of Anatevka struggle to digest the news that they are to be forced from their homes in a few days, one of them says: “Rabbi, we have been waiting for the Messiah all our lives. Wouldn’t this be a good time for him to come?”

When the Messiah finally comes – so we read in the “Good Book” Tevya cites throughout the show – then the whole world will be reconciled to the One God over all, and, through this God, to itself. Then, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid . . . They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Is. 11: 15-16). Perhaps then even birds and fish will discover how to live together.

Wouldn’t this be a good time for the Messiah to come? Surely every time would be a good time for the Messiah to come. Then what detains him? The answer seems to have something to do with the dialectic of love and loss that winds through human life. We fight and cheat and lie and steal and kill in order to acquire and hold onto the things we love, and thereby shatter the world of love envisioned by the messianic prophets.

Buddhism would tell us that to heal ourselves we must cease to cling. But Judaism would caution that we must not thereby cease to love.

How can we manage both?

It is here, perhaps, that waiting for the Messiah comes in. To wait for the Messiah is to devote ourselves to an ideal of goodness that we know will always be fractured in our tumbledown, Anatevkan, world. It is to accept the many losses of life *for the sake of* love; to embrace an ultimate hope in spite of all that may seem to quash it. To wait for the Messiah is to discern in life's very evanescence and fragility – and indeed, at times, its tragic brokenness – a shimmer of the divine; it is to live with a heart both broken and full at the same time, both mournful and celebratory but finally reconciled to the fleeting beauty of this heart-wrenching world. Such a waiting is never passive. It is an active working at making ourselves into the sort of people to whom the Messiah *can* come. The Messiah never finally arrives, but waiting for the Messiah, committing ourselves to the ideal of love and goodness embodied by the Messiah, sanctifies life. This, I think, is Judaism's answer to the paradox of love and loss.

“We will have to wait for him someplace else,” says the Rabbi to his people. Life is full of loss. Traditions change, times change – the sun rises, the sun sets – the dialectic of love and loss goes on forever. But if, somehow, we can discern the thread of love that weaves itself through our passing days, then love prevails over loss – wherever the winds of change may drive us. It is to this thread of love we must strive to orient our lives, and our traditions, even as they shift beneath our feet.

And this, I think, is how the fiddler maintains his balance.

