

Becoming Tevye

In 2015, I had the great pleasure of playing the role of Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof” at a local community theater in Cincinnati OH. While I had had been in other musicals, Tevye was my “dream role”. This memoir is the story of how I “became Tevye”.

I did not know my grandfather very well. His name was Harry Bindler. He was married to my grandmother Fannie and they lived in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, NY. Every Sunday, my parents Mannie and Charlotte would bundle up my brother Eric, sister Phyllis and I to make the 40-minute drive from the suburbs of Long Island to visit my grandparents. Whenever we arrived, the first thing we would notice was the wonderful aroma of the Jewish food coming from the kitchen. I don’t know how my grandmother did it...but she could throw a kosher brisket in a pot with some water and an onion and make the most delicious pot roast you ever tasted. There was also the requisite boiled chicken, chicken soup, potato kugel and some type of green vegetable. It was all great and loaded with cholesterol! She would make a snack called “gribbinitz”(my spelling) that was pieces of chicken skin fried in chicken fat or as my grandparents called it, “smaltz”. Eating like this you could almost feel your arteries hardening!

But, back to Harry and our family history. There was a large area that was part of various eastern European countries and Russia that was called “The Pale”. It was a relatively barren area that was dotted with many little Jewish communities called “Shtetls”. My grandfather’s family lived in one such community outside of Minsk when it was still a part of Russia. My great-grandfather was a bookbinder (hence the surname “Bindler”...many Jewish surnames were based on the person’s profession). I recall Harry having a strange index finger with a very dark fingernail. He told us that as a boy part of his finger had been cut off by a paper cutter when helping in his father’s book binding business. One day while exploring my grandparent’s basement, I found some tiny leather-bound books of Shakespeare’s plays. Harry told us that these were books that had been from his father’s workshop which he had brought with him to America.

As an orthodox Jew, Harry was the patriarch of the family. He had a thick Russian accent and a gravelly voice. He also had a glower that would scare the pants off his grandchildren. Harry would typically fall asleep in his big, comfortable chair in the living room after one of Fannie’s huge lunches. The house was small, and the grandchildren would end up playing in the living room. This would typically wake up Harry who would glower at us and yell “shechet!” which was Yiddish for “be quiet”.

While Harry could be a frightening figure, he was also very sentimental about his family. I recall my grandfather often taking my siblings and I into the back room of his store and letting us pick out a toy (but not the most expensive ones). My grandfather spent years bringing over many of his siblings from Russia. They all settled in Flatbush and the Passover seder became a huge affair with 20 adults and children gathering around 2-3 tables to listen to Harry read the Haggadah in Hebrew. As the oldest grandson, I would be called upon each year at the Passover Seder to go up to the head of the table to sing the Four Questions in front of the whole “mishbuchah” (family). Singing the Four Questions was actually my first experience performing

in front of an audience. I recall my grandfather beaming at me with tears in his eyes as I “belted out” MANISHTANOH HALILO HAZEY, etc.. This was typical of Harry; he cried at all our family events. The family would refer to him as an “onion” because he cried so much. Looking back, I realize that I was a ham even as a child and loved to perform. I also realize that singing was one of the few things I had that would bring me positive recognition from my family. I recall being alone in our house and sitting tailor-seated on the floor with our toy poodle Angel and singing to her for long periods of time while she laid on her back wagging her tail while I petted her tummy. As an adult, I recognize that the purest form of emotional expression for me has always been singing. Sometimes I sing just to understand how I am feeling at the moment. I simply love to sing.

In 1964, “Fiddler on the Roof” came to Broadway starring Zero Mostel as the main character named Tevye. In the play, Tevye is a poor Jewish man who spends all his time trying to scratch out a living as the town milkman in the poor, little Jewish town of Anatevka. While Tevye is a religious man, he has little education. His greatest wish is to have enough wealth so he would have the time to study the Torah (the Jewish scripture) and be viewed by his neighbors as a learned man. Tevye bemoans the fact that he has no sons to help him do his work and cannot afford dowries to give his five daughters in marriage. Tevye is a man bound by tradition. The show’s first song is titled “Tradition” in which the role of each member of the community is defined. There is the Mama, the Papa, Yenta the Matchmaker, the Rabbi, Nachum the Beggar, etc.. Describing the Papa’s role, the song’s lyric is “he has the right as master of the house to have the final word at home”. The patriarchal family. That certainly described Harry.

One of the most endearing characteristics of Tevye is how much he loves his wife and daughters. While demanding they follow tradition and respect his wishes as the head of the house, he gives in to his daughters and is dominated by his wife Golde who is always telling him what to do. As the story unfolds, Tevye’s love for his daughters transcends his love of tradition. He allows his eldest daughter to marry who she wishes despite having already arranged for her to marry an older man. He allows his second daughter to marry a political radical who she later follows when he is exiled to Siberia. Tevye is in tears realizing that he will likely never see his daughter again. Finally, his third daughter wants to marry a Russian...a non-Jew. Tevye finally refuses as this would mean him totally giving up the traditions that have guided his life. This daughter runs off and marries her Russian boyfriend after which Tevye and Golde mourn her saying “Hava is dead to us”. He and Golde are heartbroken at the loss of their daughter. The finale of the play has all the residents of Anatevka being forced by the Czarist police to leave their homes. At the end of the show, Hava and her husband come back to say goodbye to the family. Tevye will not recognize them but finally says out loud, “may God be with you”. Thus, does he break his silence, and the family can once again embrace Hava and they speak of how to stay in touch once the family has moved to America.

Fiddler on the Roof was based on the eight-part Tevye story written by the Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem. Tevye the Dairyman was a real person who delivered milk to Aleichem’s family every day when they lived in Kiev which is now part of Ukraine. The different parts of the Tevye story were written years apart and reflect Sholom Aleichem’s concerns for his own

daughters as they grew up and assimilated into the more cosmopolitan society of the big city and were no longer bound by the traditions of the shtetl where he grew up. The character Tevye faces similar concerns as the outside world intrudes upon Anatevka and finally destroys the community. Tevye feels lost as he prepares to leave the only existence he has ever known. One of the most touching scenes in Fiddler is the closing scene where Tevye is alone onstage and the mythical fiddler on the roof approaches him. Tevye looks at the fiddler and nods his head as if to say, “come with me”. The audience realizes that, although Tevye is leaving all he knows in Anatevka, he will be taking his traditions with him to America.

Tevye’s story is in essence the story of my grandfather. He too had to leave his home and establish his family in a new country and culture. Yet, he carried his traditions with him and helped to establish a Jewish presence in his community. When listening to my grandfather speak about his family in Russia, it was plain that they were poor and had a rough time making ends meet...just like Tevye. He escaped from Russia to find a better life in America and to get away from the rampant antisemitism that was prevalent under the Czars.

When I was 14 years old, my grandfather took the whole family to a weekend matinee of Fiddler on the Roof. What I recall most about this experience had little to do with the show...it was watching my grandfather as he cried through the entire performance. This was my fondest memory of Harry. Even as a young teenager, watching my grandfather in tears made me realize the great love he had for his family and how much he lost having to leave many of them behind in Russia. I will never forget this experience. It touches me to this day.

When I went away to college, I rarely saw my grandparents anymore. They passed away when I was a young man. Life went on. I got married (twice), got my doctorate in Clinical Psychology, and moved to Cincinnati, OH where my wife Susan set up her medical practice and my private practice as a family psychologist. We raised my son Seth who moved to Denver, CO after college. Over the years, I developed a real love of Celtic music. I taught myself to play the guitar, mandolin, and banjo. I still loved to sing and would occasionally play small local concerts and in coffeehouses.

Fast forward to 2015.

Susan and I were bored on a Sunday morning, so we decided to look in the local Cincinnati paper to see what was going on around town. Susan found a notice for auditions for the musical “Guys and Dolls” at the Loveland Stage Company, a local community theater. Susan suggested that I audition for the show. I said to her, “you have got to be kidding me! I had not done musical theater since I was in high school and that had been a traumatic experience for me. Ironically, auditioning for “Guys and Dolls” in high school was the traumatic experience that made me swear off doing any more musical theater. I was an overweight sophomore with little social status amongst my peers. I was trying out for the part of Nicely Nicely Johnson, one of the lead characters in the show. At first, the audition was an exhilarating experience. I sang the song “Sit down your rocking the boat” acapella alone onstage in the large school auditorium. At the end of the song, two things happened that amazed me. First, I heard my last note echo from the back of the auditorium. Second, my peers who were also auditioning began to clap! They were

looking at me as if to say, “where did that voice come from?” Seeing their faces made me feel wonderful. It was one of the rare times in my youth when I felt accepted and appreciated by my peers. Afterwards, everyone who tried out said that I was a shoe-in for the part. I looked like Nicely Nicely Johnson (overweight) and “nailed” the song. A couple of days later, the cast list was posted on the school office window. I did not get the part. The drama teacher gave it to one of her “favorites”, a skinny guy with glasses who could not sing a note! To add insult to injury, she made me his understudy. So, I had to learn the entire part and most likely (and this was the case) I would not get to do the part at all. To say I was devastated would be an understatement. I did learn the part, never got to play it onstage, and was so humiliated that I never tried out for another show. My wife Susan knew about this experience with Guys and Dolls and urged me to try out because, no matter what happened, it would be therapeutic for me to audition once again for that show. Three hours later, Susan and I found ourselves at the theater for the audition. I was so nervous that I forgot to put my name on the audition form. Susan did it for me later. I sang the only show tune I knew, “Summertime” from “Porgy and Bess”. I read some lines and the choreographer made me do some dancing which was not so bad as Susan and I were long-time folk dancers. Two days later, I got a phone call from Pat, the director offering me the part of Nathan Detroit, one of the two main male characters of the show. I was stunned. Susan just smiled...it was vindication for what I went through in high school. Not only did I get a part in Guys and Dolls, but I was also one of the leads! The rehearsals were really fun. I liked the others in the cast and the show was a big success.

The following year, the theater put on “The Producers”. They needed a guy that could “tawk like a New Yawka” who could also sing. I got the lead part of Max Bialystock. This time my wife Susan was also in the cast. We had a ball and laughed through the rehearsals and the show. The show was a big hit. Susan and I were delighted with how much fun we had being in the show. At the cast party after the show closed, I was talking to the director and choreographer about how I would love for the theater to put on Fiddler on the Roof because I would really love to play Tevye. They said they would consider putting it on during the theater’s next season, but they told me that they could not pre-cast me as Tevye and needed to let others try out for the part. They then looked at each other and said “Yeah...right!” They knew I had, the voice, the Jewish manner of talking and the personal history that made me perfect for the part.

When Fiddler on the Roof was announced as part of the theater’s next season I was ecstatic. The day after Passover that year I began to grow a full beard so I would “look the part” for the auditions some months later. As the auditions progressed, Kathy the director took me aside and asked me if I would be satisfied taking the lesser role of Lazar Wolfe the Butcher if I did not get the part of Tevye. I spontaneously told Kathy that it would break my heart to be onstage and not be Tevye.

Kathy called me the next evening and told me that I got the part. Even better, she decided to cast my wife Susan as Golde! So, Susan and I would be playing husband and wife onstage. I was thrilled...Susan was terrified! She had tried out for the lesser role of Fruma Sarah, and never anticipated getting the female lead. Susan did not feel her voice was good enough for Golde’s

songs and was nervous about playing a “Jewish mama” since she was a Southern Baptist from Kentucky.

For almost three months, Susan and I were at rehearsals four evenings a week. In addition, we would work at home on the scenes between Tevye and Golda usually at 6:30am before we had to go to work. In all, we rehearsed six days a week. For me, this was a labor of love. For Susan, it was a frightening experience. I kept encouraging her, working on her lines and our duets. One thing we both laughed at was my helping her to become a Jewish mother who was the matriarch of her family. We worked on the accent, talking with your hands, attitude, etc.. Watching Susan trying to overcome her Kentucky accent and “tawk like Jewish mama” was a riot!

What was also humorous was having to give the same type of “Jewish lessons” to the cast. Fortunately, Kathy the director and I could collaborate on that. Unfortunately, whoever wrote the script we were using probably was not Jewish! The funniest example was the way they spelled Muttie (like in “Muttie, the Tailor”). The script had it spelled “Motel”. So, the cast was going around calling Muttie “Motel”! Kathy and I had to tell the cast that we were not talking about a place to stay on the road and to pronounce the tailor’s name “Muttie””. We both laughed imagining how the audience who we knew was going to be at least half Jewish would have reacted to Muttie being called Motel. We thought of how the critics (the show was reviewed by a local community theater organization) would have had a good laugh at us for mispronouncing Muttie’s name throughout the show. Thinking of this, all Kathy and I could say to each other was “Oy Veh!”

In a way, playing Tevye took over my life. In preparing to play Tevye, I did some research into the life of the Jewish people in the early 1900’s. During my research, I discovered the main reason why Tevye could not tolerate his daughter Hava marrying her Russian boyfriend. It was not only because he was a non-Jew. I found out that at that time in Russia, it was illegal to convert to Judaism. Therefore, Hava would have to convert to Russian Orthodox Catholicism in order for them to marry. Tevye could not tolerate Hava leaving the faith. By her doing so, Tevye declares to Golda that Hava “is dead to us”. He then sings “Haveleh”, his pet name for Hava and is in tears as he loved her so much and now could not allow himself to do so.

In studying the script, I realized that there were a couple of things missing that I wanted to add to our performances. First, I realized that the script did not mention anything about a mezuzah being part of Tevye’s home. Tradition has the placing of a mezuzah on the door jamb of a Jewish home to signify the family’s devotion to God. I had our stage manager put a mezuzah on the door frame of Tevye’s house onstage. I had her put it on with a magnet because at the end of the show, Tevye is leaving Anatevkeh and I wanted to show the audience that he was taking the mezuzah with him in order to establish a new Jewish home in America. I also would touch the mezuzah and then kiss my hand each time I entered the house onstage.

The other addition I made in “making Tevye my own” was adding a Yiddish word near the end of the show. When everyone is leaving Anatevkeh, Tevye and Golda are saying goodbye to their daughter Zeitel, her husband Muttie, and their baby. I realized that nowhere in the script

did it give the baby's gender. So, when I as Tevye said goodbye to them, I bent down, kissed the baby, and said, "boychick" which is Yiddish for a baby boy.

Finally, rehearsals were over, and it was time to perform the show. We did nine performances over three weekends. I recall standing in the wings peeking out at the audience waiting for the strains of the violin to start the show. I was nervous, a little scared, but mostly excited. It was going to happen...I was going to play Tevye...a dream come true. All the memories of Harry crying and the family seders washed over me while waiting to go on for the opening monologue. The show began and there I was...I became Tevye.

Much of the actual performance is a blur to me now. It seemed like the show was over almost before it began. One vivid memory is singing "Do you love me" to my wife. That was amazing as Susan and I weren't acting! We did love each other and it showed in how we sang the song. I recall the audience sighing and clapping when the song was over. It was like a wave of warmth washing over us.

My most vivid memory and the one that will last a lifetime was my family being there to see Susan and I perform. They had come in from all over the country and I had gotten them the best seats in the house.

So here I was. The culmination of my family history with "Fiddler on the Roof". 51 years after watching my grandfather cry watching the show, singing at the seder, all the rehearsals, the history as told by Sholom Aleichem, all of it.

There was my family in the audience... and they were all crying.

Life can be good sometimes.

In the end, "Becoming Tevye" was more than just a theatrical endeavor; it was a testament to the enduring power of tradition, the resilience of the human spirit, and the transformative nature of storytelling. As I took my final bow on that community theater stage, I knew that I had not only become Tevye but had also forged a deeper connection to my own identity and heritage. And in that moment, surrounded by loved ones and lost in the echoes of timeless melodies, I realized that life's greatest joys often lie in the intersection of past, present, and future.

