Faith Review: Fiddler on the Roof (1971)  
Drama, Family, Musical

This film was released in the United States November, 1971 and thereafter internationally. Directed and produced by Norman Jewison and based on the musical adaption of a book (Tevye's Daughters)/play (Tevye the Milkman) written by Sholom Aleichem which portrayed the life of a milkman in a Jewish shtetl in Czarist Russia. Sholom Aleichem which means "Peace be with you" was the pseudonym of Sholom Yakov Rabinovitz who was born in Russia under the Czarist rule and fled there in 1905. He lived in several European countries until he fled to America just before WWI when the Jewish shtetl communities were being destroyed. He wrote from 1883 until his death in 1916. An earlier, non-musical version of the story was filmed in 1939 (Tevya). Joseph Stein used the story as a basis for a musical adaptation for a Hal Prince Broadway production which won two Tony awards in 1965 (Best Musical, Best Musical adapted from a book). This musical film version directed by Jewison from a screenplay also written by Joseph Stein was also well received. It was nominated for eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and won three Oscars (Best Music, Sound and Cinematography). It also won two Golden Globes. The music for the stage play was written by Jerry Bock and was used in the film with some additional lyrics written for the musical score by Sheldon Harnick.

The film is available on DVD and may be obtained through Amazon.com, Blockbuster and Netflix. The genre of this film is listed as drama, family and musical by the International Movie database site; while Netflix lists it as a classical musical, a romance and Judaica. The film is rated as sentimental and emotional for general audiences which would account for the family listing under genre. I agree that this film would appeal to a general audience, but would probably not be appealing to teenagers or young adults because of its sentimental and dated
Music is integral to the story as well as providing the image (metaphor) for the life of a Jewish community within the larger community.

The film begins with the darkness just before sunrise with the sounds of birds and a crowing rooster. As the sky lightens, the sounds of a fiddle are added and then the camera pans to the fiddler (Isaac Stern playing; Tutte Lemkow appearing) standing on the rooftop playing. As it continues to grow lighter we are introduced to Tevye, the milkman (Haim Topol), who is something of a philosopher and provides introductory narration for the story and gives us the meaning of the fiddler image: "in the village, you might say, everyone of us is a fiddler on the roof trying to scratch out a pleasant simple tune without breaking our neck." The answer to keeping balanced is then given through the song "Tradition" which places all those in the community in their place. "Tradition is how a man knows who he is and what God expects him to do."

Tevye is the anchor character in this story as it unfolds; the challenges he faces are presented as challenges to his traditional role as "Papa". He has periodic conversations with God where the movements of the other characters in the scene are frozen. These narrative sequences (monologues) give us his thoughts about the events which are happening around him. These events shake the foundation of traditions upon which he has built his life, so the story revolves around how he deals with being a fiddler on the roof who is losing his balance. The first challenge is when Tzeitel (Rosalind Harris), his oldest daughter objects to the match with Lazar Wolf (Paul Mann), the rich butcher which has been arranger by Yente, the matchmaker (Molly Picon). Golde, his wife, sends Tevye to talk with Lazar and the match is made according to tradition. Motel (Leonard Frey), the poor tailor, and Tzeitel have made a pledge to each other: "Unheard of!, Absurd!" is Tevye's response, but after an internal debate (monologue), Tevye
agrees to honor their pledge, and at their wedding, a second tradition is broken (women dancing with men). The background of anti-Semitism which against which the opening events have taken place comes to the fore when the authorities attack the wedding party and then the homes of the Jewish residents.

The other challenges come from his daughters, Hedel (Michele Marsh) and the student revolutionary, Perchik (Paul Michael Glaser) to whom he has offered shelter, then finally one from Chava (Neva Small) and the Christian young man, Fyedka (Ray Lovelock).

The most notable film technique used was the stopping of the motion of the other characters when Tevye had his inner monologues. These scenes are staged so that you see close ups of Tevye and the daughter but in sequence; and the shots with them both show Tevye looking at them from a distance. This is symbolic of the distance between what they are asking or doing and the traditions which make Tevye's world.

Since this film is a musical the songs obviously have a function within the story. Tradition, with which the film begins, identifies the understood roles of those within the family. "If I Were a Rich Man" is a humorous interlude with Tevye imagining the joys of being rich, but also ends with his questioning of God: "Would it spoil some great eternal plan, if I were a rich man?" The wedding ceremony of Tzeitel and Motel is shown as happening almost as the background for "Sunrise, Sunset" where the singers are shown, but they are not shown singing. These are the thoughts of parents seeing their children as adults. Each of the songs has a purpose within the story which adds emotional depth as well as carries part of the narrative.

It is also highly symbolic that the fiddler follows Tevye out of the village as the Jewish community is being dispersed. Tevye's response is to move more energetically as he pulls the
wagon, in some sense the fiddler restores his sense of balance even though the fiddler is no longer on the roof and Tevye no longer has a home.

The film speaks in several ways theologically. The scenes where Tevye directly addresses God could be shown as clips to generate conversation about those issues; for example, the concept that tradition is what tells a man what God expects; or the clip where Tevye asks God if He could take time out from causing catastrophes to find a way to get Motel a sewing machine. In another setting the entire film could be shown to begin a discussion of the issue of anti-Semitism or to consider Tevye as an example of a "Job" figure to initiate conversation about "why bad things happen to good people".

In summary, because this film directly addresses, through Tevye's conversations with God and himself, issues which are always part of the human condition it can allow the audience to consider these issues through this character. The violence portrayed in the film carries strong emotional weight without the overt display of gore which can be offensive and distracting from a discussion about prejudices and their harm. The implied reconciliation which occurs between Tevye and Chava because Fyedka says they are also leaving the village because they cannot stay and remain silent where this type of persecution takes place could also open up discussion of the way we respond to persecutions even if we are not actively involved.