"Fiddler on the Roof: Tradition" LESSON PLAN

by Deb Kram

LESSON AT A GLANCE

In this lesson, students will explore the role of tradition through study of Jewish text and by watching a classic scene from the film "Fiddler on the Roof."

OBJECTIVES

- Students will think about essential elements of transmitting tradition.
- Students will discuss gender roles in Jewish tradition.
- Students will compose their own verses for the song "Tradition."

ACTIVITY:

1. There are two terms in Hebrew that refer to transmitted tradition: *kabbalah* (from the root קבל) and *masorah* (from the root מסר). Ask a student to read the following text out loud in both Hebrew and English. Then, as a class, find the roots of these two words within the Hebrew text of this *mishnah* and highlight them in different colors.

PIRKEI AVOT 1:1 Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly. They [the men of the Great Assembly] said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah.	פרקי אבות א:א מֹשֶׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי, וּמְסָרָהּ לִיהוֹשֻׁעַ, וִיהוֹשֻׁעַ לִזְקֵנִים, וּזְקֵנִים לִנְבִיאִים, וּנְבִיאִים מְסָרוּהָ לְאַנְשֵׁי כְנֶסֶת הַגְּדוֹלָה. הֵם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים, הֱווּ מְתוּנִים בַּדִּין, וְהַעֲמִידוּ תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה, וַעֲשׂוּ סְיָג לַתּוֹרָה:

Reflect on the three things recorded in the name of the men of the Great Assembly. What are three essential elements or behaviors that you would transmit in order to help safeguard Judaism's tradition?

2. Show the video at http://mediamidrash.behrmanhouse.com/watch.php?VID_ID=gRdfX7ut8gw. Explain to students the background of the story: "Fiddler on the Roof" was based on the Yiddish stories of Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916), one of the founding fathers of modern Yiddish literature. Professor Dan Miron of Columbia University claims that Sholem Aleichem's work was exploring one question: "How to adapt to modernity and yet not lose the continuity of a civilization that was Jewish. Clearly the answers given by Sholem Aleichem 100 years ago cannot be the answers given today. But what you can learn from him is how to negotiate an answer. Or even how to ask the question." Discuss:

What role does tradition play in keeping societies together?
According to the song, what are considered appropriate roles for men and women? For boys and girls?
What argument might be made for community being weaker or stronger due to distinct gender roles?

If you've watched the entire film, ask:

Do you think the characters reinforced traditional roles or redefined them?
In what ways do they challenge their roles and how do they fulfill them?

3. To conclude the lesson, each student can compose his or her own verse or verses for the song "Tradition" based on each student's unique perspectives on gender roles, essential Jewish behaviors, and Jewish values.

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