

Fiddler on the Roof: Tradition, New Visions, & Honest Prayers

Genesis 18: 1, 9-14, Psalm 22 (selected verses)

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God appeared to Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent. It was the hottest part of the day.... (*...Abraham went into the tent and asked Sarah to make bread and he got other food for three visitors*)

The visitors said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" He said, "In the tent." One of them said, "I'm coming back about this time next year. When I arrive, your wife Sarah will have a son." Sarah was listening at the tent opening, just behind the man. Abraham and Sarah were old by this time, very old. Sarah was far past the age for having babies. Sarah laughed within herself, "An old woman like me? Get pregnant? With this old man of a husband?" God said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh saying, 'Me? Have a baby? An old woman like me?' Is anything too hard for God? I'll be back about this time next year and Sarah will have a baby."

Genesis 18: 1, 9-14 The Message

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them....

Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

a company of evildoers encircles me. ...

But you, O Holy One, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!

.... in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

You did not hide your face from me, but heard when I cried to you.

Psalm 22 (selected verses) NRSV

Remember when you first saw Fiddler? On stage? The movie? My home church did a production. It is such a rich story and musical. What can we learn from this character from the arts that informs our faith?

Honest faith. Honest prayers. There are times we cry or choke back tears when life is harsh. When burdens are too great to carry. Sadness and grief. And we pray for strength and peace and hope in the midst of challenges and suffering.

And there are times when the biblical narrative reminds us to not take ourselves and even God too seriously. Abraham trusts God, but Sarah is not so sure. It is impossible. She laughs. Sometimes we laugh at God when something good happens, when an unexpected blessing. I felt that way when I met Jeffrey. I felt that way when we received Lilly grant for sabbatical.

Throughout Fiddler, Tevye talks to God. He is honest. And there is humor in his prayers, his conversations with God. What can we learn from Fiddler about honest prayer and humor?

Honest prayers to God. As I listened to Fiddler I heard Tevye's honest prayers to God. He has a conversation of lament, of humor, of frustration, of hope. He prays to both accept life's daily challenges. He prays because change is coming to his life and his village. He holds to tradition. That is what helps him make sense of life.

Fiddler invites us to see a man of faith whose prayers are conversations with God.

Video Clip - Dear God <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8q9Eli863c>

Honest prayers. Ongoing conversation with God. Here are couple other quotes from Tevye's conversations prayers with God.

- [to God] Am I bothering You too much? I'm sorry. As the good book says... aaahh, why should I tell You what the Good Book says?
- [to God] I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't You choose someone else?

He has conversations with God, of humor, frustration, hope, lament. Honest Prayer. The book of Psalms exists today because the people of Israel used these songs, including the songs of lament, in their worship. This songbook of Israel contains more psalms of lament than any other type of psalm.

STRUCTURE OF A PSALM OF LAMENT, A PRAYER OF LAMENT

Address. A biblical lament cries out *to God*. This is not an internally focused process of grieving, it is first and foremost a prayer. When we further consider the God to whom we cry, this aspect of a lament psalm, brief as it may be ("My God, my God"; Ps. 22) takes on even greater significance. We cry to an omnipotent God, a good and merciful God, a just God, a cosmic God who created the stars and universe and yet is as close as our own breath.

Complaint. A lament honestly and specifically names a situation or circumstance that is painful, wrong, or unjust—in other words, a circumstance that does not align with God's character and therefore does not make sense within God's kin-dom. The emotional tone of the complaint varies, depending on the type of lament psalm. It may express sorrow, remorse, weariness, anger, disappointment, or doubt. "a company of evildoers encircles me." Complaint - honest prayers of what is on our hearts - the cancer, the broken relationship, the financial burden, the sorrow and anger about violence.

Request. A lament expects a response or an answer. It expects that God will be able to do something about the situation. Most often the request sounds like a demand: it is the psalmist's cry, "God, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!"

Expression of trust. A lament generally includes an explicit expression of trust, sometimes woven through the complaint and request, and other times concluding the psalm with notes and exclamations of praise. "in the midst of the congregation I will praise you"

Biblical lament, then, is an honest cry to a God who is good, and just—a cry that this situation is not in alignment with God's person or purposes. It's a cry that expects an answer from God, and therefore results in hope, trust, and joy rather than despair.

Tevye is honest. Struggling with poverty, with Russian Tzar closing in, with changes in culture. He bends. He begins to see with different eyes, eyes of love. He sees his daughters differently. Keeps praying. He loves his traditions and he loves his daughters, so he slowly and reluctantly yields to their pleas, first to Tzeitel (Rosalind Harris) who loves her childhood friend the tailor Motel Kamzoil (Leonard Frey) rather than the wealthy butcher Lazar whom matchmaker Yente (Molly Picon) has suggested; and then to Hodel (Michele Marsh), who has fallen in love with her tutor Perchik (Paul Michael Glaser), the student from Kiev with radical social ideas. The latter publicly breaks tradition by crossing the line dividing the sexes—he goes over and dances with Hodel.

However, when Tevye's middle daughter, the bookish Chava, falls in love with the Gentile Fyedka, Tevye has reached the limit of his bending. He cannot loosen his grip on tradition anymore. His firm "No!" The priority of religious traditions becomes much more important than the commandment to love. He and his family are forced to leave the village to flee and we are left wondering what happens to them.

How do we pray that we may hold on to traditions that are meaningful while also opening our hearts and hands to Divine love and expansive truths?

What honest prayers can we offer to deepen our sense of God in the midst of lament and in blessings, both individually and together?

May we turn to God with honest prayers, prayers of hope, humor, lament and hope. Amen.