

The Question by Linda Zoe Podbros

Recently, in New York, I cried for almost the entirety of the Yiddish production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. At the end, the stranger next to me asked me if I were okay. I was so embarrassed that she had been aware of my uncontrollable sniffing and silent gasps.

Why did this production cause me to have such an avalanche of emotion?

I felt the presence of my father, long dead, sitting beside me crying, as he did when we watched the movie *Fiddler*, explaining it reminded him of his childhood. He lived in a shtetl in Lithuania until age 10, when he and his mother came penniless to America, to a new culture and language. Eventually through hard work he achieved accolades, financial security, and college for his children. He spoke Yiddish as a child; I heard Yiddish growing up. With this production, I was in my father's childhood.

But more. I knew that my parents, in the American immigrant story, had lived *Fiddler*. My father changed his name Reuven to Robert; my mother dropped the "h" in Sarah, shortened Grodzansky to Grodson. Assimilation to America. Both rejected their parents' orthodoxy, choosing the concept of Reform Judaism, and a rabbi known for intelligent progressive thought. But still they hung on to expectations, remnants of tradition. They expected me to marry a Jewish man, and not lose my Jewish roots.

Sitting there sniffing, I knew I also had lived *Fiddler*. Like the first daughter, I chose my husband. Like the second, I chose a path of radical social change. Like the third, I did not marry a Jew. But still I clung to aspects of tradition. A rabbi officiated our wedding; my husband broke the glass. I have mezuzahs on my door posts. My children had a Bar and Bat Mitzvah. I am American and I am Jewish, though far from the Judaism of my ancestors.

Sitting there silently blubbering, I knew that I had struggled with the question, how much can you change, give up, ignore, and still preserve a tradition? At what point is it gone? Is there a point where I am only American, no longer Jewish?

And through unstoppable tears and gasps, I knew my children in *Fiddler* have and will make their own decisions, decisions that may be difficult to accept, but I will.

At what point does the *Fiddler* stop playing? At what point am I only American?

The show now having ended, I am wiping my eyes, blowing my nose, appreciating the return of normal breathing and recovery from emotional onslaught, and I hear, "are you okay?"

I guess, after all these years of living the *Fiddler* story, asking the question when does the *fiddler* stop playing, searching for the answer to my American Jewish quandary, it is probably relevant for a complete stranger to turn to me and ask are you okay. I say yes. I am moving

toward the end of my life, so I am. I recognize that it will be up to my children and their children to answer this question.