

## Fiddlers and Prayers: Images of Music in Jewish Film

Just over a century ago, East European Jews in Europe and America began to create a popular culture in novels, plays, and songs. They left a large opening for music, a blank to be filled in at will by writers and performers. Often, on the Yiddish stage, the songs were inserted almost at the whim of the players, part of the luxurious liberty that playwrights and audiences granted actors. Parallel to the great nineteenth-century tradition of melodrama--which means drama with melodies--the Yiddish play was inherently musical. Certain stage conventions, particularly the wedding and the prayer tableau, stole the scene from dialogue and action, stopping time in its tracks and providing for a communal, ritualized response from the spectators. Fiddlers and prayers stood in for a centuries-old experience that was continuing in Europe, emerging in America.

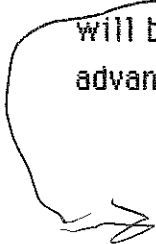
These Jews entered the film world early, producing their own and America's movies remarkably quickly. But that world was silent--there was no space left here for the richness of the spoken Yiddish language or the resonant Jewish song. Only with the sound revolution of 1927--achieved in a film written by a Jew, starring a Jew, and produced by Jews-- could a new ethnic form of drama literally find its voice, reach out to an invisible, but still deeply committed, audience of the new theaters, the sidestreet screening rooms and plush movie palaces of New York, in what the Yiddish theater folk called *di provints*, the "provinces"-- places like Philadelphia and Chicago--and in Warsaw. It became possible to show the struggles of a transitional generation to itself in its own mother tongue, or *mamelashn*, and with its own melodies. Meanwhile, as Jews took over the mainstream machinery at the heart of the film industry in what we loosely call "Hollywood," they kept on showing fiddlers and prayers, down through our times in vehicles from the 1927 *Jazz Singer* through *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Yentl*. It is in this loose sense that I am using--or misusing--the term "Jewish film" tonight. My core for commentary will be the Yiddish-language, in-group film of the 1930s to 1950s, but I will use Hollywood not only as a foil, as a mainstream mode of entertainment against which I aim to set the

internal cinema in relief, but also as a kind of continuity that has kept certain conventions alive, albeit transformed, to the present.

The approach I will be offering is a small step in a very large project I have recently begun, called the ethnomusicology of film. As an ethnomusicologist, one who studies the relationship between music and culture, I've become quite interested in why films have music, what the music is doing there, not from the usual <sup>film</sup> professional's approach of how it moves along the story or underlines the action, but what its cultural meaning might be. What we call "Hollywood" is shorthand for a dominant approach to not only how to make films, but how its resources are to be understood. Across the world, in India, Indonesia, Africa, Latin America, or even in East Europe, this dominant model has been the understood, received way of doing things. Local filmmakers, critics, and audiences everywhere have had to adjust to or resist the hegemony of the American film. In the United States itself, before the advent of Chicano film in the 1960s there were two subcultures that produced their own films: the Yiddish-language cinema and what was called "race" cinema, movies made by African-Americans for an in-group audience. In some cases, the same Jewish producers bankrolled both kinds of minority filmmaking. These two cinemas existed side by side in the sound period from the 1930s to around 1950. I do not have time tonight to launch into a comparative study of these two subcultural film systems, a first step in my larger project, and will instead concentrate just on a small set of Yiddish films including some from Poland as a helpful point of reference. For unlike the African-American case, the Jews, all too briefly, produced subcultural film on two continents.

What I aim to do is to identify conventions, what scholars might call "tropes," symbolic codes whose meaning may not always be easy to decipher at a distance, but whose very essence infuses and shapes the artistic products of a complicated, transatlantic community of Jews under stress. These dense cultural packages were also available to Hollywood, which, like all popular culture machines, enjoys having standardized imagery on hand to produce generic products. I will flash on regrettably short clips to make my points, and welcome your response to what are at present fairly tentative theories about what's going on here. As insiders yourselves, your instincts will be sound. Fortunately, for the Yiddish-language film, we have the advantage of the incredible salvage project undertaken by the National

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Center for Jewish Film, which has made available to us all high-quality copies, on affordable video, of a whole set of these traces from a vanished world. We also have the insights of first Eric Goldman's book on the subject, and most recently the major volume by J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, which accompanied an exhibition at no less than the Museum of Modern Art. Without these trailblazing efforts, it would be impossible for me to imagine a next step along the path of understanding Jewish film.

I'd like to frame my remarks by citing two instances of fiddling and praying, both originally from the Yiddish theater around the turn of the century and both involving, of all things, suicide. The first dramatic moment is from Jacob Lateiner's 1897 potboiler play, *David's fidele*, "David's Violin," <sup>which was never</sup> <sub>filmed</sub> act four, and involves two brothers. Tevya, the foolish, philistine pillar of the shtetl community, has had his money stolen and realizes his friends are false; he is going to hang himself. Along comes his brother David, who left town as a wandering klezmer fiddler and who has become a world-famous violin virtuoso. Tevya asks David to play him a tune to hang by. David calls upon the brothers' parents to save this wretched soul, and plays a tune that not only heals Tevya's heart, but causes the thief, hiding in the bushes, to return Tevya's money, leading quickly towards the happy ending. The second moment comes from the 1951 film of Jacob Gordin's drama *Gat, mentsh, un layv*, ("God, Man, and the Devil") a Faust story written around the time of Lateiner's play (it was published in 1903) but brought to the screen only in 1951. Gordin's foolish hero, a pious Torah-scribe tempted by the Devil through riches and lust, has become aware of the wretchedness of his life and decides to hang himself. As a parting gesture, he plays himself a prayer-tune on his long-neglected fiddle, which used to bring him joy, and then commits suicide at film's end. Gordin's dark vision seems like a way of standing Lateiner's standard melodrama happy ending on its head, and in fact, he might have been influenced by the earlier play. Here is the scene. Note particularly the tight overlapping of prayer and fiddler: first Hershele plays and sings a prayer, then he chants a prayer as the offstage music emphasizes the violin sound. (Clip 1)

Despite the different outcome of the fiddle's being played, the conjunction of fiddler and prayer in both these early-century stage works-- and I use the pun on the word "prayer" deliberately--shows we are dealing with a cultural package. What I propose to do here is disentangle the two

slightly by showing how they appear in a number of films independently so we can see how just two musical strands form part of a knot of meaning that privileges music as powerful carrier of a message about Jewish identity. I will not nicely wrap up the package, as the very nature of cultural symbols is to be what we call "multivalent," hold different values in different contexts that include time period, social group, author's perspective, or audience reception. In short, symbols are there to be played with by artists and interpreted by cultural consumers. Even in the brief period of the flowering of the Yiddish film in the 1930s in both New York and Warsaw, the same images or props can be used to very different effect. Yet they form part of a vocabulary of identity that is very deepseated, as we shall see.

I will begin with prayer, meaning, in my ambiguous use of the word, both the text itself and its embodiment in performance by a *prayer*, a *davener* or cantor, a person undertaking the obligation to manifest the meaning of a text. This is a crucial fusion in Jewish culture, as this literal em-body-ment of sacred text is what traditionally makes a community Jewish, more than their everyday habits, their vernacular language, or even their skin color. Through the visual and sound projection of this process of prayer, the universality of film coincides with the universality of performed sacred text to help structure an ethnic text--the Jewish film--and to create an audience as community.

Jewish film recognizes two kinds of performed prayer: public and private or, more accurately, public and domestic. Many films, like their forerunners, the Yiddish plays, stop time by offering intensely public displays of performed sacred text as a way of defining community. In this respect, both Yiddish and Hollywood film agree on this easiest marker of identity. The sight of a sea of talles-clad males, led by an authoritative male cantor, offers an eminently readable sound-and-image symbol for both Jews and non-Jews, what I am calling a cinematic trope. Let's look quickly at a montage of four such scenes, from the 1925 silent European Yiddish film *East and West*, the 1927 Hollywood production *The Jazz Singer*, the 1937 Polish Yiddish classic *The Dybbuk* and and the 1937 American Yiddish film *Overture to Glory* [clip sequence 2]

The remarkable similarity of the iconography spans three gaps: between the silent and sound film eras, the in-group and mainstream film

industries, and the European and American Jewish communities. The particular use of the single prayer *Kol Nidre* in <sup>JWS</sup> three of the four representations shows just how condensed this packaging of identity through music can become. Yet these scenes offer very different plot functions or cultural messages when we look at their dramatic context. For both the in-group *East and West* and its contemporary *Jazz Singer*, participation in performed sacred prayer is offered as a test of ethnic identity. The use of that archetypal prayer in *The Jazz Singer* is particularly adept, since the film is based on a play by a Jewish writer and stars a major Jewish entertainer for whom the conflict between the ethnic heartstrings and mainstream success was real enough to make his role convincing, so convincing, in fact, that the film catapulted the whole movie industry into the sound age through its music-based magnetism. In the film version of *The Jazz Singer*, unlike the ending of the Broadway play on which it is based, Al Jolson's Jackie Rabinowitz, who has turned himself into Jack Robin to succeed in show business, will have to stand up and sing *Kol Nidre* himself before Hollywood allows him to have it all as a successful ethnic and entertainer. The play had left this open, but suggested that Jack was turning back into Jackie.

Just two years earlier, in the silent Yiddish world of the film *East and West*, "Kol Nidre" has a different resonance. Molly Picon's brash, aggressively American young woman will be severely chastened later in the film for her disavowal of interest in the ethnic affirmation offered by the Yom Kippur service. It is a subsequent, lighthearted performance of ritual in what she thinks is a mock marriage service that will bind her to Europe for years and require her to move at least halfway towards ethnic community at film's end. *Overture to Glory*, set in the nineteenth century, takes this plot move even further, by ~~having~~ <sup>having</sup> The hero, the legendary cantor called "The Vilna Balabesl," who has moved to the opera stage and has flirted with a Polish countess, repent and die while singing in his old synagogue as his horrified abandoned wife looks on.

Time does not allow for an elaborate cultural analysis of these tangled plot lines. On the surface, of course, it does seem that the Hollywood move of easy cultural pluralism in New York for Jack Robin is a far cry from a 1930s Jewish-American view of the so-called Old World as a place where to leave your group was to die. If anything, this attitude is only

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main point:  
image of  
prayers +  
sound of  
prayer =  
icon of  
Jewish  
identity  
both internally  
and externally  
Kol Nidre  
from 1981  
remake,  
but probably  
wouldn't  
work now

strengthened in both contemporary and later Jewish films by repeatedly showing America as the logical site of a happy Jewish life. Psychologizing a bit further, one could probably see the notion of <sup>pretended or actual</sup> conversion=cultural or literal death as a metaphor for the dangers of intermarriage and assimilation in the United States during the period. For it is always the case that historical films are at least as much about the present as the past. I'll return to this conversion motif later, but for the moment, I am content to point out the notion of prayer as public spectacle as a trope that stands alongside the private or domestic use of performed sacred text. To this end, the synagogue scene from the Polish version of Ansky's classic play, *The Dybbuk*, can serve as a bridge. For in that powerful European film the voice of the star cantor and the view of a sea of tallesim is tacked on to the original stage drama, and seems quite extraneous to the screenplay's thrust. It appears as part of a long prologue that sets up the arranged marriage two Hasidic friends make between their unborn children on which the plot will hinge. Other than to allow Gershon Sirota, the well-paid cantorial superstar, to grace the film with extra entertainment, the scene has no plot function, telling us just how packaged a particular cinematic musical trope can be. As J. Hoberman has already pointed out, the cantor was a handy figure for all Jewish film, being a community celebrity at the time. Sirota was a sure winner, since he was popular on two continents. However time-stopping and plot-irrelevant Sirota's appearance seems, the scene does set up the notion of a community of prayers. This becomes a powerfully important image late in the film when we see the talles-clad Hasidim rallying in a desperate attempt to excommunicate the *dibek*, the spirit of the unquiet dead yeshiva youth that has possessed the body of the heroine. The ultimate failure of that attempt calls into question the strength of the earlier Sirota scene we have seen, just as the other form of prayer I now turn to, the more private variety, also becomes a symbol of communal weakness.

For just as public prayer appears in both the prologue and in the climax of *The Dybbuk*, so at the opening and late in the film a more intimate prayer of the Hasidic variety brackets the action. Indeed, we hear the same tune at the rabbi's table, a *lish-nign* or "table melody," as a framing device. This is what it looks and sounds like [clips 3] Notice the heavily stylized performance and camera work and the centrality of the rabbi, symbol of the weakened power of community that fails to effect the necessary healing the

plot demands yet withholds. The use of *nign* is a powerful symbol here. These spiritual tunes were used by the earliest Hasidic leaders to help shape a separate sense of identity from mainstream Judaism, as ultimately packaged in the cantorial format we've seen. Prayer as personal path to transcendence, amplified by collective singing and dancing, became a hallmark of Hasidism and a potent audiovisual shorthand device for filmmakers. But note also the strange appearance of a whole klezmer band behind the rabbi's table, again fusing the image of fiddlers and prayers, here in an very different context. a fiddler who is seen but not heard on the soundtrack. This move by the director is clearly at odds with the ethnographic quality of the film, often commented on and to which I will return, since to my knowledge, it was not common for a klezmer band to insert itself at such moments. Particularly striking is the long shot of a fiddler playing back-up chords, which we do not hear, rather than the tune, a sure sign of wedding dance-band music rather than the charmed circle of the rabbi's disciples. The director seems very fond of the fiddler-prayer nexus even when our ears do not support his argument.

In numerous movies, it is through the individual, rather than collective singing and humming of prayer tunes that a sense of ethnic identity is readily evoked. This happens in *The Dybbuk* itself, and is particularly pronounced in the 1939 *Tevya*, Maurice Schwartz's film version of Sholom Aleichem's Tevye stories, <sup>where</sup> the main character does what he does in the original tales: talk to God. Yet whereas Sholom Aleichem has his Tevye sing only a couple of times when in an unusually expansive mood, Tevye and his family are more identified with music in Schwartz's film. If they don't sing, the filmscore's orchestra does it for them. The primacy of this type of tune as a basic identifying trope emerges clearly in that more famous, later version of the same stories, *Fiddler on the Roof*, where the composer Jerry Bock integrates snatches of Hasidic *nign* into the basic Broadway sound of the score to provide authenticity, as in "If I Were a Rich Man's" *yobba-dabba* and *biri-biri-bam*, too well known to require playing for you here. It is typical of *Fiddler's* period that its creators turned to the then-exotic Hasidic sound (this was around 1960, before the rise of Hasidim as the "authentic" Jews among mainstream Jewish-Americans) as their ethnic point of reference, just as the composer of the filmscore for *The Jazz Singer* did back in 1927. In that Hollywood view of the Lower East

Side, whenever the neighborhood appears literally or figuratively through the ghetto character Yudelson or his cronies, the film score--actually the first major film soundtrack in history--turns to a Hasidic melody as signature tune, here used comically rather than with the cultural resonance it has in Yiddish film. Yet in the older Yiddish films and in Sholom Aleichem's stories, it is synagogue song that is hummed, not the *nign* straight from the rabbi's table. After all, cantorial music was in the ascendance, and men visited the synagogue for sure, the Hasidic *shtibl* less certainly. Whatever the tune, in Yiddish films, domestic singing sets the seal on *yiddishkayt*, the downhome value of family life and roots. It is shown in *Tevye* when Tevye is at home, like this moment of enjoyment of his grandson. That this is a conscious, sentimental use of domestic song is underlined by its companion: a short shot of Khave, the renegade daughter, also singing at the well, but performing in a local Ukrainian folk style identified as such by the score in the film's opening shots of peasant women working in the fields. The well itself is a heavy metaphor in a Jewish film. Tevye is ceremonially washing his hands, while Khave is suggesting a reversal of the Bible's pious Rebecca meeting her future husband, Isaac the patriarch, at the well. **[clip 4]**

But this sort of domestic tunefulness is not restricted to men; particularly as performed by women, it conveys a deep sense of ethnic identity. Two particularly poignant moments occur as scenes of elderly women chanting *got lan avram*, the women's prayer for the end of the Sabbath, which is in Yiddish, as opposed to men's mastery of Hebrew, so particularly *heymish*. At the end of *The Cantor's Son*, our hero, Moishe Oysher, has given up success on the Yiddish stage and radio and a New York girlfriend for his childhood sweetheart back in Europe and is about to marry her in the shtetl. There is a poignant scene where the American girl, who has followed him all the way to the old country, gives him up and prepares to leave. This is immediately followed by the old grandma chanting *got lan avram*, asking that evil be removed from the house, an unmistakable reference to the contamination America offers, but which is being driven out. Again, it is hard not to interpret this as a metaphor for the dangers of deserting *yiddishkayt* in America. Though I don't know much about who went to these films in the late 1930s, I imagine it was an older generation who



could wax nostalgic and enjoy the rather unrealistic triumph of the old ways that *The Cantor's Son* offers.

In *Tevye*, the emotional freight loaded onto *got lan avram* is even heavier: Tevye's wife Golde prays when Khava has deserted the family, marrying a Ukrainian boy. She turns to this ritual quite mechanically: despite their deep sorrow, the family--and here, the mother as metaphor being always particularly strong, the Jewish tradition itself--must go on despite personal tragedy. Here are the two snippets of pious women's song: **[clips 5]** It is perhaps not accidental that it is in two American-made films that this domestic singing has an aura of nostalgia and sentimentality.

To summarize what I've said thus far about prayers in Jewish film, they seem to come in two types: the formal, synagogue, cantorial variety and the more intimate interior song. Hollywood has used both when interested in trademarking Jewish culture in that easy, brand-name way stereotypes work: on the one hand they make an ethnic audience feel comfortable and on the other they provide a general audience with local color. We've already seen the standardized use of "Kol Nidre," which used to resonate throughout American culture as a labeling device. So, for example, when somebody like the crooner Perry Como wanted to put out an album of favorite religious songs, *Kol Nidre* was the obvious choice to represent the Jews. Though the appeal of *Kol Nidre* lasted through Neil Diamond's remake of *The Jazz Singer* in 1981, it seems unlikely that a general audience would still notice its cultural relevance to them, now that Hasidism rules the media image of the Jews.

All this seems nicely packaged and easy to dissect until you examine those moments in Jewish film when filmmakers test your expectations, when they offer an alternate reading of a cultural text or a cinematic trope. A remarkable example of the inversion of the seemingly standard values of the prayer occurs in the 1937 Polish-Jewish film *Freylikhe kaptsonim*, "The Jolly Paupers." From the very start, the two foolish anti-heroes, Motl and Kopl, are marked by their singing prayers while at work, already undermining the positive resonance of the humming habit ~~[clips 6]~~ As they make themselves and their whole community ridiculous by imagining they have discovered oil in their town, everything about them and their environment appears more and more ludicrous. Even America as a sensible

alternative to a hopeless homeland is blasted as stereotype when we see the foolish visiting rich American, an echo of an earlier European-made film, *East and West*. This European refusal to acknowledge America's primacy, also inscribed in Sholom Aleichem's Tevye stories, stands in clear contrast to the usual American viewpoint I mentioned earlier. For the Warsaw crowd, the attractive contrast to the silly shtetl is the cosmopolitan big city life, symbolized musically by the Yiddish popular song of the theater and nightclub. Early in *The Jolly Paupers*, a daughter of one of the bumbling protagonists is swept off her feet by the handsome star of a visiting Yiddish theater troupe, who is putting on one of the earliest Yiddish shows, Abraham Goldfaden's old national epic *Bar Kokhba*. It is not this shopworn early musical style that wins her heart, but a modern love song, leading her to run off with a visiting troupe of actors. The girl becomes a partner of her boyfriend in the big city, and we see them sing together later in the film. They continue to sing Yiddish pop songs, as contrasted with the New York club scene shown in *The Cantor's Son*, where Moishe Dysher and Helen Weiss's hot duet is a take-off on the Hasidic nign.

What I am doing here is trying to rub the American- and European-made films off each other to generate some sparks of insight. I am not proposing, however, a binary opposition; Jewish life is too ambiguous and shifting on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1930s to allow for easy reading. All the same, looking just at moments of prayer, there are some scenes from one shore that seem unlikely to have been filmed on the other shore.

Perhaps the most challenging use of sacred song in Jewish film is the lunatic asylum scene in the Polish-made *Jolly Paupers* which, I have suggested, takes a rather critical look at small-town Jewish life in the satirical manner of classic Yiddish literature. At one point, the offbeat antics of our anti-heroes has temporarily landed them in the looney bin. They confront an inmate who forces them to sing a prayer or, as he says, "I'll bite your head off." Not only do they comply, but Motl and Kopl also replicate the scene when they get back to their hometown at film's end, forcing their compatriots to repeat the madman's prompting. Only the sudden arrival of the ultrarational petroleum scout turns the scene--and the town away from the brink of total madness. **[clip 6]**

This savage inversion of public prayer seemingly stands in sharp contrast to the cultural values cited earlier. Yet it does not stand alone,

being in some sense merely a reinforcement of the seeds of doubt sown in *The Dybbuk* that we have already seen. In both cases, prayer is futile; in both, madness cowers the normal members of the community. Remember, both films were made in the same year in Poland in a period of extreme anxiety. From this angle, one might reassess the much-appreciated way in which *The Dybbuk* represents shtetl life. Throughout, that film offers a veritable encyclopaedia of Yiddish folklore, from *apshprekhn a git uyg*, warding off the evil eye, through the learning of Torah and the chanting of the *nigun*. What does this scrupulous attention to performative detail mean? The most elaborately staged of these presumably authentic scenes is the famous dance of the paupers, choreographed by Judith Berg. Dance is a close ally of music in filmic representation, and a good place to look for the film artists' approach to culture. The sequence presents a grotesque metamorphosis of vernacular movement, and seems from one angle of vision to be a counterpart to the lunatic inmate's mad vision of prayer. The effect of this transmutation of tradition in both *The Jolly Paupers* and *The Dybbuk* is to make the traditional smalltown world appear almost pathetic and of the past, impotent in the face of evil or modernity.

I hope to have demonstrated so far that looking for tropes can be rewarding, but not unambiguous, work. Let me extend the effort to the image of the fiddler. In the Broadway floodlighting of *Fiddler on the Roof*, the notion of the folk violinist, the klezmer musician, seems a blindingly obvious trope that should be transparently clear. Yet, as the opening clip from *God, Man, and Devil* has already shown, there can also be a shadow on the strings. Let me briefly rehearse the fiddler's relationship to Yiddish culture, then look at some filmed examples. The idea of the fiddler as basic metaphor for East European Jewish culture can be found over a century ago in literary works ranging from Sholom Aleichem's novel *Stampenyu* with its klezmer atmosphere, to Chekhov's short story "Rothschild's Fiddle," in which a brutalized non-Jewish folk musician is humanized by a Jewish fiddler's spirit. Often cited is the great writer Yehuda Leyb Perets's line that you can tell how many men live in a Jewish home by how many fiddles hang on the walls. In my own experience, I can cite the anecdote of a family friend. He recalled the scene from his youth. A czarist military doctor was reviewing skinny Jewish boys for recruitment, and asked his orderly how many more *berdichevskie skripki*, "Berdichev fiddles," were still waiting to be

inspected. Being brought up to worship the Russian school of violinists, whom I emulated by becoming a classical fiddler at age four, I can empathize with this close association of Jewishness and the violin.]]

Yet a closer look reveals ambiguity. No Yiddish film is more famous than *Yidl mitn fidl*, "Yidl with a fiddle," which has even been turned into a musical in New York these days. Molly Picon's lively cross-dressed street fiddler seems the epitome of oldtime pluck and tradition, particularly in the extensive, really ethnographic footage of the wedding the film crew staged in the town of Kazimierz, on location in Poland. The footage of folk dance is precious, really the only extended sequence we have from prewar Poland. Yet we never hear the wedding band live--Olshanetsky's <sup>film</sup> score provides an unsettling distance between what we see and what we hear. In this case, the violin has moved from the street, where in the opening scene we see Yidl fiddling, to a professional filmscore as the appropriate home for the sound of strings, in the Hollywood tradition. This mediation of the direct sound mirrors the film's odd status as a joint American-Polish production. For both audiences, the equation of street musician with old-time shtetl life would have rung true. Ultimately, as the plot takes the street musicians to Warsaw, the fiddle confirms this change of location quite literally as the former klezmer joins the pit orchestra of a Yiddish vaudeville house. We have already seen this urban popular music ambiance evoked in *The Jolly Paupers* as the wave of the Yiddish future. In *Yidl mitn fidl*, Yidl gives up her cross-dressed disguise on stage as she accidentally substitutes for the star of the show. Acting out her life, she responds to her fiddler friend's evocation of the film's title tune by announcing she has given all that up.

#### [Clip 7]

So getting her life and her gender straight means Yidl drops the fiddle as her major form of cultural identity. At film's end, she boards a ship for America, while her former klezmer partner, now boyfriend, plays on as a subordinate member of the band. This ascendancy of voice over violin is an accurate account of what happened in America. The recorded traditional dance tunes that we now think of as the core of what we call "klezmer music," completely faded out the fiddle in favor of the more penetrating clarinet, now seen through dominant figures like Dave Tarras and Naftule Brandwine to be the more authentic voice of <sup>our</sup> ~~an~~ imagined Old World. Paradoxically, it is in the persona of Jack Benny, the Benny Kubelski who

became an American superstar entertainer, that the violin returns as a prop for once Jewish, now assimilated, comedy.

Just to pursue this a bit farther, we can look at the fate of the film vehicle called *Humoresque*. In its 1920s original version, it dealt with the life of a clearly Jewish musician. By the time of its 1940 remake, John Garfield, himself a Jewish actor, played a very carefully crafted generic European immigrant, once again uncoupling the connection between the Jew and the fiddle in film.

But a more sinister use of the fiddle occurs in, of all places, Yiddish film itself, in that precursor to *Fiddler on the Roof*, Maurice Schwartz's 1939 film *Tevye*. As I mentioned earlier, *Tevye's* take on the Sholom Aleichem stories is less of a Broadway musical approach in, for example, allowing the main character to hum, or have hummed for him by the score, the old-time *nign*. But even more dramatically, the appearance of the fiddle finds it in the hands of the enemy, the Ukrainian oppressors, rather than ensconced as the surveyor of the scene from a Jewish rooftop. Schwartz's overriding interest in the *Tevye* stories is not the cute substitution of the tailor Motl Kamzoyl for the butcher Leyzer-Wolf as a husband for one daughter, Tsaytl, but the brutal betrayal of another daughter, Khava, who joins the Slavic fold. Khava's story is the centerpiece, and it is told in chilling detail. No contrast could be sharper than the appearance of the fiddler in the two films, *Fiddler* and *Tevye*, based on the same stories, in connection with interethnic matchmaking. In *Fiddler*, the movie, the fiddler is given more work to do than in the stage version. Throughout, he serves as emblem of community, particularly striking in a dance sequence superimposed on *Tevye's* musing about Khava. The fiddler implores Khava to stay, but she moves off with Fedya. By contrast, the 1939 *Tevye* features the fiddler in a drunken, brutal brawl scene among the Ukrainians as the voice of the enemy. Here the fiddle is not Chekhov's gentle voice of the Jews or Broadway's simple metaphor for a whole ethnic group, but rather a rude, rustic nerve-scraper that even the goyim can't tolerate. [clips 8].

In this brief kaleidoscopic survey I have tried to convey something of the intense interest I've found in not only looking at, but also listening to Jewish film. It is only in the last decade that film studies in general has become seriously interested in the sound component of the movies we watch. The pinpointing of musical moves, particularly as cultural

constructs, seems only to be emerging on the horizon of scholarship right about now. I hope I've demonstrated the particular appeal of thinking about the way a subculture like the Jews might go about stylizing their music in the service of developing a cinematic sensibility. These musical moments also serve as a sturdy bridge between the way the mainstream movie system works and the way non-standard <sup>subcultural</sup> film finds its voice and creates local traditions. Fiddlers and prayers are only two examples of an emerging set of aesthetic resources small groups can mine as they search for boxoffice gold and cultural satisfaction. Many other film examples come readily to mind: Barbara Streisand's play with prayers in *Yentl* is an obvious example. But I leave the rest of the viewing and thinking to you; my time is up this evening.

### List of Clips

1. "God, man, and devil," suicide scene
2. synagogue sequence: a) "East and West," b) "The Jazz Singer,"  
c) "Dybbuk," d) "Overture to Glory"
3. "Dybbuk," tish-nign
4. "Tevye." a) Tevye at the well; b) Khave at the well
5. "got fun avrom" examples: a) "Cantor's Son," b) "Tevye"
6. "Jolly Paupers," 2 rosh khodesh scenes
7. "Yidl mitn fidl," Yidl gives up fiddle onstage
8. contrasting fiddlers: a) "Fiddler on the Roof," fiddler + Khave  
b) "Tevye," Ukrainian fiddler