Rabbi Keith Stern as Teyye and Beth Shuster as Golde.

Rabbi trades the pulpit for pulling a milk cart
Temple Avodah’s Stern to play Teyye

By Leah Burrows
Special to the Advocate

Rabbi Keith Stern spends his weekend like any other rabbi: Shabbat services on Friday, Bar Mitzvahs on Saturday, choreography rehearsals on Sundays. Maybe that last part isn’t typical behavior for a rabbi, but Keith Stern is not a typical rabbi.

Next week, Stern will exchange his suit for a pair of brown work pants and a worn yellow vest, his yarmulke for a gray fisherman’s cap and his bima for a stage when he takes the role of Teyye in his temple’s production of “Fiddler on the Roof.”

Temple Beth Avodah in Newton has staged a play almost every year for more than 30 years. In his 14 years as Beth Avodah’s rabbi, Stern has taken small roles in the productions but never the lead. “Tevye, however, was too good an opportunity to become more of a community,” Shuster said.

“Tevye does a lot of sermons,” Stern joked. “So I agreed.”

But Stern admits that the role “quenched a Jewish thirst” for the freedom of Western Europe.

Samantha Saada, 11, and Carly Saada, 8, both of Newton, play two of Golde and Teyye’s daughters.

For Stern, the play is not only about realizing a childhood dream but also a way to bring his community together. “These plays started as fund-raisers,” Stern said. “But now, if we sell out every seat, we just about break even. It’s not about raising funds anymore—it’s about raising spirits. It’s a spirit-raiser.”

Sybil Tonkonogy, the show’s producer and veteran of every Beth Avodah’s staging, agreed. “Everyone works together on these shows. It’s about the community getting together and building each other up,” Tonkonogy said.

About 120 congregants have worked on the production since December. Temple members helped build sets, find costumes and raise money. Tonkonogy directed. Director Paul Farwell is a veteran of the local theater scene.

The cast, all congregants, come from many different backgrounds. There is a neuro-psychologist, a nurse, a real estate agent and a university professor.


Exploring the odyssey of the Russian emigre Jew
Shrayer’s fiction probes identity, faith

By Nicole Levy
Special to the Advocate


Shrayer teaches at Boston College. He is now working on an account of his Soviet youth.

Throughout “Yom Kippur in Amsterdam,” Maxim D. Shrayer gives a modern Jewish twist to Shakespeare’s dictum, “To thine own self be true.”

This recently published collection of short stories depicts the romantic struggles of Jewish-Americans immigrants from the former Soviet Union in terms of identity and intermarriage. Yet the book avoids polemics. Instead, it becomes the reader to conversation like an open cafe.

Shrayer frequently pairs a Jewish man with a non-Jewish woman to discover how they attempt to resolve religious differences. For example, in “The Disappearance of Zalman,” Mark Kagan grapples with whether he should have a relationship with Sarah as he imagines accompanying her to church when they have kids.

In an interview, Shrayer said he was “particularly fascinated by interfaith marriage as a question of identity, especially for Jewish men, who must consider the identity of their future children.”

Shrayer said his writing “follows in the footsteps” of Yiddish novelist Isaac B. Singer by conveying that “Jewish identity is not just about history and spirituality, but includes love, sex, and desire, which we negotiate in our family lives.”

Shrayer said teaching for 14 years at Boston College has enriched his perspective on Jewish-Christian relationships. A professor of Russian, English and Jewish Studies, he found that “as a Jewish stranger dialogueing with young Catholics,” he became “aware of the nuances found in the interactions” between the two faiths.

“Trouse Fishing in Virginia” brings to light the subtleties of the marriage between Jill, the daughter of a patriarchal American Jew, and Julian, a Catholic priest.

And in “Shabbos Sonata” and “Shabbos Sonata Redux,” Shuster said. “We’ll ask, ‘Is this right, rabbi?’”

Shrayer described himself as 200 percent Jewish, alluding to the Russian adage of calculating the proportion of endogamous marriage within one’s family tree. Born in Moscow in 1967, he is descended on his father’s side from Lithuanian rabbis. Although his immediate family practiced few daily rituals, he remembers feeling “Jewish pride” while growing up.

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The experience in America of Jewish emigre during the last quarter of the 20th century serves as a subject of “Yom Kippur in Amsterdam.” Their conflicts are “not just about survival, but a question of religious identity as seen through the lens of love and relationships,” Shrayer said.

The meeting of cultures surfaces in a tapestry of misconceptions, such as reflected in this passage from “The Disappearance of Zalman”:

“Of course, you have your parents refuse us in Russia?” the rabbi asked leaning over the table. “Actually no,” Masha replied, feeling guilty for something he hadn’t done. “They were kind and free engineers. We got permission to leave in…”

Shrayer, who was 20 when he left Russia, often bristles when others try to teach him what it means to be Jewish, saying he has felt attached to Judaism since he was young. His strong ties to his Jewish ethnicity shaped the title story. The oft-amorphous interplay between identity and intermarriage appears in the forefront of the plot. On his way from Nice to his home in Baltimore, Jake Glaz decides to land in Amsterdam on Yom Kippur Eve “to avoid having to atone while in flight over fathomless waters.” That night, he recounts his break up with his gentile girlfriend, Jake wanders into the Red Light District to find a woman to comfort and in goes to the city’s old Portuguese synagogue.

Jake’s alodoxy in this scene brings to mind the self-portrait of Jewish Galician writer Isaac Goldberg in the iconic “Jews Praying in the Syna- gogue on Yom Kippur” (1878). Shrayer acknowledged that he purposefully added elements associated with Jewish history to draw upon the reader’s knowledge. He believes Jews retain a connection to the “Jewish spiritual memory,” unless they “completely disavow their Jewish origins.”

Asked about whether intermarriage could succeed, Shrayer responded in an email: “I don’t know I think intermarriage sometimes works, if people are sensible and negotiate major things (children, especially) in advance. Intermarriage results from love, idealism, naivete, [an] inability to be fully honest with one another.”