



PHOTOS BY RON FELLMAN

Rabbi Keith Stern as Tevye and Beth Shuster as Golde.

Rabbi trades the pulpit for pulling a milk cart

Temple Avodah's Stern to play Tevye

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 Tevye 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 to pass up.

"I've wanted to play Tevye since the first time I saw it performed on Broadway as a teenager," said Stern, who is 55. In that production, he saw Zero Mostel in his most famous role.

"When I saw him, I thought I know this guy," Stern said. "Tevye understands what our boundaries and traditions are, what makes us unique and challenges us as Jews."

Stern, a big man with a bushy gray beard, even looks like Tevye.

Still, when offered the role, he wondered – just for a moment – if it would be appropriate for the rabbi to star in the temple's play. In the end, it was the play's subject more than the role that persuaded him.

"It would be one thing if this were a secular play," Stern said. "I wouldn't want to do that, but this is a quintessentially Jewish play. It understands the struggle of Jewish life. Is it a little unorthodox to play the lead? Sure, but so am I."



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

"Fiddler on the Roof,"
May 13, 15-16 at Temple Beth
Avodah in Newton. Tickets
at www.bethavodah.org

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 fundraisers," 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 show Beth Avodah has staged, 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 said. 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.

Beth Shuster, a recruiter for the biotech firm Genzyme, plays Golde, Tevye's wife.

"This play gives everyone the opportunity to become more of a community," Shuster said. "Everyone seems to get involved in some way."

On the stage, everyone from every background, including the rabbi, is equal – almost.

"We still apologize after teasing him or shouting at him," Shuster said of Stern.

Many of the cast still look to Stern for guidance onstage, Shuster said. "We'll ask, 'Is this right, rabbi?' and the rabbi will say, 'I'm Tevye not rabbi.'"

In fact, Paul Farwell is the director.

But Stern admits that the two – Tevye and the rabbi – have a lot in common.

"Tevye does a lot of sermonizing," Stern said. In writing his own High Holiday sermon for this year, Stern is channeling the sum of Tevye's spirit.

"Tevye raises interesting questions of what it means to be a Jew and how you relate to God. The guy has been such a big part of my life, I have to talk about him in my sermon."

Exploring the odyssey of the Russian émigré Jew

Shrayer's fiction probes identity, faith

By Nicole Levy

Special to the Advocate

Throughout "Yom Kippur in Amsterdam," Maxim D. Shrayer gives a modern Jewish twist to Shakespeare's dictum, "To thine own self by true."

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

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 end 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 Beshavis 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 dialoguing with young Catholics," he became "aware of the nuances found in the interactions" between the two faiths.

"Trout Fishing in Virginia" brings to light the subtleties of the marriage between Jill, the daughter of a patrician Boston family, and a Jew, national poet laureate Andrew Lance. The narrator parenthetically notes, "Their name used to be Lansky, and in her occasional moments of jolliness Jill referred to her husband's family as 'the gangsters.'"

Shrayer described himself as 20 percent Jewish, alluding to the Russian adage of calculating the proportion of endogenous 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.

From 1979 to 1987, he and his parents, Emilia Shrayer and David Shrayer-Petrov, suffered as refuseniks. While keeping his status as a refusenik secret from his peers, Shrayer said the experience left him "more self-aware as a Jew" and impressed upon him "the fragility of Jews in the non-Jewish world." Likewise, his stories highlight the main characters' "vulnerability" while they live in limbo.

Shrayer's memoir, "Waiting for America: A Story of Emigration" (2007) chronicles his journey to the United States via Austria and Italy. Not only was the move physically liberating, but it "quenched a Jewish thirst" for the freedom of Western Europe.



PHOTO BY GARY GILBERT

Shrayer teaches at Boston College.

He is now working on an account of his Soviet youth.

The experience in America of Jewish émigrés during the last quarter of the 20th century serves as a subtext 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 its share of misconceptions, such as reflected in this passage from "The Disappearance of Zalman":

"'Were your parents refuseniks in Russia?' the rabbi asked leaning over the table. 'Actually no,' Mark replied, feeling guilty for something he hadn't done. 'They were rank and file engineers. We got permission to leave in '77.'"

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 shape 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, uncertain over his break up with his gentile girlfriend, Jake wanders into the Red Light District to find a woman to confide in and then goes to the city's old Portuguese synagogue.

Jake's aloofness in this scene brings to mind the self-portrait of Jewish Galician artist Maurycy Gottlieb in the iconic "Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur" (1878). Shrayer acknowledged that he purposefully added elements associated with Jewish history to draw upon the reader's knowledge. He believes that 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, naiveté, [an] inability to be fully honest with one another."