

# CREATIVE COMMUNITY FOR PEACE

## The Tevye Test by Ben M. Freeman

Inspired by both the [Bechdel Test](#), which measures the representation of women in TV and film, and the [Riz Test](#), which measures the same for the Muslim community, *The Tevye Test*, rooted in Ben M. Freeman's work in the upcoming second chapter in his trilogy on Jewish Pride, aims to measure the representation of Jews in the media.

Working in a feedback loop, the Media reflects perceptions of reality back to the public while simultaneously shaping how viewers interact with the world. This is complex, particularly for marginalized groups, who may be represented in ways that perpetuate stereotypes and negative perceptions of their communities.

Asking whether a piece of media simply features a minority character is not enough to help us gauge the value of that representation. It is not just the frequency of minority representation that matters, it is also the quality of that representation.

With regards to Jewish people, depictions of Jews in popular culture tend to trend towards, what Ben M. Freeman describes as, the Trichotomy of Jewish Representation:

1. **Funny Secular Jews:** Jews, Jewishness and Judaism as the butt of a joke, particularly through reinforcement of non-threatening Jewish stereotypes.
2. **Murdered Jews:** A specific focus on Jewish death, destruction and trauma.
3. **Bad Orthodox Jews:** A demonization of Jews via stereotypes, and in particular, Orthodox Jews and traditional Judaism which are depicted as contradictory to Western values.

The Jewish People are an ethnoreligious nation indigenous to the Levant. They are part of a distinct culture and civilization and are bound by ancestry, indigeneity, land, tradition, values, experience, language and religion, in the form of Judaism. However, despite the beauty of Jewish culture and civilization, the Trichotomy of Jewish Representation often depicts Jews in offensive, damaging and reductive ways. They are examples of Erasive Jew-hate which erases Jewish identity and experience.

In his upcoming sequel to *Jewish Pride: Rebuilding a People*, Freeman describes the Broken Mirror of Jewish identity. In this model, Jewish identity is reflected back to Jews from (an often hostile) non-Jewish world. This results in the creation of categories of Good Jews and Bad Jews, as defined by non-Jewish perceptions of Jewish identity. Bad Jews are represented as being threatening to non-Jewish values (particular stereotypes, Orthodox Jews and traditional Judaism), while Good Jews are non-threatening (funny assimilated Jews or Jewish death and destruction). Both non-Jewish categorizations of Jewish identity then reinforce stereotypical ideas about Jews, Jewishness and Judaism.

The Tevye Test is named after Tevye, the central character from *Fiddler on the Roof*, which tells the story of Ashkenazi Jews living in Eastern Europe in the tiny Shtetl of Anatevka at the turn of the 20th century. Enormously popular, featuring songs such as *Matchmaker* and *Tradition*, it has won eleven Tony Awards and for ten years held the record for Broadway's longest-running musical. In 1971, its big-screen adaptation was nominated for eight Academy Awards, winning three.

*The Tevye Test* is a solution to a historic problem and aims to support both Jews and non-Jews in creating more accurate and nuanced representations of Jewish people in media.

---

# CREATIVE COMMUNITY FOR PEACE

## The Tevye Test

If a piece of media features a Jewish character (either explicitly or implicitly identifiable as Jewish), **some or all** of the following questions can be asked to gauge whether a piece of media fails or passes *The Tevye Test*.

NB: It is important to note that 'failing' one or more of these questions, does not mean a Jewish character has no value or is not enormously meaningful to people all over the world. It rather demonstrates that even beloved Jewish characters can be portrayed with even more nuance:

**1. Is the character's Jewishness the butt of jokes, without more meaningful aspects of Jewishness and Judaism being represented?**

- a. There is a difference between humor rooted in Jewishness than humor about Jewishness. People should be laughing *with* Jews, rather than *at* them.
- b. Funny Jewish characters are much beloved. Jews can be and often are funny, but if Jewishness is only referenced as the *source* of a joke, then the nuance and beauty of Jewish life can be minimized.

E.g. Schmidt in *New Girl*. When Schmidt is told "When we're in public, let's just tone down the Jewish thing, OK?" (Season 4, Episode 12: "Shark")

**2. Does the piece reference Jewish pain and trauma without mention of Jewish life, culture and civilization?**

- a. Examples of Jewish life, culture and civilization can be Jewish religious practices, Jewish diversity, Jewish food, traditions or customs, music, resilience or history.

E.g. Most Holocaust films, e.g. *The Reader*

**3. Are the Jews represented as a white group Jewish only via culture or religion with Jewish ethnicity and Peoplehood minimized or erased?**

- a. Without referencing Jewish ethnicity or Peoplehood, Jews are represented as white people only Jewish via culture or religion, which erases authentic Jewish identity and diversity.

E.g. Ross Gellar in *Friends*

**4. Are Jewish stereotypes utilized in a non-satirical manner? I.e. Economic Libel? Blood Libel, Conspiracy Fantasy and the Racial Libel?\***

- a. Jewish stereotypes can *also* include (but are not limited to):
  - i. Jewish nerd
  - ii. Jewish Princess
  - iii. The overbearing Jewish mother
  - iv. Loud, brash Jewish woman
  - v. The neurotic Jew
  - vi. The racialized Jew, with stereotypically Jewish physical features
  - vii. The assimilated Jew

E.g. Fagin from *Oliver Twist* (Economic Libel), Gretchen Weiners from *Mean Girls* (Jewish Princess) Andrew from *Big Mouth* (Jewish nerd), Grace's mother on *Will & Grace* (Jewish mother), Woody Allen (the neurotic Jew).

# CREATIVE COMMUNITY FOR PEACE

**5. *Is traditional Judaism depicted as archaic, oppressive and prejudiced without nuance and is assimilation (as opposed to integration) promoted?***

- a. Traditional Judaism is often derided. Its beauty is ignored while its perceived failings become the dominant narrative, while the shedding of Jewish identity and assimilation is deemed to be superior.

E.g. *UnOrthodox*

**6. *Is Jew-hatred minimized or erased?***

- a. Jews are often depicted as not experiencing 'real' or current prejudice. This harms Jews who experience as much hate as other marginalized communities. This is despite the fact that Jew-hatred is *still* one of the most prevalent forms of hatred today. In May 2021, Jew-hatred rose by 500% in the UK and in August of the same year, the FBI reported that 60% of all religiously motivated hate crimes targeted Jews, despite them being just 2% of the population.

E.g. *Hollywood*, by Ryan Murphy

---

Representation is complex, which is why the Tevye Test includes a ranking system:

**Rankings:**

Passing Grades:

- A - No to all six questions
- B - No to five of the six questions
- C - No to four of the six questions

Failing Grades:

- D - No to three of the six questions
- F - No to two or less of the six questions

**Example:**

How does *Fiddler on the Roof* score on Tevye's eponymous Test?

**1. *Is the character's Jewishness the butt of jokes, without more meaningful aspects of Jewishness and Judaism being represented?***

The Jews depicted in *Fiddler in the Roof* are depicted as complex and whole human beings whose Jewishness is an integral part of their lives and is not just a source of humor. **PASS**

**2. *Does the piece reference Jewish pain and trauma without mention of Jewish life, culture and civilization?***

# CREATIVE COMMUNITY FOR PEACE

Jewish culture, tradition and heritage are clearly depicted throughout Fiddler in the Rood. The Sabbath Prayer number is an example of Jewish tradition being depicted in a respectful and meaningful manner.

**PASS**

- 3. *Are the Jews represented as a white religious group with Jewish ethnicity and Peoplehood minimized or erased?***

Jews are not depicted as part of the white majority, and Judaism and Jewish Peoplehood is represented throughout. **PASS**

- 4. *Are Jewish stereotypes utilized in a non-satirical manner? I.e. Economic Libel? Blood Libel, Conspiracy Fantasy and the Racial Libel?***

Jewish stereotypes are not utilized to represent the entirety of a character, even more, stereotypical aspects of their personalities are offset by more nuanced portrayals. **PASS**

- 5. *Is traditional Judaism depicted as archaic, oppressive and prejudiced without nuance and is assimilation (as opposed to integration) promoted?***

This is complex. Traditional Judaism is challenged, with Chava's marriage to a non-Jew and Tevye's subsequent reaction. However, the beauty and richness of Orthodox Judaism and Jewish culture are celebrated throughout. **OVERALL PASS**

- 6. *Is Jew-hatred minimized or erased?***

The specificity of Jew-hatred is reflected throughout Fiddler on the Roof. Pogroms are depicted sensitively and in a moving manner. **PASS**

**Score:**

**6/6**

**Grade: A**

This test is designed to help those who tell stories and shape our understandings of ourselves, and the world create more nuanced representations of Jews. Representation helps individuals and communities feel seen and imagine how meaningful authentic and nuanced representation of Jews would be to millions of Jewish (and non-Jewish people) all over the world.