



## How the Concept of Shtetl Moved From Small-Town Reality to Mythic Jewish Idyll

From *Fiddler* to *Foer*, shtetl portrayals are idealized. Jeffrey Shandler shows how they went from fact to fantasy.

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*The Singing Blacksmith*, a 1938 Yiddish feature film, was filmed in Newton, N.J. ([The National Center for Jewish Film](#))

Until roughly the end of the 19th century, a shtetl was just a shtetl—that is, a town as designated in Yiddish, and nobody paid them any particular attention. Then interest in shtetls as places where Eastern European Jews lived picked up. Assimilated Western European Jews embarked on heritage tours to survey their exotic brethren in the east, academic interest in folk-life grew, and representations of shtetl life began appearing with more frequency in literature. After that came the Holocaust, which dealt life in the shtetl a final blow. Yet in a sense the shtetl did not die at

that point. In fact, it—or the idea of it—has thrived in the decades since the end of WWII as artists, filmmakers, and writers have depicted shtetls—and what they imagine them to be—in their work.

In his new book [\*Shtetl: A Vernacular Intellectual History\*](#), Rutgers University Jewish Studies Professor [Jeffrey Shandler](#), who has a particular interest in Yiddish culture, examines how the original meaning of shtetl has morphed and acquired so much cultural baggage over the past century. He joins Vox Tablet host Sara Ivry to discuss early instances of shtetl fetishization, examine why misperceptions about what shtetls were like persist, and tell us about a [Plimoth Plantation](#)-like project that would have modern tourists become shtetl re-enactors.

<http://www.tabletmag.com/podcasts/161313/shandler-shtetl>