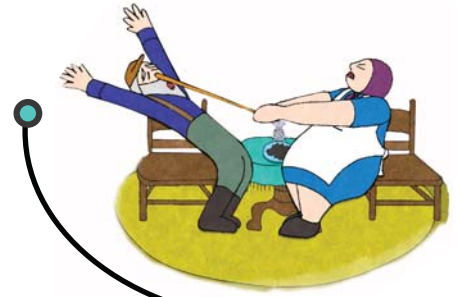


# The Three Wishes



## The Three Wishes: A Study Guide

### Summary of the film

A poor junk collector and his wife learn to appreciate what they have after three wishes granted by a magical meat grinder go awry. In this short film for all ages, animator Sheldon Cohen's colourful drawings add pathos, humour and warmth to the traditional wishing story. Paul Soles and Linda Kash voice the Aubrey Davis script.

### Themes

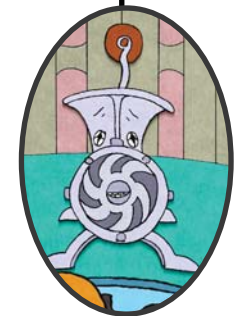
1. **Be careful what you wish for!** Whether it's Koppel's thoughtless wish for a piece of kishke (see glossary below) or the unthinking punishment that Yetta wreaks on her hapless husband by wishing that the kishke should stick to his nose, both partners come to realize that hasty action and words are often hard to take back and may be hurtful.

2. **Conflict resolution** Yetta wants a golden palace, riches and youth. Koppel is undecided but is driven by his immediate hunger. Their differing desires lead to a blow-up and to Koppel's predicament. Yetta and Koppel see that compromise is the only way to resolve their conflict: Koppel could have, himself, wished away the kishke from his nose but he defers the decision to his wife, wanting to make her happy. Yetta sees Koppel's distress and, indeed, wishes the kishke off his nose, sacrificing the third wish out of love for her husband. Both eventually act out of consideration for the other and the viewer realizes that their love is stronger than a disagreement. The meat grinder, meanwhile, becomes the mediator who helps Yetta and Koppel see the bigger picture.

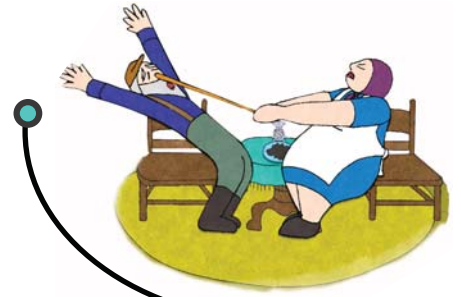
3. **Be thankful for what you have** Restored to the same conditions after the wishes are used up (except for the kishke, which is safely back on the plate), Koppel and Yetta once again bemoan their poverty. However, the meat grinder reminds them: "Look a little closer. Don't you see???" Outside the window, which is too poor for curtains, a cardinal bird sings with the fullness of life. Musical notes leap for joy from the sheets on the music stand - despite the cracked plaster wall behind it. The floral heart arrangement on the couple's wedding photo, a record of happier times, throbs with renewed love. "A little kishke, a loving wife...Who could ask for more?" concludes Koppel.



4. **New immigrants adapting** Koppel and Yetta speak with Yiddish accents from the old country. It is understood that they have been uprooted and have come to Canada to find a better life. They discover their love for one another is the most important thing they brought with them. And from love, there can only be optimism.



# The Three Wishes



## Discussion topics for groups and for the classroom

1. What three personal wishes would you make? List three key elements that make your present life happy (for example: family, good health, freedom). Are these more important than the wishes you'd make?

2. Is wishing a good way to make changes happen in your life? Why or why not?

3. Why is Yetta tempted to put Koppel in a circus with the elephants? (The kishke looks like an elephant's trunk.) Why does she change her mind? (She realizes it would make him miserable.)

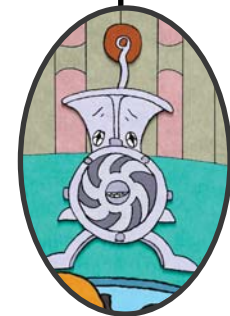
4. How might sudden riches (like winning a lottery) change a person? Is Yetta's initial selfishness her usual character? (No, because she puts Koppel before feelings of greed.)

5. Describe Koppel and Yetta's house: What do you see in it and what does that say about them? (See below.)

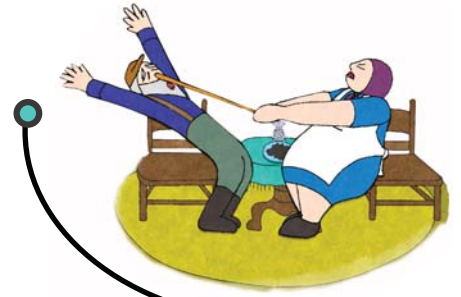
6. The meat grinder told Koppel, "I'm here to help you." Did it help him and Yetta even though the outcome of the three wishes didn't change their circumstances?

7. Why does Koppel return the meat grinder to the back alley and walk away whistling? Is it because:

- The wishes are used up?
- Koppel won't be able to sell the meat grinder?
- Koppel has learned that the love he shares with Yetta and their enjoyment of life is the real gift and he doesn't need any more magic than that?



# The Three Wishes



## A mini-guide to Jewish aspects of the film:

*NOTE: Some of the words below are in Yiddish, the language of Jews who came from central and eastern Europe.*

**Koppel:** a man's name, literally "head" (deep thinker).

**Yetta:** a diminutive form of Henrietta, meaning "mistress of the house."

**Cap:** Koppel's cap likely covers a skullcap, which is not removed even indoors, as a sign of recognition that God reigns above humanity.

**Tichl:** kerchief headcovering that conceals, for the purposes of modesty, an Orthodox woman's hair.

**Shabbes candlesticks:** lit to usher in the Sabbath on Friday nights.

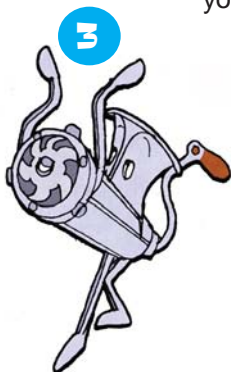
**Bookcase:** Jews are called The People of the Book because of their devotion to Torah and study. Every Jewish home, no matter how poor, has an honoured place for books.

**Clarinet:** An instrument often played by klezmer musicians who entertained at weddings in eastern Europe (exemplified by the Toronto klezmer band Beyond the Pale that plays on the film's soundtrack). Koppel's clarinet indicates the joy music brings to their life. Cohen choreographs the meat grinder in a lively Hasidic dance at the film's closure.

**Bubbe:** A Jewish grandmother. Koppel has great nostalgia for her cooking.

**Kishke:** Stuffed derma. Beef or sheep casings (intestines, or sheep's guts, to which Yetta refers) are cleaned and stuffed with flour, suet, onion and spices, then roasted as a side-dish delicacy.

**The Yiddish curse:** Why would Yetta take the product of Koppel's foolish wish and turn it against him? It's the custom of the Yiddish curse. In a world that often victimized Jews, they could only fight back verbally, and became adept at developing a rich lexicon of curses like this gem that recognized the dangers of material wealth: "May you have a lot of money but may you be the only one in the family with it!" or this one: "May you win a lottery, and spend it all on doctors!"



**A glass of tea:** In the old country (particularly Russia) a *glayseleh tay* was sipped through a sugar cube held between the teeth. This is the treat that Yetta offers Koppel to smooth over their recent troubles.

**A note about Montreal junk collectors:** Some new immigrants to Montreal, like Koppel, collected and sold junk picked from the back alley depositories of their landsmen (fellow immigrants). The Jewish rag pickers, often with horse and cart, plied the streets off the Main (St. Lawrence Boulevard), which housed the early waves of Jewish immigration.

# The Three Wishes



**Other NFB titles that address similar themes and can be partnered for discussion:**

**The Illuminated Life of Maud Lewis**

1998, 50 minutes, documentary, rated 13+

How a beloved Canadian folk artist coped with poverty by seeing the beauty around her.

**Strange Invaders**

2001, 8 minutes, animated, rated 13+

A childless couple receives a long-wished-for baby from outer space and havoc ensues.

**Village of Idiots**

1999, 13 minutes, animated, rated 10+

A Yiddish folktale about seeing one's environment anew.

**Ted Allan: Minstrel Boy of the Twentieth Century**

1993, 49 minutes, documentary, rated 13+

The biography of the author of *Lies My Father Told Me*, a story based on Allan's grandfather, a Montreal rag picker.



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