

L O S T   S O U L S

by

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## CHARACTERS

FRANK, late 30s, a rabbinic student and former lawyer, older than his years.

OZZIE, 30s, a hard working East Harlem electrician, still in training and holds another job some nights.

CARMEN, 20s, OZZIE's sister, a student at F.I.T., works some afternoons and nights.

ABUELA, very old, OZZIE and CARMEN's great-grandmother, limited English, mostly speaks Spanish.

RABBIT, late 20s to early 30s, also a rabbinic student, FRANK's roommate, happy-go-lucky.

SARAH, early to mid 20s, RABBIT's girlfriend and assistant to the school's director.

MOSE, a homeless man of indeterminate age who shelters at an East Harlem synagogue.

## SETTINGS

A cemetery, Frank's Upper West Side New York pre-war apartment, Ozzie's East Harlem apartment, and an old synagogue. Both the cemetery and the synagogue can be represented by a spotlight on a bare stage.

A C T    O N EScene 1

(FRANK, on a bare stage.)

FRANK

You may be seated. I love saying that.

Thank you all for coming--not that you had any choice, of course. This is your home, your space, and I'm just a visitor--a new interloper in your world, a world we will all join sooner or later.

Yes, we'll all be joining you, Mrs. Ida Rosenbaum of 3243 Moshulu Parkway, or you, Mr. Max Ostrowsky of 2832 Brighton 7th Street. And yes, even you, Mr. Daniel Braunfelt of 2701 Jerome Avenue. Even though you had just moved into that two-bedroom rental you had your eye on for seven years.

Last month, we observed Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year. Well, at least I observed it. I doubt many of you took much notice, and I'm sure you'll be forgiven.

But it was the beginning of the ten Days of Awe, which ends with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Not that you have anything to atone for. You're all taken care of, I'd say.

It is during these ten days where we consider how we behaved the past year, and how we can improve our relationships with each other, and with whatever supreme being you believe in. And contemplate whether the new year it will be a good or bad year for us, a year of plenty or or want, or happiness or sorrow, of life or whether...or whether we will join all of you here, in a quiet grassy field under the Kennedy Airport flight path, a few miles from the Van Wyck Expressway. Not what you would have planned for your eternal resting places, I'll bet.

Somewhere, someone is saying a prayer for you, at least once a year. That's a good thing. My own father passed away ten years ago. And it always occurred to me, why do I do it? What do I get out of it? I say "I" because, well, I'm sure it really makes no difference to you at this point.

Let me tell you all a story.

I know. Another story from a long-playing rabbi. But that's what I like about this congregation. You can't walk out on me.

I remember, about three years ago, when I was still a lawyer, I was walking in midtown Manhattan during a summer heat wave. I had my shirt sleeves rolled up, looking for a place to grab a quick bite so I could go back to my law office and screw somebody out of something.

And I heard a song. I don't know where it was coming from--I suspect a taxi. It was Benny Goodman. Begin the Beguine. A favorite of some of yours, from your swing days, no doubt.

And when I heard that smooth clarinet, it reminded me of my father. He was a CPA in downtown Brooklyn. Drudgery, I can still hear him say. Sheer drudgery. Pure, unmitigated drudgery.

But on the weekends, he played clarinet in a wedding band. Not well. Badly, in fact. His playing was an adventure. He had no concept of timing, and if he landed somewhere near the note, that was success. Some weekends I'd go and hear him muddle his way through the canon--Pennsylvania 6-5000, Bei Meir Bist Du Schoen--that one was especially bad--and, always, Begin the Beguine.

I'd always hold my breath during his opening solo. Hold that half note just right, I'd pray. Come in a beat after the sax. And one night, after years and years, after dozens of weddings, dozens of bar mitzvahs, and even a Zoroastrian retreat, he was flawless. He was no Benny Goodman, but he was good.

And this time, he knew it. Once his solo was done, he gave me a wink. That was my dad. And I remember that wink now maybe twenty years later.

So when I heard the song coming from the taxi, I thought of him, and the wink, and how he had been gone for seven years. And I realized--this was his anniversary, his yahrzeit, when we light candles in memory of those who have left us.

By the time I got home that night--maybe nine or ten o'clock--it would be dark, too late. As you know, a Jewish day begins at sunset. We strive to be different.

I looked up, still hungry, and saw a hot dog man behind his steaming cart. As he put mustard on my lunch, I looked behind him. And behind him was St. Patrick's Cathedral.

I squinted through the cathedral's open doors--it was so sunny outside, but so dark inside--and went in. I had never been inside before, although I've lived in New York my whole life. It was huge--bigger than I ever thought, bigger than Notre Dame in Paris, bigger than Westminster in London. A vast open space, and even though it was summer, it seemed cold and clammy.

There were a few people in the pews, empty for such a place as this, but probably more than we usually got on a Friday night at the temples of my youth. I looked around, and I saw the votive candles, and a woman lit one, and made the cross.

I always envied that Catholics could make a cross at times of stress, or just as a symbol of faith. A friend told me he remembered it as shoulder to shoulder, spectacles to testicles. Making a six pointed star of David all over you could get you arrested in some places.

I saw her light the candle, and after a few seconds of debate, I slowly approached them, not knowing if what I was doing was an act of grace and humility, or a gross violation of the tenets of not one, but two great world religions.

I took the match, and lit a votive candle in St. Patrick's Cathedral for my father, and muttered his Hebrew name, Yitzchak ben Mordecai.

And then I ate another hot dog from the cart outside in his honor. That's me, Frank Rosen, the hungry rabbi. The rabbi from hunger.

Rabbinic student, actually. Yes, Mrs. Brownstein, still a student. My third year of five. Older than most students, but that's life.

And I'm sharing my apartment with a fellow student because it's old and dark and huge. And he's younger than me. Keeps me on my toes.

My grades? Fairly good, thank you for asking.

So, who am I? Who do I want to be? That's a question I've been asking myself for a while. Where do I come from? They're all very, what do the kids say, first world problems. A starving teenager in Africa doesn't really care where he came from or why he's there. He just wants to know where his next meal is coming from.

But we have the luxury of asking questions like these. Or at least I do. I think you all know who you were, and where you are. Or at least where you were. Me? I'm still searching for my identity in the darkness.

I may not be the best rabbi out there, but now I'm your rabbi, and you all, you're my new congregation.

I think we'll get along just fine.

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene 2

(RABBIT on a bare stage, addresses a crowd, laying down the law.)

RABBIT

Okay everybody. I'm going to say this, and I'm just going to say it once. This is my house, and you are all in my house. And while you are in my house, there are rules. Very very strict rules. And if any of you break those rules, I have no problem kicking you the fuck out of my house, and back on to the street where you all probably fucking belong.

One--the only person in this place who is allowed to curse is me. I will curse all the fuck I goddamn want to. You, however, will not curse. If you do, out the fuck on the street you go.

Two--no talking above a whisper. No yelling, no shouting. Raise your voice around here, and I will personally throw you out on the street, man, woman or child. I don't give a fuck.

Three--no eating or drinking, unless you have asked me, I have given you permission, and I have given you the food or the drink. Get it? No booze, no shit. I have sandwiches for all of you, and bottles of water. You will eat tonight. If you're nice, and don't give me any trouble, I might even give you two.

If you fuck around with me, however, you will not eat, you will not drink, and I will kick your ass back on the street. Gladly.

Four--no drugs. No fucking with each other. You all know what I mean. I don't care. This is my house, and you will treat it and me with goddamn respect. Got it?

Turn to your left. You see that person on your left? If he or she breaks any of these rules, you are both getting kicked out. Yes--both of you. So don't fuck around with me.

You will spend the night here. It is not going to get any warmer in here, but it is not going to get any colder, either. It is 25 degrees out there, and it is snowing. And I have no problem with chucking any or all of you back out there.

This is a house of worship. This is a synagogue. It is my house of worship. You are all strangers in a strange land here, and my

faith requires me to care for the stranger. I may not like it, but I do it. Why? Because it's right. I was born to this, to my faith, so I do it.

This may be a house of God seven days a week, but this night, I'm the supreme being here. I can be a nice guy, tell that to all your friends. If you were all out there tonight, some of you would have died. So all that's standing between you and laying on a cold slab in the morgue tonight...is me. Remember that.

(Suddenly, a book is thrown at RABBIT's head. He is incensed.)

Okay--I saw that. You! Yes, you, come over here. What the fuck is your problem! Get your ass up here--now!

(SARAH approaches him, angry.)

I'm not going to ask you anything, or say anything. Get the fuck out of here.

SARAH

Who the fuck are you to tell us...

RABBIT

Who am I? I'm the rabbi here tonight. We take in the homeless, clothe and feed them, give them a safe and warm place to stay. But not you. Out.

SARAH

Hey, fuck you. Don't demean me, you self-important prick. We're not just nameless street people for you to piss on.

RABBIT

Ask me if I care.

(HE grabs her by the arm roughly to take her out, but she stops, wrestles free, and breaks down.)

SARAH

Don't you....don't do this to me. Please. I...I have no place to go. No money. I've just been out here for a week. I've seen...horrible things. I just walk all day. I slept in a



doorway downtown last night, and here I am in East Harlem. I even jumped the turnstiles in the subway trying to get arrested.

RABBIT

They don't arrest you for that anymore.

SARAH

I found that out. Damn liberal mayors.

(SHE laughs slightly, and looks at him.)

RABBIT

Who are you?

SARAH

Sarah. From Berkeley Heights.

RABBIT

Sarah from the suburbs. How did you get here?

SARAH

No job, no money, no friends. Bad crowd, shit in my arm. I'm clean now. No family. None that talk to me, anyway.

(Pause. HE looks her up and down.)

RABBIT

Hey, Sarah from the suburbs, how would you like to help me give out the sandwiches.

SARAH

Okay.

(RABBIT turns to the crowd.)

RABBIT

You see this nice girl here? Her name is Sarah. She is going to be my helper tonight. You fuck with her, you fuck with me. Got it? Good.

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene 3

(A cold Friday late afternoon in a chilly late autumn.)

(An East Harlem tenement apartment, focusing on the eating area, which doubles as a small living room. This room has a table, just a little bigger than a card table, and four chairs. There is also a kitchen, and exits to bedrooms. Neatly kept, bare floors with thin rugs.)

(A knock at the apartment's front door.)

FRANK

(from behind door)

Hello?

(HE jiggles the door knob, and the door opens. HE sticks his head in. HE is wearing an expensive overcoat, and is clearly out of place.)

FRANK

(nervously)

Uh, hello? Uh, Mr. Paz?

OZZIE

(from rear bedroom)

Uno momento...One minute please! Come in!

(FRANK enters and closes the door. HE has a briefcase.)

OZZIE

(from rear bedroom)

Make yourself at home!

FRANK

(looking around)

Yes, I'll...make myself...at home.

(FRANK inspects the few nearby things in the apartment, picking things up and putting

them down, not moving much. HE shows some interest in three silver candlesticks on a sideboard on the wall.

(OZZIE enters from the bedroom.)

FRANK

Ah, Mr. Paz. Good to meet you. I'm Frank Rosen.

(FRANK offers his hand, and OZZIE shakes it, not thinking, distracted.)

OZZIE

You're the lawyer from the city? They said you'd be coming at two. I took the afternoon off from work to wait for you, man.

FRANK

I'm sorry I was late. They only told me about this yesterday.

OZZIE

Yesterday? Man, we've been fighting to stay here for six months, and they decide to send you now?

FRANK

The building's going co-op?

OZZIE

Can you imagine that? I was born in this apartment. In that bedroom over there. I grew up here. Nobody wanted to live up here then.

FRANK

Now East Harlem's a hot property.

OZZIE

It's total bullshit. Who's going to pay five hundred thousand dollars for a two bedroom apartment on East 116th Street? Would you?

FRANK

Actually, in this market, that's pretty good.

OZZIE

What do I know? They offered it to me for three-fifty so they didn't have to pay me off. I need twenty percent down. Where am

I going to come up with seventy thousand dollars? Everybody in the building wants to fight this.

FRANK

Well, let's see what I can do. You have all the paperwork they gave you?

OZZIE

Oh yeah. Here.

(OZZIE hands him a packet of papers, which FRANK looks through.)

Well, anyway, I'm glad you're here. My sister's getting dinner ready, and I was trying to calm down Bahbie, *mi abuela*.

FRANK

Your grandmother.

OZZIE

She's really my great-grandmother. She's a hundred and seven.

FRANK

A hundred and seven?

OZZIE

She wants to live to a hundred and sixteen because we live on a hundred-sixteenth street.

FRANK

(taking off his coat)

Oh. That's very...admirable. You know, the Bible says longevity is a reward for the righteous. Where can I put my coat?

OZZIE

The Bible? I thought you were a lawyer.

FRANK

(coat still in hand)

Well, I was a lawyer.

OZZIE

What happened?

FRANK

(gives up, and puts coat on back of chair)  
I got sick of it.

OZZIE

So you're not a lawyer?

FRANK

Well, once a lawyer, always a lawyer. I'm a rabbi.

OZZIE

A rabbi?

FRANK

Very similar. Except now, I argue with God, not with people.

(OZZIE doesn't understand.)

It's a joke.

OZZIE

So you're not a real lawyer?

FRANK

You wouldn't want me to defend you at trial, but for this... Trust me, I can write a good letter to their lawyers and buy you some time while we think of our next move. So what do you do, Mr. Paz?

(FRANK begins to take notes.)

OZZIE

I'm an electrician. My father always said to get a good trade, and I did. I'm still training to be a master electrician, but I kept out of trouble, managed to get out of high school alive.

FRANK

That's very commendable.

OZZIE

A lot of my friends didn't make it. Got caught up in all the crap up here. Five hundred thousand to live two blocks from a crack house. I don't get it.

FRANK

Real estate can be tricky sometimes. Are you home much?

OZZIE

Not really. I'm gone most of the day. And sometimes after dinner I catch a shift at the shipping dock at Klein's warehouse in Queens when I can. Trucks come in empty, I load them, they go out. Not much to it. My sister takes care of Bahbie when I'm not here.

FRANK

Your sister? Does she live here?

OZZIE

Yeah, that's her room. Carmen. She's 22. She's going to F.I.T.--someday, you'll see Jennifer Lopez wearing her dresses to the Oscars.

FRANK

Ah, excuse me for asking, but where are your parents?

OZZIE

They got sick about ten years ago. My papi got sick in the lungs, and then my mother. He was a big man, smoked cigars--he got me the job at Klein's. He got too sick to load the trucks, and old man Klein fired him. "Nothing personal," he told him. "Just business." With them, it's always business.

(PAUSE, as FRANK considers OZZIE's use of the word "them.")

FRANK

And really, I'm a rabbinic student, not a rabbi. At the seminary on West 120th. I won't be a rabbi for two more years.

(OZZIE stares at him.)

But ...but I went to law school. I like doing community service. So I can do this. Really.

OZZIE

Really?

FRANK

Hey - if you can't trust a rabbi, who can you trust?

OZZIE

I thought you won't be a rabbi for two years.

FRANK

Well, yeah.

OZZIE

OK, look, I'm sorry if I was a little...you know, upset. I'm not like that. Thanks for the help. It's just ...where am I going to get seventy thousand dollars? I'm their only protector, Carmen and my bahbie, you know.

FRANK

You two live here with your grandmother?

OZZIE

Carmen works at a coffee shop on the West Side after school. Ever since our parents died, it's just been us three.

And all Abuela does is watch TV. We got a satellite dish so she can watch whenever she wants. Sometimes she gets up at two in the morning if Doctor Phil is on. Would you like to meet her?

FRANK

Well I...

OZZIE

I'll bring her out. Abuela!

(HE exits, then quickly reenters with ABUELA in a wheelchair.)

*Abuela, es un abogado. Ayudanos con el landlord.*

(ABUELA looks at FRANK and motions him forward.)

ABUELA

*Un abogado. Judio?*

OZZIE

*Sí.*

ABUELA

*Ah, bueno. Venga, mi hijo.*

OZZIE

She wants you to come closer. She can't see well. Too much TV.

(FRANK bends down.)

Say "Hola, Señora Paz."

FRANK

(haltingly)

*Hola, Señora Paz.*

(ABUELA feels his face, is astonished, and looks at OZZIE.)

ABUELA

He looks like Maury Povich.

OZZIE

No, Bahbie. *Es un abogado, y un rabino.*

ABUELA

*Rabino? No--no rabino en mi casa. Tienes que salir!*

OZZIE

I think she wants you to leave. She has this thing about...well, about rabbis.

FRANK

About rabbis? Kind of odd.

OZZIE

I don't know why. We were downtown, around 47th Street, and all the old Jews there...

FRANK

Well, they're the Hasidic diamond merchants. They're not rabbis.

OZZIE

They sure looked it to her. She went into a fit. She was scared, then angry, she started screaming "Rabinos! Rabinos!" We almost took her to the emergency room.

FRANK

Where she would have found more Jews. The doctors.



OZZIE

I'm sorry for this. Here, I'll give you all the letters and you can call me.

(The door opens, and CARMEN enters. As SHE enters, SHE touches the upper right corner of the doorway and lightly kisses her fingers--as if unconsciously, as if it was something she has done all her life, with no one ever asking why she did it.)

CARMEN

Oh, Ozzie, I had to stand all the way on the train. My feet. But I stopped at my place across the street for a minute, and I feel much better. Everything's all right now.

(She sees ABUELA, and crouches down to talk to her.)

*Hola, Abuela. Cómo estás?*

ABUELA

*Bien, bien, mi Carmencita.*

FRANK

Well, I'll be going...

OZZIE

Oh, this is Rabbi Rosen.

CARMEN

Rabbi? Does Abuela know?

FRANK

Unfortunately, yes. Oh, and please call me Frank.

OZZIE

He's also the lawyer to help us with the co-op.

CARMEN

A lawyer and a rabbi? You must be a very wise man. Thank you so much for helping. This is our home. My parents, my grandparents, even Abuela, we all lived here. Rent controlled.

FRANK

My...my pleasure. Well, I'll be going.

CARMEN

No--stay. Stay for dinner. I made enough for four and Bahbie doesn't eat much. Besides, it's getting dark outside. We'd be honored if you joined us.

FRANK

Yes, but it's Friday night, and I usually have dinner with...with my congregation.

OZZIE

We have a special dinner on Friday nights, too. *Arroz con pollo*.

CARMEN

Chicken with rice. It's been cooking all day.

FRANK

Well, my congregation won't miss me. But won't your grandmother have a fit?

CARMEN

(to ABUELA)

Abuela, I'd like Frank to have dinner with us tonight. He's our special guest, and we must be nice to him. Sí?

(to FRANK)

She understands English when she has to.

ABUELA

*Pero no kipá.*

CARMEN

She wants you to take off your...head covering. What do you call it?

FRANK

A yarmulke. And I'm not wearing one.

OZZIE

And you're a rabbi?

FRANK

We don't always...

CARMEN

No matter. Please stay.

FRANK

All right.

CARMEN

Ozzie, can you get the dishes out? I'll get the candles.

(At the word "candles," Frank looks interested.)

(CARMEN goes to a sideboard and gets the three silver candlesticks and a silver wine goblet. SHE puts them on the table and places candles in them--two tall white candles, and one twisted candle with several intertwined wicks. OZZIE comes in from the kitchen with the dishes and silverware, and a small bottle of dark red wine, and pours the wine very delicately into the goblet.)

CARMEN

(checks her watch)

It's just about time. Good thing the train wasn't late.

(OZZIE wheels ABUELA to the table. HE is on one side of CARMEN, and FRANK the other.)

CARMEN

Before we eat, we say a blessing. Abuela taught it to my mami and to me, and she was taught it by her grandmother. It's just sounds to me, and I don't know what it means, but we've been saying it my whole life. And one day, I pray Jesus will bless me with a family and a child, and I will teach it to them.

(CARMEN lights the candles--first the two white candles, then the twisted one. After lighting, she waves her hands over the candles. Then she covers her eyes, so as not to see the candles before reciting the blessing. All others hold hands.)

CARMEN

(says the following, exactly as written)

"Barakata anoy lohayn malch holm, ahsh kidsan bamezvotav vzivanu hadlek nair shabbs." Amen.

(CARMEN opens her eyes, and she looks at the candles. ALL say "Amen." )

And then, we all take a sip of wine from my mami's special cup. I remember her telling me that we must always remember and we must tell everyone that this wine is the blood of Our Lord.

(CARMEN takes a small sip of wine, and passes it to OZZIE, who takes a sip and then helps ABUELA. ABUELA does not want to pass the cup to FRANK.)

OZZIE

(to ABUELA)

Bahbie, please. *Él es nuestro invitado.* Our guest.

ABUELA

*Pero él es judío! Él le dirá.*

OZZIE

He will tell? Tell who what?

ABUELA

*Oh, mi hijo. Hay tantas cosas que no sabes.*

(And then SHE blurts out loudly, as a cry from her soul:)

*Éramos esclavos en la tierra de Faraón!*

(ABUELA looks at OZZIE, and reluctantly gives FRANK the goblet.

(FRANK is wide eyed and astonished. He cannot believe what he has just seen. HE sips, and hands the goblet back to CARMEN.

(CARMEN lifts the smaller twisted candle, and dowses the flame by putting it in the wine goblet. We hear the flame sizzle out.

(And then CARMEN blows out the candles.

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene 4

(FRANK enters the apartment he shares with RABBIT, directly after coming from OZZIE and CARMEN's apartment across town.)

The apartment is old and dark, lots of wood and old photos.)

FRANK

Rabbit? Rabbit? You around? I have to tell you...

(SARAH enters in the top half of a Yankees baseball uniform, barelegged and barefoot.)

SARAH

Oh hi. We wondered where you were. We, uh, started without you. Shabbat dinner.

(RABBIT enters, adjusting his clothing, and massages SARAH's shoulders.)

RABBIT

And finished.

SARAH

The chicken was especially good.

RABBIT

A very young and tender bird.

SARAH

I especially liked the stuffing.

(RABBIT and SARAH look at each other, and fall into uproarious laughter.)

FRANK

Okay. You have your laughs, but I have found something amazing, something neither of you have ever seen. I didn't even think they really existed--that they were just stories in a book, historical remnants of a civilization forgotten by history, but they exist. They exist! And not three or four blocks from here, just cross town.

RABBIT

What are you talking about?

FRANK

You won't believe me.

RABBIT

What did you find--the Baal Shem Tov is living above a bodega in the South Bronx?

FRANK

You're surprisingly close.

SARAH

So? Nu?

(RABBIT looks at her.)

RABBIT

I didn't know you spoke Yiddish.

SARAH

I'm from New Jersey. I'm the new assistant to the director of a rabbinic school, and my boyfriend is a rabbinic student. I shouldn't know the mother tongue? A word or two of the Mamaloshen?

RABBIT

Just a word or two is fine. Keeping up academically with my roommate is enough. I don't need competition from you too.

SARAH

(slightly angry)

Competition? Back off, buddy. I could hammer out a sermon just as well as you can.

RABBIT

(to FRANK)

So what was it?

FRANK

I have found, living on East 116th Street...hidden Jews. Crypto-Jews. Conversos.

(Pause. Conspiratorially:)

Marranos.

RABBIT

(astounded)

You're shitting me.

FRANK

No lie.

RABBIT

You found a family of marranos in East Harlem?

FRANK

They closed the curtains, lit candles, said the blessing in broken Hebrew, and immediately blew them out--just like in the books. True, she made Havdalah, which is supposed to come tomorrow night, but she had a Havdalah candle! She even doused it in the wine! It's like she was...she was Orthodox!

RABBIT

No way.

FRANK

He called his grandmother Bah-bie, like he didn't know it was *Bubbe* in Yiddish.

RABBIT

Can't be.

FRANK

They had chicken for Friday night dinner!

RABBIT

Well, that seals it.

SARAH

Hey, clue me in here. What exactly are marranos, anyway?

FRANK

Well, that's really not the preferred term. In Spanish, it means pigs. The polite and academic terms are *anusim* or *conversos*. But these are people whose families were forced to publicly convert to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition, but continued to practice Judaism in their homes in secret. So they were Jewish



in the 14th or 15th century, and as the years passed they maintained some connection to the Jewish faith with weird customs--like lighting candles and immediately blowing them out. And they do these things because that's what their family has always done--no reason beyond that.

SARAH

So this family, they're Catholic, but they're really Jewish?

FRANK

It looks it. She asked Jesus to bless her with a family and children.

SARAH

Wow.

FRANK

I don't know what to do.

RABBIT

Why do anything?

FRANK

You mean I shouldn't do anything? I shouldn't tell them they're really Jewish?

RABBIT

How do you think they'd take it?

FRANK

I...I'm not sure.

RABBIT

I am. Imagine this. A total stranger comes into your life and says to you, "Excuse me Mr. Steinberg, but you know how you like to look at the Christmas windows at Macy's every year? How you once said your favorite movie was Easter Parade? Well, you may not realize this..."

FRANK

This is more than Christmas windows and movies. They made Shabbat dinner, they lit candles, they said a blessing.

RABBIT

Do they go to church?

FRANK

I don't know. The grandmother has a thing about rabbis.

RABBIT

And I'm sure it's not a positive thing, is it?

FRANK

No. They're very protective of her.

RABBIT

They?

FRANK

The brother I was doing the pro bono work for, and the sister.

RABBIT

Ah ha! Tell me more about this Crypto Jewish Carmencita.

FRANK

Her name happens to be Carmen.

RABBIT

And you want to be the one to open up this what, 22-year old dark eyed girl to the wonders of Judaism? So she can be your sad eyed shiksa of the sonnets, so you can be her tutor, her teacher?

FRANK

It's not like that.

RABBIT

If it's not, you're not a normal 35-year-old man.

SARAH

Tell her.

(FRANK and RABBIT look at her.)

FRANK

Really?

SARAH

Tell her about her family. Tell her what you feel for her. I'd want to know if it was me.

FRANK

Would you? Would you really?

SARAH

When I was in junior high school, a guy I liked--we were 14 or so--told me he had something to tell me. I thought he was going to ask me to go to a movie. He said he had something to share with me, a great gift. And he said that gift was his personal relationship with Jesus.

I was speechless. I was confused. I was angry.

I told him I had a great gift too, and it was my Jewishness. But he couldn't have it. I couldn't share it. He had to want it.

And then I ran away to the girls room, hid in a stall and cried for the rest of the afternoon.

Tell her what the customs are, explain to her what she's doing, and if she wants to draw her own conclusions, that's up to her. Just be prepared for her to cry in the bathroom for a while.

RABBIT

Wow. I didn't know.

SARAH

What? I'm not just some ex-junkie you rescued off the street, and I'm certainly not some yahmmy-bopper hanging around rabbinic students.

FRANK

Look at the time. I've got to write my sermon for tomorrow morning.

RABBIT

Not that anyone's going to hear it.

SARAH

Where's your student congregation?

RABBIT

Frank here is the rabbi for the good parishioners of Mount Carmel Cemetery in Queens. They don't ask for advice, they don't burden you with their problems, they don't walk out during the

sermon. In fact, they don't walk out at all. Jews check in but they don't check out.

FRANK

I'd prefer it to yours. How many bar mitzvah students did you tutor last year at that factory in Scarsdale you work at? Sixty? Seventy?

RABBIT

One hundred twenty.

FRANK

A hundred twenty pimply faced kids who think being Jewish means eating a bagel on Sunday morning and visiting grandma in the Hebrew Home and planning a \$30,000 themed party after the bar mitzvah. I heard of one bar mitzvah party where the theme, so help me, was the Crusades.

RABBIT

The Crusades? What did they do? Kill all the guests?

FRANK

So all in all, maybe my job is...more suited for my aspirations. I want to give back to the Jewish community, and you want to tell your congregation that, really, they're not too bad and everything will work out and please give to the building fund.

RABBIT

I know. That's why I volunteer at that small shul across town. But a good gig like head rabbi in Scarsdale, twelve hundred families, two assistant rabbis to do the dirty work of actually talking to the congregants, a six-figure salary--not a bad future.

FRANK

I'm going to go and write my sermon--it's a project for Himmelfarb.

RABBIT

You have sermon writing with that fat old coot with the white beard? Why do all our professors look like Santa Claus?

FRANK

Don't you have one to write too?

RABBIT

Nope. Rabbi number one does it on Saturday night. I just sit up there and try to look interested.

SARAH

Which he does very well. Most times.

(FRANK starts to exit to his room.)

RABBIT

Frank--good luck.

SARAH

If you want to talk...

FRANK

Thanks.

(HE exits.)

RABBIT

Now where were we? Oh yes--you were about to put a little shmear on my bagel...

(HE grabs her, and SARAH laughs. SHE reaches into her jersey and gives him a piece of folded paper.)

RABBIT

What's this? A message from the front?

SARAH

Rabbi Cohn wanted me to give this to you. Some new policy.

(RABBIT unfolds it, reads it and sinks away.)

SARAH

What's the matter?

RABBIT

They...they want me to prove I'm Jewish.

SARAH

What?

RABBIT

You heard me. They want me to prove I'm Jewish. Written proof.  
How the hell am I going to do that?

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene 5

(FRANK, in spotlight.)

FRANK

As I was considering what I would speak on today, my thoughts went back to my youth, and the temple my family belonged to on Long Island. It was a large suburban congregation, with more than fifteen hundred families. So there were a lot of people to look to as examples of what kind of character made someone--in my case, a man--uniquely Jewish.

As I got older, I came to realize that among our congregants--as in much of Jewish history--two distinct types showed themselves. On the one hand, the learned, the scholarly, the bookish--the great rabbis and thinkers, Maimonides, Einstein. But we also had the men of action, warriors for a cause--Herzl, Ben-Gurion, the Macabees. And this dichotomy resounds through Jewish life even to today.

Which brings me to the topic of my end of semester sermon for this year. In this person I will speak of, we see these two sides clearly. At once--a writer, a searcher, a seeker of truth, but also a righter of wrongs, an avenger, one who fought against evil for truth, justice, and the American way.

And so, my topic for today is--*Was Superman Jewish?*

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene 6

(FRANK's apartment. A few days later.)

RABBIT

So? Was he? I'm waiting for the exegesis of your thesis.

FRANK

Will you stop it?

RABBIT

No--I'm truly interested. Even if Himmelfarb wasn't.

FRANK

People were staring at me.

RABBIT

And why not? A brilliant theory. The ultimate alien, conflicts with his father, works for a major metropolitan newspaper, in love with a shiksa. That spells jay-ee-double U to me! Now, Batman--probably Episcopalian. You could tell just by looking at his outfit he wasn't, if you know what I mean. And Buck Rogers? Try to find a kosher butcher on the planet Mongo.

FRANK

I...I can't stop thinking about it.

RABBIT

The family?

FRANK

The girl.

RABBIT

Of course.

SARAH

(reviewing papers)

Not bad. Hey Frank, listen to this. "When Abraham drew his knife to slay his son Isaac, did he know he was killing off generations upon generations? Did he realize he was being instructed to do away with his descendants? Or was he blindly following God's instructions, without thinking of their implications?"



RABBIT  
I like it.

SARAH  
You should. You'll be giving it this Saturday.

FRANK  
She's writing your sermons?

SARAH  
I have the gift.

FRANK  
I thought you didn't have to give sermons at your place.

SARAH  
His rabbi's out sick.

RABBIT  
He called in verklemt.

FRANK  
By the way, why do they call you "Rabbit"?

SARAH  
It was on his application to the school.

RABBIT  
I blame auto-correct.

(FRANK checks his watch.)

FRANK  
I gotta run.

SARAH  
The girl?

FRANK  
All of them. I'm working on their co-op problem. I hope the old lady doesn't beat me up.

SARAH  
Have you decided what you're going to do about them?

FRANK

I can't just leave them, not knowing.

SARAH

Remember what I said about sharing. There's something called sharing too much.

FRANK

I know. Thanks.

(FRANK exits.)

(THEY look at each other, and the tone changes.)

RABBIT

What the hell am I going to do?

SARAH

You haven't told him?

RABBIT

Hey, Miss too-much-sharing-is-a-bad-thing. No.

SARAH

He could help.

RABBIT

How?

SARAH

Bounce stuff off him. I don't know.

RABBIT

That's right--you don't. Why me?

SARAH

It says it's to make sure all the rabbinic candidates have proper credentials. If it works, they'll make all the students do it. This is a pilot project, and you were chosen.

RABBIT

Great. They choose me to prove I'm chosen.

Sarah, they're not just questioning my religion. It's more than

that. It's my identity. I grew up in a Jewish home, with Jewish relatives and Jewish friends. It's not just being a rabbi, or a Jewish professional. They're asking me to prove I'm Jewish three generations back! How do you do that?

SARAH

They said pictures of gravestones, birth certificates, other rabbis vouching for your ancestors.

RABBIT

My parents were born in New Jersey. My grandparents somewhere in that weird area that was Russia or Poland or Austria or Ukraine depending on who won the last war.

SARAH

Galicia.

RABBIT

And their parents? You can't find records going back that far. Up in smoke--like many of my ancestors, which is what gets me. The fucking Nazis knew my family was Jewish, but these assholes want proof?

SARAH

Look--let me do a little poking around. I have resources you might not know about.

RABBIT

Like what?

SARAH

In that week on the street, I met people.

RABBIT

People? Homeless genealogists?

SARAH

Let me...just let me. You know, this hurts me, too.

RABBIT

Hurts you? How?

SARAH

When I was younger, I wanted...

(And she stops.)

RABBIT

Wanted what?

SARAH

I wanted the opportunities you have. To be a rabbi.

RABBIT

But you could be a rabbi. Hell, Frank and I are the only two men in a class of 18.

SARAH

That's not how I see myself. Between my father, my grandfather, his father, there's a line of rabbis in my family. My father said that ended with me when he kicked me out.

RABBIT

That's ridiculous.

SARAH

It's how I was brought up. It's hurts less when I'm with you...and your work.

RABBIT

You have so much I don't have.

SARAH

What, you're the head and I'm the heart? Let me tell you something, I'm just as brainy and qualified as you, as anyone, as Frank...

RABBIT

Maybe not Frank.

SARAH

Yeah, maybe not Frank. But I'm not just the emotional Yiddishe mama here. I can write a sermon and lead a congregation just as well as you can. I just choose not to.

(An insistent knock at the door. RABBIT jumps up, looks through the peephole, and opens the door. It's OZZIE.)

OZZIE

Hi--is Frank in? We got this letter...

(Takes out a letter, presumably from the  
landlord.)

RABBIT

Oh, hi--you're Ozzie? Rabbi Simons, er, Frank just told us about  
you.

SARAH

(realizing)

Oh, he's...

RABBIT

He just left--I think he was going to your place to see your  
sister.

OZZIE

My sister? Why would he want to see her?

(HE steps into the apartment and looks  
around.)

Very nice place. You two live here with him?

RABBIT

Well, I do--I'm a student, like Frank.

OZZIE

She your girlfriend?

SARAH

Yes.

OZZIE

So--with you two, Frank, the co-op people and their lawyers,  
I've met more Jews in the past week than my whole life. You guys  
got it all right.

RABBIT

Uh?

OZZIE

No--it's good. You're smart people, with nice things. That's  
good. My grandmother, she don't agree.

SARAH

We heard.

OZZIE

It's a big city, but sometimes you need to stay with your own, you know? You say he went to my place? I'll catch him there. Thanks. Good luck, you two.

(OZZIE exits.)

RABBIT

I don't want to get involved.

SARAH

Me too.

RABBIT

So you're the good woman behind the good man?

SARAH

I guess. The good rabbi.

RABBIT

That's all you want?

SARAH

It'll do for now.

RABBIT

And later?

SARAH

You graduate, get a congregation of your own, I'll be a presence.

RABBIT

Two for one deal?

SARAH

I'm sure the temple board would like that. One salary for two people.

(THEY laugh.)

SARAH

Rabbit, let me make a few calls. Let me see what I can do.

RABBIT

OK.

(THEY embrace.)

(BLACKOUT.)

## Scene 7

(FRANK is in the cemetery, addressing his congregation.)

FRANK

Tonight, I think I want to speak about the power of faith.

(Pause.)

No. Tonight, I think I want to speak about the power of gifts.

(HE lets that hang there, but isn't satisfied.)

Tonight, I think I want to speak about the gift of faith. Yes. The...gift...of faith. Sorry for the all that. I'm a little frazzled these past few days. You all remember what that was like.

A friend of mine...really the friend of a friend...told me the story recently of a gift someone wanted to give her. The gift of a faith she was not brought up in. What do you say when offered such a gift? Do you politely say "thank you" and forget about it? Do you think it over? Or do you react violently, rejecting their gift for what it is, an attempt to make you just like them?

Still, what if it was meant well? And what if there was a reason to offer them the gift of another faith--a faith that may be the one of their ancestors?

When my grandfather gave me the gift of his apartment, that's a gift I gladly accepted, even though it's too big, too dark, too much for me. That's why I share it with a friend. I like taking in strays.

At least it's not a walk-up, and one day if I'm lucky I can sell it for a more money than I've ever seen before and move to Brooklyn and drink craft beer and wear one of those little hipster hats with all the other hipster Jews.

Oh, I don't know. Yes, Mrs. Nussbaum, I'm as confused as you.

(BLACKOUT.)



## Scene 8

(RABBIT at the synagogue, addressing the homeless.)

RABBIT

OK--it's late, so I'll make this short.

You all know the rules. No swearing, no talking, no eating or drinking in your seats. And no fucking cellphones!

I say this every night, and there's always some of you who just don't listen. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of you all. Sick of...of everything.

Sorry. I don't know who I am anymore. Well, I know who I am, I just don't know how to prove it. And why should I? Why do I have to prove anything to anyone?

I'm ranting now. It's not your fault. Not your fault you're here. It's cold outside tonight. Might even snow. You're all safe here. Safe here with me.

I'll check on you all in a few minutes. Until then, just chill, treat everyone with respect, and everything will be fine. Really.

(BLACKOUT.)

(END OF ACT ONE.)

## A C T    T W O

## Scene 1

(FRANK is again in the cemetery, addressing his congregation.)

FRANK

Ah, you're all still here.

Tonight, I wanted to talk about where I come from and where I live. I don't know where many of you lived at one time, but I assume in the immediate area.

When one passes, one may have expressed a wish to lie for eternity in the Holy Land. Or California--a wholly different Holy Land. No one actively wishes to rest forever half a mile off Exit 3 of the Interboro Parkway.

Yet, for you, my loving congregation, that is your fate.

But, as an old girlfriend of mine used to say, now let's talk about me.

I may have let on that in a previous life--sorry--I was a lawyer. I make no apologies. It was something to do while I waited to find out what I really wanted to do.

But I was bored. I was helping rich people get richer, and catching the few pennies they dropped. But what I was doing for my fellow man, yes, for my fellow Jews, and what was I doing for me?

But I was lucky. My grandfather was a rabbi. Interesting story about his father, my great-grandfather, Morris. He came to this country in 1910. When I met him--and I only met him once or twice--he was an old, old man. He may have been in his eighties, but he looked even older.

An ancient, stooped-over man with weak, bony hands. I was too young to appreciate him, and he could barely talk, so I never gave him much notice.

Supposedly, on his eighteenth birthday, he was to enter a yeshiva in the old country to become a rabbi, and on the same

day, get married. An arranged marriage to a woman he had never met, from a town twenty miles away. Back in Romania in 1910, twenty miles was at least half a day's travel.

Comes the fateful day, and...no Morris. My great-grandfather Morris is nowhere to be found. All the town goes looking for him, and not just his town, but the town twenty miles away. Even the Catholic priests in the town went looking for him--one of the few times they engaged with the Jews.

Where was Morris? By the time they went looking for him, Morris was somewhere outside Prague, on a third-class train car, starving and thirsty, but free and on his way to the French port of Cherbourg and a rendezvous with the S.S. Ameritania, where he would spend eight days in steerage, with little food and water, and only pots and pans to relieve himself.

And when he finally reached New York, the ship almost sank, because the navigator mistook the bright lights of Coney Island for Manhattan.

So he saved and he scrimped, he found a job in a hat factory--back when men wore hats--and got married to a woman he met there. They had three children--four, but because of the horrible air and sanitation in their back tenement apartment on the Lower East Side, one died after three months from tuberculosis.

That made them decide to move, and with the money they had put aside for that fourth child--Manfred, they had called him--and some overtime at the hat factory, they got a new apartment way uptown. Everyone thought he was crazy. "Morris, who's going to want to live at 102nd Street and Broadway?"

Turns out a lot of people did, but there was this little thing called rent control, which is how he passed the four-bedroom Upper West Side apartment on to his son, my grandfather the rabbi, who was lucky enough to buy it on the cheap and passed it to me, the rabbinic student.

It's dark, it needs some paint and new floors, and maybe, just maybe, I can keep it in my family. It's been handed down for four generations, and it's my heritage. Maybe I'll sell it someday, but I'd rather not. It has my grandfather all over it.

But if Morris hadn't ankled it out of Carpathia that night, what would have become of him? And what would have become of me?

I recently met a family with their own heritage, their own story, but it's a story they might not want to hear. I celebrate my heritage, but I'm not sure how they'd take to this gift of a new heritage.

Sometimes you find out information you'd really be best not knowing. The kindly German baker on the corner--what was his grandfather up to in the 1940s? Maybe we shouldn't dig any deeper into anyone's past.

Sometimes history can no longer be distinguished from fantasy.

And with that thought, we can continue.

(BLACKOUT.)

## Scene 2

(OZZIE and CARMEN's apartment. A knock at the door. CARMEN checks the peephole, and opens the door.)

FRANK

I was hoping I'd find you here.

CARMEN

Come in, Rabbi. My brother isn't here. In fact I think he went looking for you. Something about the apartment. Sorry for the mess--I just got in myself.

FRANK

You work on Saturday mornings?

CARMEN

No--I was just... There's a small place down the street I go to when I feel, I don't know, anxious. It's a Jewish church--do you know it?

FRANK

A synagogue? Anshei Chesed? Really?

CARMEN

It's like I'm drawn to it. It's quiet. Peaceful. Everything that my life isn't.

FRANK

Anshei Chesed? They're too Jewish for me, and I'm a rabbi. So, you go to a synagogue to find peace?

CARMEN

I guess so. No one bothers me. There's never anyone there.

FRANK

That's what I've heard. They might sell it--they don't have enough people to make up a congregation anymore.

CARMEN

But don't you have to go to a church to be closer to God?

FRANK

That is a question Jews have been dealing with for generations.

Usually, the answer is yes--until your children's bar mitzvahs.

Carmen, when I was here two weeks ago for dinner, you brought out three very beautiful candlesticks and a wine cup. Can I see them?

CARMEN

Of course.

(SHE goes to a sideboard and brings them to him. FRANK looks them over very carefully.)

Please be very careful. It's all we have left from our parents. That and this apartment.

FRANK

We had candlesticks like these when I was growing up, but not as beautiful. They seem very old.

CARMEN

They were Abuela's, on the island. We're Dominican.

FRANK

Oh. Aren't most people here from Puerto Rico?

CARMEN

The Puerto Ricans, they have it so easy! They just fly here from San Juan and move in. My parents had to wait so long for a visa, they had Ozzie and me, and we all had to become citizens. Even Abuela.

FRANK

That's very admirable.

CARMEN

Our church here helped us. They even helped Ozzie get his electrician's license. I don't know we would ever do without them.

(Pause.)

FRANK

Carmen, when you came in that Friday night I met you, do you remember what you did? At the door.

CARMEN

At the door?

FRANK

Yes.

(FRANK goes to the door.)

You came in, and as you entered, you touched the top of the doorway, and kissed your fingers.

CARMEN

Oh that. I've done that my whole life. My mother taught it to me. She would do that whenever she came home. She said it was how we welcome Jesus into our home, and we kiss the door He entered. She told me not to tell our father--he didn't like it.

FRANK

And before dinner, the candles.

CARMEN

It makes Friday night so beautiful, doesn't it? Work is over, and now we relax, we take a deep breath and exhale, and we let something beautiful into our lives.

FRANK

But then you blew the candles out.

CARMEN

First we put the candle in the wine, the blood of Jesus, because He brings light to the world. And we blow the candles out to show we are not prideful.

FRANK

And the blessing over the candles?

CARMEN

Blessing? I don't know. My mother always said it. It's our family tradition. And you did the same things when you grew up?

FRANK

Well, yes, but for different reasons.

(Pause.)

When I was a boy, my mother would also make a special Friday night dinner. She'd roast a chicken--even in the summer, when it was 90 degrees outside--a big, plump roast chicken with gravy and potatoes. And we'd all gather around our table, my father, my mother, sometimes my grandparents too, and we'd hold hands. And my mother would light two tall white candles in candlesticks just like these, and she'd say a blessing: Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to kindle the light of Shabbat. And then she'd repeat it, but in Hebrew. *Baruch atah, Adonai, Eloheinu, melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.*

Does that sound familiar?

CARMEN  
(apprehensively)

A little.

FRANK

And on Saturday night, when our Sabbath was over, my mother would take a small silver box of spices we kept on a sideboard, and she'd pass it around to everyone to smell something beautiful. And she'd pass around a cup of wine, this very very sweet syrupy wine that no one would drink unless God Himself told them to, and we'd all take a sip. And she'd light a special twisted candle with blue and white wicks, and say a blessing over it. And then she would put the candle in the wine, and we'd all hear it sizzle out. That was my favorite part.

CARMEN

Mine too. You don't hear it often. I like that sound. Some sounds stay with you your entire life.

FRANK

And my grandfather, when he entered a room, he would touch the top of the doorway and kiss his fingers. Except he wasn't touching the doorway. There was something on the doorway he was touching. Do you think you know what that was?

CARMEN

He wasn't letting Jesus into his home, was he.

FRANK

No. See, Carmen, he was Jewish. Jews have a small medallion, a



case on their doors, that has part of the Torah, the Jewish Bible, on a piece of parchment. On the parchment is a special Jewish prayer, *Sh'ma Yisrael*. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." It's our dedication of faith. What it means to be a Jew.

And my mother who did that ceremony, called Havdalah, and lit the Friday night candles, and made the roast chicken dinner--she was Jewish. My father and my grandparents are Jewish. I'm Jewish.

Do you see what I'm getting at?

CARMEN

I can't be. It's impossible. No, we just had very similar childhoods.

FRANK

Carmen, your ancestors came from Spain, or maybe from Portugal. In any case, they were there in the 15th century. Spain had a large community of Jews, and they were very prominent in culture, in the sciences--they were part of everyday life.

And a man called Torquemada came to power and gave all the Jews a choice--become Catholic, or die. Many did become Catholic in their hearts, and many just, well, played at being Catholic to the outside world, but in their homes, among their families, they were still Jewish.

They had their own language which was a mixture of Spanish and Hebrew, called Ladino. They kept the Jewish traditions, and the Jewish holidays.

But in secret. Like when you lit the candles and immediately blew them out? The authorities in Spain went out on Friday nights looking for candles in the windows of homes, because they figured anyone with candles on a Friday night must be Jewish.

And the secrets, the codes, the special rituals, were passed down from generation to generation. From mother to daughter, usually, over hundreds of years.

Carmen, you, and your family, are Jewish. And if you want to explore that side of you, I wanted to tell you I can help. And I brought you this.

(FRANK approaches her and places a necklace around her.)

It's a Star of David. A symbol of our faith. Of our shared faith.

(He takes her hands to comfort her, as OZZIE enters, unnoticed.)

CARMEN

So what am I? Am I Catholic or Jewish? I don't know what to say. Frank, you're confusing me. I grew up at St. Paul's, I've devoted my life to Jesus, and now you're telling me our whole family is Jewish?

OZZIE

What are you telling her?

(FRANK gets up to greet him.)

FRANK

Mr. Paz, I'm so glad to see you.

OZZIE

You leave her alone.

FRANK

No, it's not... I was just explaining to her that all those rituals she does before Friday night dinner probably means that your family was Jewish in the 15th century in Spain.

(OZZIE looks at him, then laughs.)

OZZIE

What? Sure, we're just a Jewish family in a five-floor walkup tenement in East Harlem. Man, *estás loco*. Look, I appreciate you trying to help us, but that kind of help we don't need. I mean what? I look Jewish? I sound Jewish?

FRANK

Don't you want to know about your heritage?

OZZIE

I want to know what you're doing to keep us in this apartment.

That's your job. That's why you're here. Not to me this bullshit story about being Jewish.

And if you know what's good for you, keep your hands off my sister.

FRANK

I'm sorry, I thought...

OZZIE

Oh man, I gotta tell Abuela. You'll see what I mean.

CARMEN

No Ozzie, don't. Don't!

(OZZIE runs into the bedroom, and wheels ABUELA in to the main room, in her wheelchair.)

ABUELA

Ozzie, *qué estás haciendo? Estaba viendo la televisión. Judge Judy.*

OZZIE

*Bahbie, este rabino loco dice que somos judíos. ¿Tu lo crees? Estábamos judía en España hace mucho tiempo.*

(A long pause as ABUELA glares at FRANK. Slowly, she gets out of her wheelchair and walks haltingly toward him. SHE looks at him, and begins to cry out and pound him chest with her fists.)

ABUELA

*No soy judía! No soy judía! No soy judía!*

(SHE beats his chest and cries out repeatedly until she tires and falls into his grasp.

(At this, CARMEN runs out of the apartment, crying.

(OZZIE takes ABUELA from FRANK and carefully puts her in her chair. SHE is still weeping and muttering.)

OZZIE

Get out of my house. I don't want to hear from you again. Not even about this apartment. Get out and leave us all alone!

FRANK

I was just trying to help. I'm...I'm sorry.

OZZIE

Yeah, you say that a lot.

FRANK

If there's any way I can help you, I will.

OZZIE

I don't need your help. I need seventy thousand dollars and a place to live.

(FRANK looks at OZZIE comforting ABUELA. OZZIE picks her up in the pose of the *Pietà*, and carries her in his arms back to her bedroom, as FRANK is left standing alone. HE exits.)

(BLACKOUT.)

## Scene 3

(A small East Harlem synagogue, dark and almost in disuse--this is the synagogue where RABBIT runs the nightly homeless shelter.)

(RABBIT and SARAH enter.)

SARAH

I know it's here somewhere. Do you know why I came here that night? Not just to get out of the cold. My grandfather used to be the rabbi here.

RABBIT

Here? This place? My place? My homeless shelter?

SARAH

Back in the seventies. It was even worse then. All the Jews had left, except for about a dozen old men. Enough for a minyan. Addicts would come and shoot up. But he took compassion on them, welcomed them in, and started to care for them overnight.

I know there are books here from Europe, before the war. Maybe we can find something about your great grandparents--that would satisfy the school.

RABBIT

Why should I have to satisfy them? Would it even prove I was Jewish? How do I do that? It wouldn't definitively prove I'm Jewish.

SARAH

It would prove you're Jewish enough.

RABBIT

I'll tell you one thing I'm not doing. Converting.

SARAH

What do you mean?

RABBIT

Sarah, I'm Jewish. I've always been Jewish. I'm a freaking rabbinic student in New York--of course I'm Jewish, and I shouldn't have to prove it to anyone. And I'm certainly not

giving them the satisfaction of converting to something *I already am!*

SARAH

It would answer all our problems.

RABBIT

Under no circumstances will I convert just to join the most exclusive club in the world. What did Groucho Marx say? I wouldn't join any club that would have me as a member.

SARAH

I can't see a thing in here.

(SARAH holds up her cell phone and uses it as a flashlight, revealing the back of CARMEN, sitting in one of the pews, crying.)

CARMEN

Please turn that off.

SARAH

I'm sorry. Can I turn the lights up a little? I'm looking for something.

CARMEN

So am I.

(SARAH finds a light switch, and the lights come up a little.)

SARAH

Are you all right?

CARMEN

I don't know how I am. I don't even know who I am anymore. I got some terrible news today. I might be Jewish.

RABBIT

I might be Jewish too.

SARAH

Being Jewish is great gift. A great honor.

CARMEN

But you didn't grow up singing about Jesus and going to church all your life.

RABBIT

I might as well have. I might as well spent my youth eating Twinkies and listening to the Osmonds.

SARAH

They're Mormon.

RABBIT

Same thing. I have to prove to someone that I'm Jewish.

CARMEN

He must be right. I mean, I come here, we light candles on Friday night, we kiss the doorway, we make a chicken dinner...

(RABBIT and SARAH look at each other.)

SARAH

Wait a minute. Are you Carmen?

CARMEN

How did you know?

RABBIT

We're friends of Frank--Rabbi Rosen. The one who was helping you with your apartment.

CARMEN

Some help he was. My life is upside down. I'm shaking, all nervous. And we're getting evicted, if we don't come up with seventy thousand dollars by the end of the month.

SARAH

I'm sure he can do something.

(FRANK enters.)

FRANK

Carmen, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

CARMEN

You! You ruined my life! I don't know who I am anymore! Who am I? Who am I?

(An old homeless man, MOSE, enters.)

MOSE

'Scuse me, ma'am, but some of us are tryin' to settle down and get some sleep.

CARMEN

I'm sorry.

MOSE

No. No reason to get all sorry and weepy like. What's the problem? I seen problems all my life, and there ain't none I couldn't lick.

CARMEN

This man just comes into my life, and he tells me I'm Jewish.

MOSE

Jewish? Well, then, you're in the right place! You in a Jew church. I know that's not the right way to say it, but it's what I grew up with. Don't mean no harm by it. In fact, this man here and his woman saved me many a night sleepin' rough and close to freezin' to my death. Ain't that the truth.

CARMEN

My parents, my grandparents were good Christian people. We would go to St. Paul's on 117th every Sunday. We knew everyone, everyone knew us. We knew our place in the world.

MOSE

No reason you should stop going to church if it makes you feel good. You can still come here too. Lotsa ways to get to Heaven. Like the song say, Eight gates to the City, hallelujah!

I come here every night, and I sure ain't Jewish. Been comin' here for years and years. The Jews here, they good people. Take care of you right, feed you right. Don't ask you to give your soul to Jesus for a bowl of soup like those other places. They feed you and leave you alone. My kinda people, Jews.

Even when I was down South were I was born, Charleston, South Carolina, by the waterfront--my daddy was a fisherman, you know--there was a Jewish family owned a store. Fair prices, good talk. And when I was older, if I didn't have enough for a



bottle, more often as not they'd sneak me one. Good people.

You know who was a good Jew to me? Mister George. Now, we talkin' years and years ago. Back, way back. War years. *Before* the war years. Mister George, he used to come here 'cause we used to put on shows here back in the day. That was Mister Roosevelt's doin'. 'Course, he wasn't Jewish, Mister Roosevelt, but everyone thought he was. *Rosenfeld*, some of us called him, but I always took it as a compliment. Yessir, the WPA. Back then I was rich, 'cause nobody had nothing anyway!

FRANK

Carmen, is there anything I can do?

CARMEN

You've done enough.

MOSE

Anyway, Mister George, he used to come up and play that piano over there. Is it still there? Underneath all those rags and dust there's a piano and Mister George would come here and he'd play for us. He'd say to me, he'd say "Mose"--he called all us folk "Mose"--Mose, he'd say, some day I'm going to write you into a show. And ain't it the truth if he did! Mister George, he died too soon, too young. Something up in his head, I hear. But there must have been so much up there, so many wheels turnin' up in his head. Maybe too many to live.

And then every night they'd do a little show up there for us, and all the downtown white folks would come up to Harlem to watch. My my, that was a time. All them downtown white folks come uptown to sit with us black folks and watch Jews sing and dance!

Sometimes the world turns upside down, miss. Black folk in a synagogue, white people movin' to Bushwick, rabbis in East Harlem. Nothin' you can do about it except ride it out. There's always another adventure around the corner.

You're young, miss. Jew, Catholic, these crazy Muslims with their bowties, we all the same. We all looking for something, and we don't know what we're looking for, and when we find it we don't know we were looking for it in the first place.

Now 'scuse me, but I've got an appointment with Mister Mogen

David before I go back to sleep.

SARAH

Excuse me--just how long have you been coming here?

MOSE

Long as I can remember.

SARAH

My grandfather. He was the Rabbi here a long time ago. Mordecai Silverman.

MOSE

You mean, Old Man Morty? He your granddaddy? He was a good man. Always kind to me.

SARAH

But that was fifty-five years ago.

MOSE

Ma'am, at a certain point, ain't no difference between fifty-five years ago and last night. Not for me, at least. I kinda like for time to wash over me. Cleanse me. But I remember your granddaddy like he come in yesterday. I know this place from top to bottom. Traced every wall with my fingers, counted every light, read every book there is in here. The ones in English, at least. And some that ain't, too.

SARAH

You've read the books here? All of them?

MOSE

Ma'am, they have books in here, your granddaddy tell me one day they had to bring 'em in from the old country before that maniac burned them all. I remember boxes and boxes of books comin' in, day after day, week after week. And then it stopped. Found out they got the guy who was sending them to us. War no good for anybody anytime. No sir. No damn good.

RABBIT

So you know where these books are?

MOSE

Know? I damn near memorized them all! Ask me something about Martin Buber. I know all about that guy. "I And Thou." I read

that.

FRANK

You read I And Thou?

MOSE

Got lots of time on my hands, young man. 'Course I read I And Thou. No idea what he was talking about.

RABBIT

Me neither.

MOSE

But it sounded intelligent. Some people got that knack.

RABBIT

These books, are any of them directories? Like phone books? Maybe of Poland? Or Russia?

MOSE

Which part of Poland you askin' about?

RABBIT

My grandfather used to talk about a town called Lvov.

MOSE

You mean "Die jüdische Directorie von Lvov"? Also known in Polish as "Katalog żydowska Lwowa"? Like I said, I got a lot of time on my hands.

RABBIT

(incredulous)

You have the Jewish directory of Lvov?

MOSE

You talkin' 1925, 1927, 1931 or 1933. They kinda stopped after that.

FRANK

I figured they would.

RABBIT

1927?

MOSE

Comin' right up.

(HE exits for a short time to get the book.)

CARMEN

Frank, why would they stop in 1933? The books. The books of Jews. Why would they stop?

FRANK

(sighs)

Because Germany had a nervous breakdown. And they blamed the Jews for everything bad that had ever happened.

CARMEN

Whenever she saw a German car, my mother would spit at it. And she'd whisper something to me. Carmen, she'd say, *El Dio es tadrozomas no es olvidadozo*. God may act slowly, but He never forgets. And she'd say something she said she heard many years ago. "Always remember, *Schwer zu sein ein yid.*"

FRANK

(smiles)

It's hard to be a Jew. Yes. Sometimes. Sometimes it is.

CARMEN

I don't think I can be a Jew, Frank. It's tough enough being Dominican.

FRANK

I understand. Is there anything I can do about your apartment? I haven't been a very good lawyer.

CARMEN

We'll find a way, Ozzie and me. And bahbie.

(MOSE enters with a large hardcover book, which SARAH takes from him and starts paging through.)

MOSE

Here we go, *Die jüdische Directorie von Lvov, 1927*. I'm kinda the unofficial librarian around here. Nobody ever asked me about these books. What you need them for?

SARAH

Perlmutter, Perlmutter, Perlmutter...

MOSE

I believe you'll find that in the P section, ma'am.

SARAH

(to RABBIT)

What was your grandfather's name?

RABBIT

Shmuel, like everyone else's. But he was born in the Bronx.

SARAH

Do you know your great-grandfather's name?

RABBIT

We called him Manny, but it was Mendel Moishe. Mendel Moishe Perlmutter.

FRANK

That's some name.

RABBIT

No one asked *him* if *he* was Jewish.

SARAH

(looks up)

Number 6 Shevchenka Prospekt, apartment 12. Mendel Moishe and Fayga Perlmutter. "Kushnir"?

RABBIT

(quietly)

It means fur. He was a furrier.

SARAH

So this is him? Your great-grandparents, Mendel Moishe and Fayga Perlmutter, are in the Jewish directory of Lvov in Poland. Rabbit, this is the proof we need!

RABBIT

Proof of what?

SARAH

Proof that you're Jewish.

RABBIT

Proof that I'm *sufficiently* Jewish.

SARAH

What do you mean?

RABBIT

(quietly)

What if *they* weren't Jewish?

SARAH

Mendel Moishe and Fayga Perlmutter weren't Jewish??? In Poland in 1927? What do you want? You want to go back to Abraham and the burning fucking bush?

RABBIT

But what? This has all made me think. Think about what I'm doing. If a simple question can make me rethink who I am, and who I should be in life, what good will I be as a rabbi? People will come to me with questions about life--should I marry this one, should we adopt a child, should I pull the plug on my terminally ill father. They'll ask me. And what if I'm wrong? What if I'm wrong in my faith.

SARAH

You're being ridiculous. You were asked to provide paperwork. That's all. And here it is. This should make you stronger in your faith, not weaker. You have proof--definitive proof--that you're Jewish.

RABBIT

I can't do it.

SARAH

Do what?

RABBIT

Continue in the program.

SARAH

Why?

RABBIT

I help the homeless. Isn't that enough? Shouldn't it be enough? Isn't it?

SARAH

Is that about me? You think you just picked me off the streets and saved me? I was there waiting to be saved, mister. You didn't want to save anyone but your own shitty self.

If you don't continue, you won't have me.

RABBIT

Sarah, I don't have *me* anymore. I'm some foolish kid who stumbled into something way out of my reach. And now I know it. Frank, I'll clean my things out of your apartment tomorrow.

FRANK

That's not the answer.

RABBIT

It is for me. Now come on. Everybody out. My congregation of misfits is waiting outside, and I must minister to them for the night.

(to SARAH)

You too. You've graduated.

(RABBIT exits into the darkness. but as HE exits, HE passes CARMEN.)

(to CARMEN)

You. You can stay.

(BLACKOUT)

## Scene 4

(Night. FRANK speaks before his congregation.)

FRANK

Please be seated. Well, please remain seated, at least. This won't take long.

Usually, I draw my sermons from the weekly Torah portion we read every Sabbath. This week's portion, unfortunately, is Exodus 25 to 27, and a duller part of the Bible you've never read. It's instructions on how to build the Ark of the Covenant, which you'd think might be pretty cool. After all, God is giving instructions like he's that New England guy on This Old House.

But it's not. It's how many cubits wide and long the ark should be, and let me clue you in on some inside information--no one actually knows what a cubit is.

"They shall make an ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high." Now, that could be a little box, or it could be big enough to fit in the bed of a pickup truck. No one knows.

"Overlay it with pure gold -- overlay it inside and out -- and make upon it a gold molding round about. Cast four gold rings for it, to be attached to its four feet, two rings on one of its side walls and two on the other. Make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold; then insert the poles into the rings on the side walls of the ark, for carrying the ark." I mean, this is worse than instructions from Ikea.

And get this--"Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts"--I'll cut some of this here, since for a divine being God can sure prattle on--"gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats' hair; tanned ram skins, dolphin skins"--dolphin skins! Did the ancient Israelites live near Sea World?-- "acacia wood"--God must have a thing for acacia wood--"oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense, lapis lazuli"--don't you get that in an organic grocery store?--"and precious stones for the ephod." Whatever an ephod is.

So I'm not going to talk about cubits and dolphin skins and



ephods. I'm going to talk about disappointment.

Sometimes, the best intentions go awry. You all know that. How many of you started exercising to lose a little weight, and dropped dead on a treadmill? How many of you made a nice little dish of gefilte fish for the new next door neighbors, only to poison them with trichinosis?

How many of you asked a friend for a simple favor, for help with a simple task, or asked them a simple question, and the answer caused them pain and suffering?

How many of you just wanted to tell someone how you felt, and in the process broke their hearts? Or upended their entire life?

How many of you? I won't ask you to raise your hands.

That's right. I can't ask you to raise your hands.

Because you're all dead.

Because all you do is just lay there. Lay there in your smugness. You never answer me. You just lay there. And sometimes, not often, but sometimes, I envy that smugness. I envy your resoluteness in your silence.

Sometimes I envy you.

I think I've told you all about where I live. An old dark, endless apartment. The kind of place that should harbor ghosts. Well, you'll be happy to know I've sold it. Sold it for more money than some of you made in your entire lives. Three million and seventy thousand dollars. I insisted on that extra seventy. I think I know what to do with it.

Which brings me to some sad news. You won't be able to call me Rabbi anymore. No, Rabbi Rosen will become rabbinic intern Rosen, student no more. But after a few weeks of figuring out what I'm going to do with the rest of my life, and where I'm going to do it, I'll be right back here with you, listening to your concerns, tending to you, my flock, my people, my congregation.

After all, in the end, I think we're a pretty good match. Don't you?

(BLACKOUT.

(END OF ACT TWO.)