

SHUL

A Play

Sheldon Wolf
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No previous productions

SHUL: SYNOPSIS

The once thriving little synagogue, Etz Chaim, is now a decrepit old building in a decrepit old, inner city neighborhood where buildings are missing on every street, where sirens are heard throughout the night, and where bullets have shattered windows. This play is about the day when the last few members of Etz Chaim gather to decide the fate of their building, which means the fate of their lives; the daily visits to the old building are central to their subsistence. They bicker, they laugh, they remember. They are thrown by the arrival of a stranger, from another religion, who has other ideas for the site. They consider the possibility of some new commercial activity in the area, perhaps some other artists finding studios, perhaps a coffee shop.

Perhaps. Perhaps.

As in Chekhov, the final chances to take action are turned down. No change. No move. No plan. The members decide to stay, celebrating life—the decision to not decide-- with dancing and clapping. And even as they celebrate, a portion of the ceiling crashes to the floor, ending the play with a solemn look to the heavens for some understanding if what comes next.

There have been two readings of SHUL, in Philadelphia directed by Amy Kaissar (co-producer of the recent revival of THE HEIDI CHRONICLES) and in Massachusetts. At both readings some members of the audience wept, and after both readings, members of the audience spoke to me, saying, "That's my church," "That's my civic group," "That's my family." "That's not a Jewish story...that's my story."

SHUL is under consideration for a production in 2018-19 by the Minnesota Jewish Theatre Company.

CAST
(in order of appearance)

MIRIAM, woman, 80s

NATE, man, 80s

FRIEDMAN, man, 80s

GOLDEN, man, 70s

ABE, man, 30s

EZRA, man, 80s

HEIDI, woman, late 20s

JOHN, man, 40s

SETTING

The sanctuary of a small, old, inner-city synagogue.

SHUL

ACT ONE

(Lights come up on the interior of a very small synagogue with an ancient wooden ark, a few dark wooden chairs on either side. Above the ark, an eternal light, its stained glass now broken. Several dark pews, random folding chairs, some of them covered with tarps. On the floor, three or four white 5-gallon paint buckets. A dark bookcase filled with old prayer books. Dusty light enters from above. The distant sound of a siren.)

(MIRIAM, 80s, enters in a simple floral dress or housecoat, stockings rolled down to her ankles.)

MIRIAM

So, you're here already.

NATE *(80s, pants, old white shirt, lying on a bench, his back turned, facing the ark.)*

I've been sleeping here since sunrise. Or at least I tried. I kept hearing sounds.

MIRIAM

Who could sleep?

NATE

Sounds like breathing. Snoring.

MIRIAM

Maybe you were hearing yourself.

NATE

No, this was different. Frightening.

MIRIAM

It's a big day, Nate. We're all a little frightened.

NATE

I slept here as a kid. Next to my father. It was warm, under his tallis. And, look, I'm still here!

MIRIAM

Someone should empty these buckets. It doesn't look nice, water dripping.

NATE

With all the holes, our words can fly up to heaven.

MIRIAM

Well, look who caught the spirit today.

NATE

I'm just saying-

(pause)

MIRIAM

Abe isn't here yet?

NATE

Abe, are you here? Nothing.

MIRIAM

I was just saying- *(starts to hum the tune of Etz Chaim Hi)*

NATE

If I hold still, I can smell my father. I can hear his murmur, see his eyes. *(Sings)* Di-di-di...

(pause)

What are you doing?

MIRIAM

Dusting. When was the last time someone dusted?

NATE

Yesterday you dusted. The day before you dusted.

MIRIAM

It isn't nice.

NATE

Having holes in the ceiling isn't nice. Having no heat isn't nice. Did you see in the hallway where the dirt blew in? There is a tree growing out of the floor. Do you think someone is going to see the dust?

MIRIAM

I see the dust. And I'm doing what I can do. Let's show a little respect.

NATE

I'm showing respect. I prayed here this morning until my eyes closed.

MIRIAM

You prayed, now do. Go pull the tree.

NATE

My Esther used to give me orders. Now you. For a whole life, I never had to think. Such a blessing! Now, let me shed a tear.

MIRIAM

It isn't tears that we need. It's money. Dough-re-mi.

NATE

Ach! If we had it, we wouldn't know what to do with it. Why start now?

MIRIAM

Go pull the tree.

NATE

Yes, sir. Yes, m'am. What do I know? I'm just an old cocker.

(He leaves. She dusts, then stops. She covers her eyes, mumbling to herself. He returns quietly, holding a small tree shoot.)

NATE

Etz chaim hi. "It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it."

MIRIAM

"And all who cling to it find happiness." Is that what we found here, Nate? Happiness?

NATE

In the old days, this was the place! Such goings on.

MIRIAM

And look at us now. The last of the last.

NATE

So, Miriam, what's gonna be with you, after this is gone?

MIRIAM

Me? I'm calling my broker, checking my options.

NATE

You have a broker?

MIRIAM

I have options? Where am I going to go? Hollywood? Miami?

NATE

So, you'll come with me.

MIRIAM

And where are you going?

NATE

Israel.

MIRIAM

And who's sending you to Israel? Nu, I'm-waiting-for-the-punch line.

NATE

The government.

MIRIAM

Federal or state?

NATE

They're all sending me. When I win the lotto.

MIRIAM

And they're making me Queen of Sheba.

NATE

You see, we have what to look forward to.

MIRIAM

Yes, every day I have such choices. Do I buy the old brown bananas because they're cheaper, or do I buy more sardines? Such a land of opportunity, America! I go to the store, I don't recognize the products any more. Chinese. Pakistani. Who knows what? I don't know nobody there anymore. I don't know the people in my building. I hear from the next apartment, but I can't understand. On the other side of me, just drums. Night and day, drums. Don't these people stop to make a crap? You should pardon the expression.

NATE

You pray to live to eighty, if you have the strength. It's after eighty you need the strength. The whole world changes around you. It takes strength just to get up in the morning. You wonder if the place you remember when you went to sleep is going to be there the next day.

MIRIAM

You're lucky. You hear snoring. I hear sirens. I hear babies screaming, voices, and even if I listen through the wall I don't understand them.

NATE

So, as the great rabbis must've said, don't listen.

MIRIAM

Don't listen. Don't see. Like monkeys.

NATE

And now this!

MIRIAM

Yes, this. Not ten of us left for a respectable service. Not even eight. Not even six, without Ezra.

NATE

No, we should count Ezra. He should have a vote.

MIRIAM

Why, you think he's coming out? You know something I don't know? He was a sick man before he went in. Now, he must be worse. He's not coming out, I tell you. Kiss him goodbye.

NATE

Keyn aynhoreh. Pooh, pooh, pooh.

MIRIAM (*whispers*)

As I said, not even six. And when the time comes, don't send me to no state hospital like him. There's nothing for me there but streptococcus.

NATE

And who says I'll still be around to send you?

MIRIAM

Sha!

(pause)

MIRIAM

So, what if nobody comes?

NATE

You think they're not coming? On such a day?

MIRIAM

I mean, what if? What if we wake up again, tomorrow and the next day, and nothing changes.

NATE

No, today it changes. Today is the vote. We decide or we don't decide. If not, we've missed our opportunity.

MIRIAM

If nobody shows, there is no opportunity.

NATE

Maybe not for you. But for me—

MIRIAM

I was hoping for an opportunity.

NATE

Hoping?

MIRIAM

Yes. I was hoping. Am. Still am.

NATE

Be here 10 a.m. That's what the letter said. What time is it now?

MIRIAM

Someone should empty these buckets.

(Enter FRIEDMAN, 80s, an unlit cigar, a fancy cane. Plaid pants.)

FRIEDMAN

Hello, hello. The sun is shining. The birds are singing. Di-dee-dum. You can smell the smell of new cut grass. Life is beautiful.

NATE (to MIRIAM)
Oy, the optimist is here.

MIRIAM
Opportunity knocks.

FRIEDMAN
What, you don't believe me. The birds are singing. Just not here. Ha-ha.

MIRIAM
So, good morning, Friedman. Are we going to see dancing today?

FRIEDMAN
Only when I'm happy. Or nervous.

MIRIAM
Which is just about always.

FRIEDMAN
Dri-de-do, dri-di-dum. Look, I brought a thermos full of coffee. But the cups I forgot.

MIRIAM
So, what else is new?

NATE
I'll just go into the kitchen and get the demi-tasse set.

FRIEDMAN
No need for the tone, Mr. Rosen. So, we'll share the cap. What? You think I have germs?

NATE
No, Friedman, I think I do. Too much dust in the air.

MIRIAM
Funny, funny. I just want it to be right.

FRIEDMAN
Anything about Ezra?

MIRIAM
Not a word. He's not coming out, I tell you.

FRIEDMAN

So, he got lost on the train? What's the big deal?

MIRIAM

He was naked, Friedman. He was singing songs from the High Holidays and he was naked.

FRIEDMAN

And who did he hurt?

NATE

Oy, look what happens to us! We become like children.

MIRIAM

From the High Holidays yet!

FRIEDMAN

They're nice songs. Who did he hurt?

(pause)

NATE

So, Friedman, let's change the mood. There's something I've been meaning to ask, and today seems like just the time.

FRIEDMAN

So, shoot.

NATE

How long do I know you?

FRIEDMAN

Who knows anyone really?

NATE

I know you for a hundred years. We move here around the same time with our wives. We were young marrieds. Our kids grew up here. We grew old here. Soon here isn't going to be here anymore, if you know what I mean. So, tell me something, Friedman.

FRIEDMAN

Yes, Mr. Rosen, so formal.

NATE

Friedman? You have a first name?

FRIEDMAN

All these years, I'm waiting for someone to ask.

NATE

So, nu? When I see your name, it's C dot Friedman. C dot Friedman. Charles?

FRIEDMAN

Not even close. *(He dances a bit, a shuffle of his feet.)*
Li-diddle-di.

NATE

Carl? Claud? Cole...like Cole Porter?

MIRIAM

He wasn't Jewish.

NATE

I'm stumped.

(pause for effect)

FRIEDMAN

Christopher.

MIRIAM

Oy!

FRIEDMAN

What? You don't believe me? My mother was a nun.

NATE

And my girlfriend here is the Queen of Sheba.

FRIEDMAN

I mean before she met my father. She was a nun. *(Feet shuffling.)*

They sat shiva, my Bubbe and Zeyda, when my father married her, a *shiksa!* Then she was converted. Then I was converted...don't ask for details, it wasn't pretty. Everything changed, except my name. Too much to explain. So, I became just Friedman, and Friedman I shall be forever more, amen, amen.

MIRIAM

Who woulda thought? *(whispers)* Christopher!

FRIEDMAN

And then, after the conversion, my parents were raised from the dead. For years, Bubbe and Zeyda were mourning for them, saying kaddish, and then there was a miracle, right after I got clipped. My father was alive again. My mother was alive. Everyone raised from the dead, I tell you. And such joy there was! For nine hundred weeks in a row, we went to Bubbe and Zeyda for Shabbos dinner. Ate the same chicken. Told the same stories. So, don't tell me that miracles don't happen anymore. The dead can return, I tell you, and I'm the living proof.

MIRIAM

Baruch Ha'Shem.

FRIEDMAN

"Oh, my mother was a nun,
And I'm a son-of-a gun."

That's how I used to sing about it.

NATE

I thought you were a bookkeeper.

FRIEDMAN

In my head, I performed in Yiddish Theatre. For the IRS, I was a bookkeeper.

NATE

I *did* work in Yiddish Theatre.

FRIEDMAN

You did. I didn't. Now between us, both of us have nothing.

NATE

So much for youth and dreams.

MIRIAM

Ay, ay, ay. Keep up this talk and you'll get yourself depressed.

NATE

Someone has been reading Oprah.

MIRIAM

I'm just saying.

(pause)

FRIEDMAN

And I'm saying, if there can be a miracle for me, coming back from the dead, then we haven't seen the last of Ezra yet.

NATE

To God's ear, Friedman. To God's ear.

MIRIAM

Baruch Ha-shem.

FRIEDMAN

So, where is Abe? Mister President keeps us waiting?

NATE

I'm sure he's on the way. And the agent.

FRIEDMAN

That we should see such a day! Who would've guessed? (*Feet shuffling.*) Everyone got a letter?

MIRIAM

We need to straighten up. They pay more when they see it is nice.

FRIEDMAN

I think they call it "street value." Or is that what they pay for drugs?

NATE

Pay? Who is going to pay anything? There are holes in the ceiling. There are mice.

FRIEDMAN

Just the property alone is worth something. Even if they knock it down.

NATE

The whole neighborhood is knocked down. There are empty lots everywhere, like a mouth without teeth.

MIRIAM

Friedman, will you help me with this bucket? We keep emptying, the rain keeps filling.

FRIEDMAN

Thank God, we have something to do.

(Enter GOLDEN. 70s, dark suit, white shirt, tie, slick grey hair, attaché case, Wall Street Journal.)

NATE

Maybe we'll be lucky, they'll be blind.

FRIEDMAN

Sha. We have company.

NATE

The beginning of the end.

MIRIAM

Now, boys, where are our manners. Hello. I'm Miriam Daniels. Welcome to our synagogue. Please *(dusting off a chair)* have a seat.

GOLDEN

Nice to meet you. Paul Golden.

FRIEDMAN

Mr. Golden, I'm Friedman.

GOLDEN

Please, call me Paul.

FRIEDMAN

Please, call me Friedman. *(He winks at the others. A trace of feet.)*

NATE

Don't ask about him. I'm Nate. Just call me Nate.

GOLDEN

Nate.

Nate. Miriam. Just Friedman.

MIRIAM

Yes.

(Pause)

FRIEDMAN
A cap of coffee?

NATE
We have one cup.

GOLDEN
Thank you. I'm all set.

(Pause)

MIRIAM
It's not as bad as it looks. Just needs some paint.

(pause)

GOLDEN
I see clouds.

FRIEDMAN
Followed by a rainbow.

NATE
So, tell me again your company.

GOLDEN
Company?

NATE
You're with which real estate agency?

GOLDEN
I'm not with an agency. *(laughs)* You thought— What, you thought I was an agent?

FRIEDMAN
We're waiting for the realtor.

GOLDEN
No, I'm here to vote. Keep it or sell it. I got a letter.

MIRIAM
You got the letter?

GOLDEN

Isn't this the vote on what to do with the shul? I'm a member. I'm here to discuss the potential sale, etcetera, etcetera, and to vote.

MIRIAM

Oh, don't we look silly.

FRIEDMAN

You're a member? Of Etz Chaim?

NATE

It's just, the rest of us look like shleppers.

FRIEDMAN

That's because we are shleppers. Deedle-di.

GOLDEN

Well, I haven't been around for quite some time.

MIRIAM

Some time? I don't recognize you, and I have a good memory for faces, don't I, Nate?

GOLDEN

But I send my check. Every year, Rosh Hashana. Someone cashes it. So, I think that makes me a member.

NATE

When you're not around here, where are you around?

GOLDEN

Mostly Hilton Head. But I travel, I mean, when I can.

MIRIAM

Yes. Of course. Personally, I'm thinking about Hollywood.

GOLDEN

My great grandfather, Mendel Goldenberg, was one of the founders of this shul. His name is on the big window out front.

MIRIAM

Oh, the window?

GOLDEN

Under the plywood I guess. And the rabbi's lectern. Where is the lectern?

NATE

Someone had a little campfire.

MIRIAM

We couldn't afford-

FRIEDMAN

And if we could, they'd only come in again.

GOLDEN

Yes, my family had history here.

NATE

Some of us live that history every day.

GOLDEN

Yes, I see.

MIRIAM

Yes?

GOLDEN

Although someone really should clean up a bit. Dust. It would make all the difference.

MIRIAM (*to NATE*)

As I was just saying.

GOLDEN

There are girls that come in and do everything. Services.

FRIEDMAN

Mr. Golden, I'm not sure if you understand our situation here. Some of us can barely afford lunch.

GOLDEN

I'm sorry if I offended. I just stated an opinion. It is right to state opinions now, isn't it? Or maybe I should wait for the formal discussion.

NATE

No, of course, just look around, and you can see that first thing we need here is more opinions.

GOLDEN

But someone has been cashing my checks, and I think that entitles me to something. Now, I'm aware of what's happening. I see what you've done, the disintegration that has been allowed-

NATE

We haven't allowed-!

MIRIAM

We're people of very limited means, Mr. Golden. We've done what we can. But, you don't know-I mean, you may not know what it has been like seeing so many families leave, seeing our friends pick up and go, seeing members die off, seeing the drug trades on the street and the fires and the garbage that hits you in the face on a windy day.

NATE

When I was a boy, sitting next to my father, I remember this shul being so crowded. People were backed up out the door on to the street. I remember the cantor then, you know his name...and the cry in his voice. And the joy! An opera singer he was. The rabbi was known by everyone. Well, everyone was known by everyone. It was such a family. I remember the opening of the ark, and the torahs, all in gold velvet with the names embroidered and the silver ornaments, brilliant, shining. The pride we had.

(pause)

The ornaments were the first to go.

FRIEDMAN

Nate-

NATE

A new temple, out in suburbs, they bought the silver for good money. Solid sterling.

MIRIAM (*to GOLDEN*)

Would you like some coffee? (*She makes no effort to serve him.*)

NATE

Friedman, do you remember the ark curtain?

FRIEDMAN

"Kadosh. Kadosh. Kadosh."

NATE

There was a tree, with the leaves all embroidered from gold.

MIRIAM

"In memory of Bella Steinberg, beloved wife and mother." I used to think it was the most beautiful thing.

NATE

Gone. But not the memory.

FRIEDMAN

When did they sell that?

GOLDEN

May I ask...Is there a printed agenda?

MIRIAM

Yes, the calligrapher is working now.

NATE

Mr. Golden, we have nothing. We don't have a rabbi. We don't have a cantor. We don't even have one of those students they used to send. We don't have families singing. It is so-difficult trying to do the right thing. We don't have services here. Not really. We don't have any torahs here, Mr. Golden. We have very little but our memories. They've taken everything else.

GOLDEN

When I look at the ark, Nate, Miriam, Friedman, I see an insect-ridden piece of timber, an object of insignificant monetary value. It looks like the wood had some gold paint—maybe even gold leaf—at one time. Part of the appliqué carving is missing. The painted words on top are worn away. I can't imagine there would be much interest in the resale market. My great-grandfather was a founder here. But I was raised to see what is in front of me. We Jews, too often, look behind, and our memory becomes like shackles. And we get stuck. My opinion, if you want it, is "Look hard. See what is here. In *fact*. Not in memory. Get the agent to get a price. Any price. And move on."

MIRIAM

Yes, it is so easy for you to leave your memories behind. You don't have any. Not here.

NATE

Miriam. Please. Not now.

MIRIAM

When? When the Messiah comes?

FRIEDMAN

I'm afraid, when the Messiah comes, I will be fertilizer in the Garden of Eden. *(A little dance.)*

MIRIAM

And who says that's where you're going? I know where I'm going, and that's nowhere fast. I have no place to go. That is why some of us cling on. Some of us don't have a Hilton Head or a shmilton head. This is it, bubbelah. Don't cut me off so fast.

GOLDEN

Okay, I know when to shut up. I'll wait for this Abe. And the agent. The agent will talk smarts. *(He picks up an old book.)*

MIRIAM

What, I'm not talking smarts? I got just as much a vote as you and the next guy.

Yes, a funny twist, isn't it? I remember the days when I didn't count, when I sat off to the side. The women were nobodies. Good for cutting cake and challah, that's what we were. Then the husbands started to die off, and someone thought the women had control of the money. Yes, the big estates we had! We played out that fantasy, didn't we? We were nobodies, and suddenly we became somebodies. Talk about miracles!

NATE

And still you dust.

MIRIAM

We all have a different way of caring.

FRIEDMAN

Oh, it used to be so easy. Now, women count as men.

MIRIAM

And a dollar is a dollar, and don't you forget it. None of
yous. I gave plenty to this shul.

NATE

All of us gave plenty. Even Golden, in his way. And now it
is time to step back and look at what we got.

GOLDEN

Please call me Paul.

FRIEDMAN

R-O-I. Return on investment.

MIRIAM

Look, such a fancy dancy with the words.

FRIEDMAN

What? I went to a seminar. At the library. They had donuts.

MIRIAM

Ah, you're the clever one.

FRIEDMAN

Ha-ha. So I like to read. *(He opens a book.)*

MIRIAM

And you like to eat.

FRIEDMAN

So, call me *pisher*.

(They all just sit.)

GOLDEN

I'm going to look for coffee. If I don't come back, I think
you know my vote.

MIRIAM

I'm not sure we do.

GOLDEN

Although I would like that window.

NATE

Good luck finding coffee.

(They all just sit.)

FRIEDMAN *(orating as he reads from book)*

Listen to this. In Genesis we read, "And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he could not prevail against him, he touched the socket of his hip, and the socket of Jacob's hip became dislocated as he wrestled with him. And he (the angel) said, 'Let me go, for dawn is breaking,' but he (Jacob) said, 'I will not let you go unless you have blessed me.' So he said to him, 'What is your name?' and he said, 'Jacob.' And he said, 'Your name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for you have contended with God and with men, and have prevailed.'"

NATE

We struggle with God, and we struggle with man, isn't that right?

MIRIAM

Some of us struggle more than others.

GOLDEN

Or perhaps we struggle in different ways. The night is just as long for each of us, no?

ABE *(offstage)*

Hello, hello.

MIRIAM

Abe!

FRIEDMAN

The Messiah comes.

NATE

It's Abe.

MIRIAM

Abe-elah, we've been waiting for you.

(ABE enters. He is 30-ish. Jeans. Mexican shirt. Sandals. Paint splattered on everything.)

ABE

Okay, who wants what? I've got double latte with cinnamon, I've got espresso with steamed milk no sugar, I've got a double half caf skinny-

NATE

What language is this?

ABE

You think it was easy carrying this? I had to balance and step over people, I don't know how many blocks, but they've opened a new place down near me.

MIRIAM

A new place?

ABE

On that empty corner.

MIRIAM

Every corner is empty. So tell me something new.

ABE

So, everybody take. On me. I won the lotto. Twenty bucks.

NATE

So long struggling with the angels!

ABE (*distributing cups*)

Nate. Miriam. Friedman. And you are....?

NATE

Golden.

MIRIAM

Let him talk for himself.

GOLDEN

Golden. Paul Golden. Like Friedman, but with a first name. Paul. (*to ALL*) Paul.

ABE

Ah. And tell me you just moved into the neighborhood.

GOLDEN

My great grandfather, Mendel Goldenberg, was one of the founders of this shul. I've been sending money every year, from far away.

MIRIAM

Hilton Head.

ABE

You're the one! So very glad. An honor, really.

GOLDEN

So, you're the President?

ABE

Yes. They had an election. I lost.

MIRIAM

No, no, no, honey. We're all winners with you around.

FRIEDMAN (to MIRIAM)

You kissing up for a better seat Yom Kippur?

ABE

So, who wants coffee? Miriam gets the decaf on account of the heart, and Nate could use a little pick-me-up. And Friedman, I suspect you're high already. And our guest.

So.

GOLDEN

Yes. Thanks.

FRIEDMAN

Ach, such a good morning!

ABE

The light was so good this morning. I've been painting.

GOLDEN

Yes on that hot coffee.

(pause)

MIRIAM

What do we do if there's no buyer?

ABE

This has to be worth something to someone. There will be a buyer.

MIRIAM

Not just a buyer. An acceptable buyer. Someone who will respect this sacred space.

ABE

The agent said she'd come. Heidi Schwartz.

MIRIAM

Heidi Schwartz?

ABE

She's very good.

NATE

You know her?

ABE

Yes. Used to.

FRIEDMAN

What, in the biblical sense?

ABE

There was something-

FRIEDMAN

With a name like Schwartz, how bad could she be?

MIRIAM

I'm surprised, a Jewish agent in this area.

ABE

Yes, agents, and I know of some other Jewish artists who moved into a storefront. Next will come the restaurants. Okay, so not kosher, but restaurants. Then the professionals. The architects. Okay, so not observant...But, ok. Maybe if we just sit tight--

MIRIAM

I can't be any tighter.

FRIEDMAN

My belt is so tight, my stomach is coming out the back.

NATE

If you stand out front, you see the explorers, the scouts. They come by car, never alone. just looking ahead, casual, relaxed, and they put their arm, so gentle, up near the window, still looking ahead. Click. The lock closes. As if they are entering a jungle, a zoo, and we are the animals on display. "But look! There is a white one. And another." "Must be albinos." "Don't stare, honey." To them, this is an adventure. To us, this is our neighborhood.

FRIEDMAN

Well, I know I can't keep chipping in. A dollar here, a dollar there. It kills me to say it. But I'm on a fixed income.

NATE

Who has the energy for this? We've tried every kind of life support. Please, no more extraordinary means. The patient is dead." I think, "Maybe we should just be done with it." But it's not that simple.

MIRIAM

And if there is no buyer? We can't just walk away.

GOLDEN

Yes, like Lot at Gemorrah. And don't look back.

NATE

But the city looks back. The police look back. Somebody owns this place. Someone is responsible, even if we want to go.

MIRIAM

Oy, This is too complicated, and I'm too old. Where is the comfort of the golden years?

ABE

And I tell you, this area is changing. It's coming back.

MIRIAM

When it comes, come to the cemetery and say hello for me.

NATE

Shalom for me. I'll be in Israel. Where everyone is Jewish. I mean, except the Arabs.

FRIEDMAN

Shalom, y'all for me. I'll be in Richmond with the evil sister-in-law.

MIRIAM

My daughter has a room, she says. But I already have a room. Every day, I leave my room on my way to shul, I ring the bell of Mrs. Smith. If she rings back, I know she is ok. And I always carry a piece of candy for the little girl with the scars. I don't ask questions. If I see her, I give her a candy. Her eyes say "Thank you." You see, I am needed here. Here I have a purpose. I could move to the suburbs, but who am I going to see in the suburbs? What am I going to do, sit by myself in a chair on the patio? Who over there needs a little piece of candy?

NATE

We need another miracle.

MIRIAM

As if miracles still happen.

FRIEDMAN

We need Mr. Trump.

ABE

Yes, such a big lover of synagogues.

FRIEDMAN

A philanthropist. Someone with money.

MIRIAM

An extra yacht he can sell.

NATE

A penthouse he doesn't need.

MIRIAM

A studio in Paris.

FRIEDMAN

Monte Carlo.

NATE

Hawaii.

MIRIAM
Hilton Head.

(All look at GOLDEN. Silence)

GOLDEN
I hope you're not looking at me.

MIRIAM
Where else should we look?

GOLDEN
What? You hear Hilton Head and you make assumptions?

NATE
What should we make?

GOLDEN
You see clothes? A watch? You don't know me. You don't know anything about me.

ABE
You're right. We really don't know you.

(pause)

GOLDEN
I-- sell clothes in an exclusive men's shop. I get to look nice.

MIRIAM
You came a long distance just to look nice.

GOLDEN
I came for a vote. Just like you.

ABE
I think you want to help.

NATE
One Jew helping another.

FRIEDMAN
Isn't that right? (*A fidget.*)

GOLDEN

One Jew helping another! As if that ever happened. We have these myths, don't we? The myth that we're all such wonderful people. Chosen! The myth that all of us came from Poland. The myth that Zeyda was a peasant and Bubbe lit the Sabbath candles and cooked chicken soup. We have this myth that everyone came through Ellis Island and the Lower East Side. And they all made a little money. And they all wanted the best for their children. Yes? But that's just a myth. Some of us came from the big cities, Berlin, Vienna. Some were professionals in the old country, doctors, teachers. Some had money, lots of it before they got here. Isn't that true? My grandfather had a place in the mountains. My mother went to private school. They were up and coming. American. They owned a house here, on the boulevard. When this was the best street with the best people. The last thing they wanted was a friend from the shtetl.

NATE (to MIRIAM)
He's one of us?

GOLDEN

And not all of them wanted the best. When my father got drunk—yes, there are Jews who get drunk—when he beat me with the wooden hanger, he said, "This is how it was done to me. To make me a good Jew." And my Zeyda watched. He lived with us, and he watched. And, if you ask me, the rabbi watched, and the teachers. These were not good sweet people. These were monsters I was asked to honor and obey.

"Nice people, those Goldenbergs, founded the shul, the Goldenbergs."

NATE
A hanger?

GOLDEN

On the holidays, when I was young, when they prepared to say Yiskor, the rabbi said, "Think of your poor, sweet parents and grandparents, how they loved you, how they sacrificed for you." So, what was I supposed to think? Love? Sacrifice? I hated them all. And I hate the God who allowed them to crush me.

I have obliterated them from my life. Everything, every last letter and picture, everything...except that piece of stained glass with his name that is covered up with wood. I

have waited a long time for this moment, sending my little check each year until I could be here in person. And then, I got the letter, and I knew. (whispers) Now is my moment. When they knock this building down, I will be waiting for that glass, that last bit of family legacy--- so I can SMASH it. Smash it, and their God with it.

(pause)

MIRIAM (*clapping slowly*)

Bravo! Bravo! And here I was thinking I was the only one. I mean, who talks about these things. If I left even one thing out of place, my mother held my hand over the kitchen flame.

GOLDEN

Then you know.

MIRIAM

The difference between me and you, Mr. Paul Golden, is that I grew up.

ABE

We play so many roles. Some are happening now, and some live in our memory.

MIRIAM

May our memory of them be a blessing. They did the best they knew.

GOLDEN

You think beatings was the best they knew?

MIRIAM

I think their pain was deeper than we can know.

GOLDEN

And I think he was a self-indulgent prick.

MIRIAM

And I think your pain, Mr. Golden, is deeper than their graves.

ABE

Friends, there will be no smashing windows.

GOLDEN

Shackles, I tell you. The sooner memory is obliterated the better. Just pieces of wood, that's all. We should obliterate it all. *(He goes to rip open the door of the ark.)*

FRIEDMAN

There are no Torahs. You'll be disappointed.

GOLDEN *(turning, shaken)*

There--there is someone in there.

(The doors to the ark open. EZRA emerges, 80s, unshaven, dark pants and a hospital johnnie top.)

EZRA

Shma Yisrael.

MIRIAM

Ezra! They let you out!

EZRA

The didn't "let" anything. I walked. Thanks to God I can still walk. They give such medicines--!

ABE

Let me help you.

EZRA

What a good sleep I had in there. Such a schluff! Everyone is staring. Why is everyone staring, tell me.

FRIEDMAN

It's such a surprise, that's all. You!

NATE

You out! We're just so--

EZRA

What, you didn't believe I'd make it? No faith? Look, I'm here. I'm out. I'm better.

ABE

Come, sit.

EZRA

Why sit? I've been sleeping. I'm rested. I'm good.

MIRIAM
I'm so excited for you.

(pause)

EZRA
I'm better. I'm dressed. A little.

What? *(To GOLDEN)* And you are?

GOLDEN
Paul Golden.

MIRIAM
From Hilton--- from far away.

EZRA
And what brings you here?

FRIEDMAN
Ezra, so much has happened since you've been-gone. So much.
You can see how bad it is now.

NATE
We're having trouble, holding on to the shul.

EZRA
In the middle of the night, I just walked in here.

NATE
The snoring!

EZRA
Mr. President of the Congregation, don't we have locks?

ABE
We have locks. They have picks.

EZRA
We have God. And they have what?

GOLDEN
We're going to get rid of this old rat trap of a shul. Sell
it. Knock it down.

EZRA
Get rid?

FRIEDMAN
Look for a buyer. At least consider it.

ABE
Coffee, Ezra?

MIRIAM
We're just considering. That's all.

ABE
Cream and sugar?

EZRA (*too loud*)
Get rid? How do you get rid of your own heart?

ABE
OK, skip the coffee.

MIRIAM
Relax. Everyone.

EZRA
It's just that you find yourself one day walking around
nude, and suddenly everyone treats you strange.

What?

FRIEDMAN
Yes?

EZRA
It's over. The bad stuff, for me, is over. And this, THIS,
is my security, my place, my home even more than my home.
You know how much I've put into this shul. A lifetime. Yes,
Mr. Golden from far away, a lifetime. And I'm not ready to
get rid of a lifetime. (*Pointing to GOLDEN*) Who is this
man?

MIRIAM
Ezra, the roof is caving in.

EZRA
Oh, when wasn't it caving in? That or something else. We
always had problems. We always fixed them.

MIRIAM

We? Ezra, you're looking at what's left of the "we." It's just us.

EZRA

Who is this fancy stranger? A new member?

NATE

The roof is caving in, Ezra.

EZRA

Oh, the temple now has a roof? We are lucky, no, that we have such a temple, that we have a place like this to gather and to pray.

NATE

Yes, I feel so lucky.

EZRA

There have been times when our people prayed for any place where they could gather. You see a hole in the roof. I see an opening to heaven. We should seize the opportunity to pray more directly to God. So, call me crazy.

(pause)

NATE

That's what I said, about words flying.

GOLDEN

And you, my friend, are coming from which fine facility?

FRIEDMAN

Mr. Golden, shhhh, you are a guest here.

EZRA

Our words rise up.

GOLDEN

I'm a voting member. A donor.

ABE

I just got a text. Our realtor should be here any minute.

MIRIAM

Let's straighten up.

FRIEDMAN (*Shuffling*)
Let's do something.

GOLDEN
I'm here for a business decision, not a sermonette.

ABE
Please. She's coming. Everyone play nice in the sandbox.

EZRA
Open our eyes to your Torah, Lord. Open our ears.

GOLDEN
Open your minds! Your God gave us minds. So, let's use them.

EZRA
We have so many gifts from Adonai, our God. Sometimes it is hard to choose. But, I think we can all agree, this gift or that gift, this choice or that choice, Adonai is a constant. He is with us, always.

GOLDEN
Not me.

MIRIAM
You most, my friend. God is with you the most. You are wrestling with his angels even now.

GOLDEN
There, you see what's wrong with the system? They let these people out.

EZRA
And what is so right about this shul is that they let all these people in.

FRIEDMAN
SHA! We have to give a good impression.

ABE
She's here.

MIRIAM
Baruch Ha-Shem.

EZRA

Come, we should pray for wisdom. Get smart with our shul, not get rid. *(Opens the doors to the empty ark.)* The torahs are looking especially beautiful today, no?

HEIDI (offstage)

Knock knock.

(EZRA continues to pray, rocking on his heels. ABE, FRIEDMAN, GOLDEN, MIRIAM face the door. Enter HEIDI SCHWARTZ, a beautiful young Asian woman in her late 20s.)

So, what the hell is this?

ABE (to all)

Heidi Schwartz.

HEIDI

There's a hole in the roof. And it looks like crap. Sorry. Yes, Heidi Schwartz. My card. *(Distributes cards to all but EZRA who looks away.)*

FRIEDMAN

You look like your picture.

MIRIAM

You don't look Jewish. Sephardi?

HEIDI

I get that all the time. My mother was a nun.

NATE, MIRIAM, FRIEDMAN

Ach. Go on.

HEIDI

Philippines. What?

NATE

We've heard that one before.

HEIDI

What? WHAT? If we're not going to be honest with each other—

ABE

Welcome. Shalom.

HEIDI
That's better. Shalom haverim. Ma shlomcha?

MIRIAM
You speak Hebrew?

HEIDI
Only on my father's side.

FRIEDMAN (*shuffling*)
Ah.

HEIDI (*Looking around and jotting some notes into her phone.*)
So, you know the place is a pit. Jeez, the dust!

GOLDEN
As a businessman, I should tell you you're making a helluva first impression.

HEIDI
No, that's your job. You're the ones who want to make the impression. Too harsh? Fine, get someone else. They'll only tell you the same thing.

EZRA (*Still facing away.*)
You're not looking deep enough.

HEIDI
Oh, I've seen plenty.

EZRA
It's not just the structure. It's the spirit that lives in the structure. Look into our hearts.

HEIDI
Oh, you think you're different here? Every seller has a long list of memories. So, let me be the one to tell you: they don't count for crap.

FRIEDMAN
Abe, who is this?

NATE
They used to screw.

HEIDI

Aren't morning prayers over? You...Mr. Rocker...Shacharit is kaput.

MIRIAM (*whispers*)

Be a little gentle with him. He just got out of the clink.

EZRA

I can hear you. You walk out of your house and strip off your clothes, and suddenly people think you're crazy.

NATE

Go figure!

HEIDI

So, for those of you not engrossed in prayer---I have news.

MIRIAM

Shma Yisrael.

HEIDI

Good news and bad news.

NATE

Oy!

HEIDI

First, the bad news.

MIRIAM

We live the bad news.

NATE

We ARE the bad news.

HEIDI

Before you sell, you will have to invest.

MIRIAM

I already have a call into my banker.

HEIDI

I can't tell you where to get the money, but you need money. Pardon my French, but this place is-

NATE

OK, we got it.

MIRIAM

Abe, I really want to thank you for doing this for us. You and your friend. Both of yours.

HEIDI

God, I could kill for a latte.

ABE

It just so happens-

FRIEDMAN

And the good news?

HEIDI

And the good news is...there is a potential buyer. It's early in the game, but they want to see.

EZRA (*turning*)

A buyer.

HEIDI

It's early.

EZRA

Not possible.

HEIDI

Of course, if you're not selling-

GOLDEN

But not so fast. Tell us about this buyer. Who exactly wants this?

MIRIAM

Wants this!

HEIDI

I don't know the details. A referral.

NATE

Friend of a friend? Like you to Abe.

HEIDI

Is that what he said? Friend? (*To ABE*) Is that what you said?

ABE

I wanted it to appear more neutral.

HEIDI

Is that what I was to you? Neutral?

ABE

So I dated her.

HEIDI

We lived together for two years. Before he turned religious.

ABE

I'm not religious. I'm just searching for something.

HEIDI

Well, aren't we all? I mean this Jewish thing just came over you and took over.

ABE

You got jealous. You thought it was someone else.

HEIDI

And?

MIRIAM

I confess. It was me.

ABE

Yes, this Jewish thing. I guess it was in me all along. I was one of those kids who *liked* Hebrew school. I like it all. It settles me. Structures me.

HEIDI

And you found this?

ABE (*a gesture that includes everyone in the room*)

Yes, this. A group. A community.

HEIDI

No, you found this: A place that was falling down, and you thought you could prop it up. That relentless need to make things better. To make them better. To make me better.

GOLDEN

As if there was room for improvement.

HEIDI

Who needs a mother when you have Abe?

FRIEDMAN

That reminds me of a joke--

HEIDI

OK, if you don't want them to come, I can make a call.
Honestly, this place isn't big enough for all your baggage.

NATE

Can you represent us fairly?

HEIDI

Represent? Represent what? Look around! Everything is
falling down.

FRIEDMAN

Then why do this--?

HEIDI

For a lark. For old time sake. For the four dollars of
commission I'll get. (pause) For my friend, Abe.

ABE

Dear old Mom.

HEIDI

You remind me of my father. Doing the right thing. In his
own way.

FRIEDMAN

In his Jewish way. Repairing the world. Mothering the
world.

HEIDI

Well, thank you all for the lessons in philosophy. All of
this really moves us forward. If we're going to just stay
stuck, I could make a call to cancel.

GOLDEN

No. No calls. Let the buyers come.

ABE

We need to be open to the possibilities.

NATE

Thank you, Mr. Woodstock.

ABE

I'm just saying—

MIRIAM

When would someone come?

HEIDI

Something around...now.

GOLDEN

If not now, when. Is that right?

EZRA

If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I?

NATE

Well, this could be a landmark day.

EZRA

So said the Rabbi Hillel. And if not now, when?

HEIDI

So, does "now" mean sell or does "now" mean wait? 'Cause now is passing us by pretty fast.

ABE

Or we could choose otherwise. I mean, if we're going to invest in improvements, why do it for the next guy? Why not for us?

EZRA

Yes, now is for us, not for some "buyer."

HEIDI

Honestly, you should make your decision before you call me in. Timing, Abe, as you well know, was never your strong suit.

MIRIAM

Children!

ABE

No, the timing is just right. Today is our day. At least get the facts. Then we can decide.

GOLDEN

Just knock it down.

(EZRA suddenly turns again toward the ark.)

EZRA

I brought a little present for us. Something *(a package he retrieves from the ark)* for a day just like today, *(He unwraps it)* a day of decision. Voila! *(He reveals a piece of red velvet, the ark curtain described earlier. He reads:)* "In memory of Bella Steinberg, beloved wife and mother."

NATE

We wondered what became—

EZRA

Under my protective wing.

FRIEDMAN

The curtain!

ABE

Now it is Etz Chaim!

(EZRA hangs the piece of curtain.)

MIRIAM *(begins to sing softly, the traditional Ahkenazi melody)*

Eits chayim hi lamachazikim ba,
Vesomecheha me-ushar.

Deracheha -

(NATE joins in, softly, a different key, then EZRA)
d'rechei no-am,
Vechol nesivotecha shalom...

(FRIEDMAN joins in softly, a different rhythm, then ABE)
Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v'nashuva

(HEIDI joining in, just mouthing the words)
Chadeish chadeish yameinu k'kedem

Chadeish chadeish yameinu k'kedem..

(pause)

HEIDI

Well, that was—unexpected.

EZRA

A tree of life, like our little congregation. Etz chaim.

ABE

Cause us to learn, renew and return, just as in days of old.

GOLDEN

Yes, cause us to do nothing as in days of old. Cause us to sit still as our enemies came to defeat us. Cause us not to see the world changing around us. Just as in days of old.

MIRIAM (*to GOLDEN*)

So, come, Mister Happiness, let's get ready for your buyer. Maybe this is the end of your recurring nightmare. Prepare the ark. Line up the chairs. Let's make it at least look like something.

EZRA

If it wasn't for this shul, where would I be?

HEIDI

He is here. The buyer. I got a text.

EZRA (*holding up a book*)

I also got a text.

HEIDI (*as she exits*)

His name is John. Let me bring him in.

FRIEDMAN

Jon as in Jonathan? A Jew, maybe?

ABE (*to ALL*)

Can we be civil? Can we just be civil until we have the facts?

GOLDEN

I'll try to make nice. You know what I want.

MIRIAM

Like a child, you see a tower and you need to knock it down.

FRIEDMAN

I'll be quiet, too.

NATE

I'll be a pain in the ass. It's what I do best.

(EZRA once again is "praying.")

MIRIAM

Ezra, you have to be with us, Ezra.

EZRA

I'm with you. I'm just trying to throw them off their game.

HEIDI *(re-entering)*

So, he is standing outside. He wants to do the right thing.

FRIEDMAN

See, I told you, they look first from the street. We should've put a plant outside.

NATE

Palm trees.

ABE

Just remember, everyone, I tried.

MIRIAM

Thank you, Mister President.

HEIDI

John, please do come in.

(All eyes on the entrance. JOHN enters. Very handsome, 40s, dark-skinned man in a stylish suit and tie. And a turban.)

HEIDI

John Singh. Meet Congregation Etz Chaim.

JOHN

Shalom. Is that correct?

Do I take off my shoes?

MIRIAM
Oy.

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

JOHN (*looking around*)

The size...is perfect. The condition is...as described. Miss Heidi, you did not misrepresent.

NATE

Did you notice perhaps the kitchen in the back.

JOHN

Adequate, but very small.

HEIDI

And the washroom.

JOHN

Smaller still. But for those who moved from India, where some small towns still do not have plumbing, this will be a step up.

MIRIAM

The stove is cold. The freezer is warm. Nothing is working.

JOHN

We do the work.

MIRIAM

We?

JOHN

My community. I am looking at this property for my community. Was that not made clear?

FRIEDMAN

Little has been made clear. It was only a couple of minutes ago we heard of your arrival.

JOHN

Yes, even I did not know until recently. It was only then that I was asked to be the representative.

NATE

Sir, we've had little contact with Hindus.

JOHN

Not Hindus. Sikh. We are Sikh.

MIRIAM

But the hats?

JOHN

I'm afraid we are not well enough known. We tend to stick to ourselves.

GOLDEN

Sounds familiar. Sir, if we could have a minute, there is a certain matter I would like to discuss with you privately, something I would like to leave out of the deal.

NATE

Golden, quiet! You'll have your chance.

EZRA

Amen. Amen.

JOHN

Only now do you finish your morning prayer? I'm sorry. I do not mean any disrespect. I fear you are as unfamiliar to me as I am to you.

EZRA

We study. It is a form of prayer.

JOHN (*excited*)

Yes, for us, as well. We read the sacred texts.

ABE

Yes, you see, this is wonderful. So much in common.

NATE

Please, Abe. I'm told it is best to show no emotion to the buyer. Let him look. Then we can play hardball. Everyone, no emotion.

(All look at JOHN blankly.)

HEIDI

So, Mr. Singh, what are you thinking?

JOHN

I wonder sometimes about my understanding of life. There are as many holes in my understanding as we see in this roof.

HEIDI

All can be fixed, Mr. Singh. Most important is location.

JOHN

Yes, I agree.

NATE

Yes? You come from around here?

JOHN (*indicating MIRIAM*)

Somehow that woman seems familiar.

NATE

Maybe from another life.

JOHN

You are still thinking Hindu, sir. No, I think, dear woman, you may live in my building. Or perhaps I live in yours.

MIRIAM

I don't know. You all, I mean so many people look alike. I mean, I really don't see. I just go about my business.

JOHN

Yes, it is so easy to mistake one person for the next. For example, I look very much like that one (ABE) do I not. And that one (FRIEDMAN), I could easily understand, just from our costumes, how one might mistake—

HEIDI

Perhaps all of Etz Chaim should wait outside.

JOHN

And harder still when everyone has horns.

HEIDI

Perhaps Mr. Singh would like to look around in private, without the glare-- and the commentary.

MIRIAM

Who has glare?

FRIEDMAN

Do you come to America to insult us, Mr. Singh?

JOHN

I was born in America. And you, sir?

FRIEDMAN

It's just you have a touch of an accent.

JOHN

They sent me to Yale.

MIRIAM

It's what I hear every day in this neighborhood.

JOHN

Oh, everyone went to Yale?

ABE

Well, we've had all this chat, and none of us have been formally introduced...a task one might've hoped from the competent realtor, but here we are, so I'd like to start by saying that I'm Abe Warshaw, and I know it may seem odd because I'm so young, but I am the president of this little congregation, and on behalf of everyone I welcome you. I imagine that should you be interested, and should this go ahead, you and I will be the ones to make the deal. With us today, we have Miriam, who you may know by face if not by name, Nate, who may be our oldest, or more correctly our longest-standing member—

NATE

And just barely standing at that!

ABE

Friedman, whose unique design sensibility you already have noticed. Ezra, who only recently has returned to Etz Chaim from—his travels—and speaking of travels, Mr. Paul GOLDEN, who joins us from Hilton Head where he resides BUT from whence he has supported this congregation for some years.

NATE

"From whence"?

ABE

The rest of us all live around here, some closer, some farther, and we have built a congregation here, and we are very proud. Etz Chaim, I introduce you to Mr. Singh, a proud member of the Sikh community who has come to us from India. Welcome.

JOHN

Actually, I was raised just down the street. This neighborhood is my home, too.

HEIDI

Beautiful work, Abe. You have managed to insult everybody in the room, so if you would let me do my job—

ABE

Since we don't know what has been said to you by Miss Schwartz, I think it is only fair to inform you that this conversation today is preliminary, that, as a congregation, we have not yet voted on whether or not to make our beloved sanctuary available for sale to anyone.

JOHN

Sale? (to HEIDI) Do they think I'm here as a buyer? (to ABE) We do not have the money to buy.

ABE

Heidi!!?

MIRIAM

Here we go!

HEIDI

Mr. Singh, with all respect, sir, you did say you were hoping for a mutually agreeable contract.

JOHN

Not to buy! We are poor people, my friends. Not merchants or diamond dealers.

NATE

You mean like all of us.

JOHN

Please, please, everyone. I do not mean—

FRIEDMAN

Then, what do you mean?

JOHN

To share. All we want is just to share

NATE

You want to share this dump.

JOHN

My friends, you and I are seeing with different eyes. You are seeing through a cataract of your history. The reference point is always backwards. You look at this and ask how to bring back the world that was. You want the communities of old, Romania or Hungary, steeped in the golden light of legend and memory. Of course, we know that such a world is never coming back, but we see it anyway, pure and perfect. I look at the same place and wonder what can be. You see loss. For me, with no memory to cloud my eyes, I see possibility. My eyes are fixed on the future.

GOLDEN

Finally! Someone talking business.

NATE

I'm not having statues. We will not desecrate this sanctuary with statues.

JOHN

My people have no statues. Just a holy book. Surely we can find a place among Jews for a holy book. And the words of our scholars and elders. Our ceremonies are very simple really. Reading. Study. Just as you study.

And we are interested in your kitchen, so we can prepare food, I mean for the whole community. It is part of our sacred purpose to feed the hungry. I am aware of your laws about food. I have done my homework. We can abide by your laws. We will not desecrate. Just share.

NATE

"Just share."

JOHN

You see, as we learn from Miss Heidi, location is everything. And this location is perfect, very much in the center of where my people are living now. We are spread out, here and there, and this will be a fine meeting place for us, not very far to walk for even those in the outskirts. And look, already we have a pathway for our words to fly up to God.

MIRIAM

With ours.

NATE

My only comfort is that beloved Rachel didn't live to see this, may she rest in peace.

GOLDEN

My advice is give it away if you have to. Get out while the getting is good.

ABE (*aside to HEIDI*)

So, thank you, Heidi Schwartz. On a day that was difficult enough, you come with a buyer—no, a sharer—and add to the confusion.

HEIDI

Surely, Mr. Singh, you are thinking about some rent at least. Something to help defray the costs.

JOHN

We will defray the hunger. That will be sufficient.

FRIEDMAN

That doesn't pay the piper.

MIRIAM

Or the electric company.

ABE

We can have the loftiest thoughts, Miss Heidi, and the loftiest ambitions, Miss Heidi. We can be as pious as the prophets. But, at the end of the day, Miss Heidi, it all comes down to money.

JOHN

We will be supplying all the food.

NATE

Thank you, thank you, Mr. Singh. You have made your point. And we have made ours. Unless there is some money, there will just be more of us watching from the floor as the walls cave in.

GOLDEN

People! People. There is another way, of course.

Just take the whole thing to auction. The bank takes its piece, and you are free of your debts, one-two-three.

FRIEDMAN

You wanted choices. Now we got choices.

MIRIAM

This is what we do. We discuss. We debate. Isn't that right?

GOLDEN

I'm just saying, let's lay it all out.

ABE

Ven ale mentshn zoln tsien af eyn zayt, volt zikh di velt ibergekert!

GOLDEN

Why are we speaking Yiddish? My parents did not speak Yiddish.

NATE

Your story we know already.

ABE

I said, "If everyone pulled in one direction, the world would tip over."

JOHN

"Our diversity is our strength." This is what we say at the bank.

FRIEDMAN

I think, Mr. Singh, that this is our conversation.

EZRA

Kavu tehiti Adonai; vayet ailai, vayishma sharati. This is Hebrew, Mr. Singh, from the ancient psalms of David. "I waited patiently for the Lord; and He turned to me and heard my cry." There are things we do, Mr. Singh, that people think are crazy. But just waiting, waiting patiently, may be the craziest one of all. I think you should let us be for a little while, so we can debate and discuss.

JOHN

I understand. I think I see the whole picture. Heidi, thank you. Etz Chaim, you know my interest.

HEIDI
We seem to be finished here.

JOHN
But, I understand your interests as well.

We are also ready to share the upkeep and expenses. We can be good partners.

HEIDI
Abe, we'll talk.

MIRIAM
ABE! We'll talk!

NATE
Upkeep and expenses?

FRIEDMAN
Share?

JOHN
But ultimately, we know where the decision rests, as it is said, "Even a single leaf cannot quiver in the breeze without His Will."

EZRA
Amen.

JOHN
So, Miss Heidi, you seem to be making a hasty retreat.

HEIDI
You're a nice guy, Mr. Singh, but I work for a living.

JOHN (*whispers to Heidi*)
But we are negotiating.

Slowly. Like having a cup of tea.

HEIDI
Ah!

(*too loud*) So, John, let me show you the outside. Getting rid of the graffiti is easy-

JOHN

Ah, yes, one more thing. Shalom. I think it is right to say that word again as I leave. I do not wish to disrespect.

(JOHN and HEIDI exit.)

ABE

No, no. No disrespect.

MIRIAM

Thank you to your angel of mercy for paying us a visit.

NATE

Abe-aleh. Our little Abe. What are you doing to us?

FRIEDMAN

What, this is supposed to help us choose? With this we can make a decision?

ABE

I was trying-

NATE

Try less.

MIRIAM

Who was talking about sharing?

FRIEDMAN

Now if we make the wrong move, we have men in turbans to chase us down the street.

ABE

No one is chasing. I think it is an honest idea. We should consider it. We should consider everything.

GOLDEN

Just be done with it.

MIRIAM

Yes. And tomorrow, you and your anger go home to Hilton Head. Where do we go?

GOLDEN

Surely, each of you has a place to go. It may not be perfect, but-

FRIEDMAN

You don't know my sister-in-law. As sweet as a sour pickle.

GOLDEN

Enough with the stories and the excuses. Just get out.
(softer) Just. Get. Out.

ABE

Mr. Golden, I've been here just a short time, and even I have attachments. These people have been here much of their lives. They raised their children here. Bar mitzvahs. Weddings. Funerals. They came here as children themselves, prayed with their parents. Prayed for their parents. They cleaned and cooked and argued here. This is their lives. A little understanding, please.

GOLDEN

He was right about the cataract. It's like you're unable to see through the sentiment. I feel sorry for you.

MIRIAM

Sorry for us?

GOLDEN (*pacing the room*)

All of you.

MIRIAM

You, Mr. Hilton Head, have wrapped yourself in your anger like a cold, hard shield. Don't be sorry for us. It's a long, long journey from grandpa Goldenberg to Hilton Head and then back again. I suspect you've made some stops in between.

GOLDEN

I could call the fire department.

MIRIAM

Other Hilton Heads? Other jobs?

GOLDEN

This place is a fire trap. There must be a thousand violations.

MIRIAM

Go ahead. Call.

(*GOLDEN takes out a cell phone. Dials 911.*)

MIRIAM

And while you are calling, I want to tell you that the sisterhood came in one morning to bake challah for Shabbos, and we saw a hole in the glass. And cracks. Then we saw the bullet on the floor. We were afraid of someone getting hurt. The window was taken out years ago. And three of us women covered the hole with a board.

GOLDEN

Yes, yes. Nice delaying tactic. *(to phone)* Is this 911.

MIRIAM

The hole, as you see, survived. The window was dropped.

GOLDEN

What?

MIRIAM

We dropped the Goldenberg window. We dropped the window. We swept up the pieces.

NATE

Miriam, when?-

MIRIAM *(to GOLDEN)* Now, tell me again about your life in Hilton Head.

GOLDEN

It is a lie.

MIRIAM

The women of Etz Chaim may not always see the truth as you see it, Mr. Golden, but we do not lie.

GOLDEN

Liars. All of you. Fools and liars.

MIRIAM

In our day, the women were strong.

GOLDEN

It was mine. It had the family name.

MIRIAM

No, not in memory of you, but your grandfather, may he rest in peace. For you, the memories are the shackles you wanted to escape.

ABE

But this is great news. Mr. Golden, you are a free man. Free at last of your history.

NATE

Just as you want us to be free of ours.

GOLDEN

Free? I'm free?

FRIEDMAN

As we used to say on the street, "Make like a bird and fly." (*Turning toward the kitchen/bathroom*) Speaking of which, it's that time again. The call of the wild. (*He exits to kitchen/bathroom.*)

GOLDEN

But what am I supposed to do now?

EZRA

Welcome to Etz Chaim, Paul Golden. We carry our disappointments on our backs like a sack of coal.

GOLDEN

I sent all that money. Doesn't that count?

Doesn't that make me a good Jew? (*He sits, off to the side.*)

(*pause*)

NATE

Those people say they look to the future? What future?

ABE

If I had the bucks, I'd snatch up everything right now, every old building, every vacant lot. When the developers come in, I won't have a sack of coal; I'll have gold.

MIRIAM

From your mouth to God's ear.

ABE

Just look around. There are reasons for hope.

NATE

Believe me, that cold cup of milky coffee was not a reason for hope.

EZRA

Hope. Hope. Hope is a dangerous thing. I pray to stop hoping. It is the hope that gets you into trouble. I tell you, I struggle with this.

ABE

No, no. You all know that's not true.

NATE

Hope is for the young.

EZRA

As the noose kept tightening, in Germany, how many hoped it would stop, that yesterday's edict would be the last edict, that yesterday's round-up would be the last.

ABE

Please, not the Holocaust bit.

EZRA

Egypt? The Romans? The Inquisition? Why don't we just get out of the way? We keep on hoping, even when the reality is staring us in the face. We should go back there in history, be like little angels in their ears, and scream at them, "Get out! Get out now! If not now when? How bad does it have to get?"

NATE

For the young, I tell you.

EZRA

I try to be faithful. And yet, look at how I live my days. I have seen the changes—the buildings that are no longer there, the neighbors who are no longer there—but I cannot stop thinking of solutions, alternatives, possibilities. If only this one piece would change, we could hang on. If only this one good idea would connect with someone. Connect with who? There's no one left to listen. Yet, I hope. If only. If only. Maybe you are right, Golden. Maybe we're fools.

MIRIAM

Don't get yourself excited, Ezra. It's not good for you.

EZRA

So, you leave your room one day. And you wonder, if only my wife would come back to me, come back to me from that goy she ran with. Yes, I know we have been apart for so many years, but if only. If only she knew my loneliness. If only she knew how happy I could be with her. If only she saw me as I really am, not burdened down by worries, but free and happy, the young man she had married. I feel that way inside, some days, you know, young and strong, and if she could only see it. If only I turned back the clock, had the vigor, had the courage. Stripped myself of the layers of troubles that dragged us down. Stripped down to just me. If only she could see me. Happy. Young. Singing. Naked and sexy.

If only.

What was I doing in the street?

Hope is a dangerous thing. It is the essence of our faith, and yet, I sometimes have these moments of doubt. Let us stop hoping. This year, I hope to stop hoping.

MIRIAM

And if I didn't think today would be a better day, so why would I wake up in the morning? None of us live easy.

(FRIEDMAN suddenly appears in the doorway of the kitchen, with a towel he uses as an apron, then folds into a little rag doll.)

FRIEDMAN

And now, gentlemen and lady, it is time for a little something from the borscht belt. May I have some music, please? *(He sings:)*

*In an orem shtibele
ovnt-tsayt baym koymen;
shpint a libe muter dort
far dem kind irs troyemen;*

*zingt zi im a lidele,
patsht er mit di hentlekh;
zingt dos gantse shtibele,*

zingen mit di ventlekh:

(MIRIAM, EZRA, NATE join in, mouthing some words, clapping hands.)

*patshé, patshé, kikhelekh,
oytser|l, mayn sheyner;
tate t'koyfn shikhelekh
zunele, mayn kleyner.*

*tate t'koyfn shikhelekh,
mame t'shtrikn zeklekh;
tate t'koyfn ferdelekh
mame t'onton glekelekh.*

ABE

A translation, sir, for all the Yiddish-deprived.

FRIEDMAN *(stumbling through a rough translation)*
In a poor house, every evening in front of the fireplace,
Mother tells dreams for her child.
She sings for him a song and his hands, he claps ("patshé,
patshé") his hands.
The whole room sings, even the walls, too, are singing.

Clap hands, (You, Abe, clap, too.) my precious one, my
beautiful one!
Pappa will buy you some shoes, my little one.
Mamma will knit you some socks.
Pappa will buy for you horses
and Mamma will put bells on them.

In the house happiness and joy rule over everything.
Side by side with poverty, there lives...paradise.
There, in that house, love is greater than anything else.

There, the love is ...stronger ...than... poverty.

(A long pause.)

EZRA

Patshé, patshé.

NATE *(quietly)*

Bravo.

MIRIAM

Love is stronger than poverty.

(HEIDI appears at the door.)

Speaking of love--

HEIDI

Good news. Sharing is out. Buying is in. He likes it. He wants to buy. We have an offer on the table. *(Pause.)* What? No response? Don't you want to know how much?

ABE

So what happened to sharing? I was just warming up to the idea.

HEIDI

He was negotiating. He was testing you.

NATE

I'm sure it is a wonderful offer.

EZRA

Fair.

MIRIAM

Wonderful.

HEIDI

But.....? What? You had a vote? You decided already? Yes? Abe, can I talk a minute? I mean, what am I doing here? I've got a buyer at the door. I have a buyer...a BUYER...for this heap of garbage. Why isn't everybody jumping up and down?

NATE

Inside our skin, we're jumping. On the outside.....

HEIDI

What? Because he's a Sikh. Look, I know the tradition, don't sell to another religion, but you've got to be kidding if you think this heap of garbage is sacred. The termites are not sacred. The "sky lights" are not sacred. Just open your eyes! I just worked my butt off with that guy.

ABE
But-

HEIDI
But. But. But. All I hear is a series of but this, but that. Listen up, people. Do something. Do something.

NATE
Yes, yes, the sky is falling. We know.

FRIEDMAN
Buck, buck, buck. It's Chicken Little.

HEIDI
It's not a joke. You can walk away and know you did the right thing. (*To each one.*) Yes? Yes? Do the right thing!

GOLDEN (*very quiet*)
The right thing! As if the right thing is so simple.

MIRIAM
He's been so quiet, I thought he left.

EZRA
Sometimes, we get so inside ourselves, the weight can pull us down. Yes, Mr. Golden?

HEIDI
Well. What's it going to be?

GOLDEN
Hilton Head--ended. Not a good fit, they said. Not the right temperament. They said. So, I followed my--my little investment.

MIRIAM
You have a temperament? Such a surprise!

EZRA
Sha!

GOLDEN
You know, Ezra, I went to Julliard for a year. I've been to a lot of places.

NATE
Your travels?

MIRIAM

A lot of jobs?

EZRA

Miriam!

GOLDEN

I just have to figure out the next step.

EZRA

That next step is the hardest one.

HEIDI

Well?

GOLDEN (*to all*)

I played the violin.

EZRA

Come, let me sit with you.

FRIEDMAN

I wanted to act in the Yiddish theatre. If only I didn't have to eat!

GOLDEN

I had a gift. They said.

EZRA

Yes. Yes.

GOLDEN

A gift.

(pause)

HEIDI

The clock is ticking. Buyers don't wait forever.

FRIEDMAN

You, Miss Realtor, you talk out of both sides of your face, and I know you can't help it. You're in sales. I know this double talk, it's an occupational hazard. Who cares about the price? Who cares about consequences? Sell the place, and get your commission. Six percent of anything is better than six percent of nothing. Right? Forgive me if I'm being harsh, but as a bookkeeper I understand, business is

business. You gotta do what you gotta do. That's right for you. But what is the right thing for us?

HEIDI

I admit it. I get commission. I work hard for that commission. I'm going to have money, and I'm going to be happy.

MIRIAM

Money, you say? Happy! As if one leads to the other. As if you can plan it. I had money. I had lots of money. Then, my baby died inside his crib. Tra la la. How happy! And my husband had a heart attack at 41. La la. Fatal-la-la-la. I was so depressed, I could not work, Deedle-dee. And slowly, I lost everything. Ha ha. Ha. Such a funny life this has been. You keep on planning, little girl, until the laughing stops and you find yourself with holes in your stockings and an empty fridge. I wish you well.

HEIDI

What a sorry, sorry bunch this is.

FRIEDMAN

Like old bananas.

HEIDI

Look at this place. *(She walks around the room, touching the ark, the bench, the window, etc.)* Garbage. Garbage. Garbage. Really look at it. What in God's name do you see? What's the romance?

NATE

You walk through these doors, and you feel connected. You feel proud. "You see. You see, damned world. I raise my fist to you. We're still here. You can't beat us down. We're still here."

HEIDI

Still where? In a pile of shit?

MIRIAM

None of us wants to be the last. I don't want to feel the door slamming into my tuchas.

HEIDI

But-

NATE

Now, who's saying "but?"

EZRA

"There, in the house, love is greater than anything else. There, the love is stronger than poverty.

HEIDI

Love? Love comes and goes like a snowflake. My future will not be tied to love. My fate will not be the same as yours. There's a cash offer on the table. I've written it down. Decide. Or don't decide. It means nothing to me.

These are great times for a young Jewish girl. Cash gives you power. You're not going to talk me out of my life.

When you're ready to act like adults, call me.

(HEIDI exits.)

NATE *(to ABE)*

Yes, I can feel the chemistry.

FREIDMAN

Respectful, too. What have we done with these young people?

ABE

Hey, I'm one of the young people.

NATE

Only in years, Abe-elah.

MIRIAM

I don't care how much cash. We're not selling to one of them. I don't mean because he's a Hindu.

ABE

Sikh.

MIRIAM

Whatever. He's not Jewish. We should sell to Jewish or to something not religious. It isn't right. This is a Jewish shul!

NATE

You mean compared to a Christian shul.

FRIEDMAN

Or a Hindu shul. They're all nice people.

MIRIAM

It isn't right. I think there are laws about this thing.

GOLDEN

Those laws were from another time. What about now?

EZRA

Those laws have gotten us to now. We're here because of those laws, and we shouldn't be so quick to toss them in the gutter.

GOLDEN

Better to toss us in the gutter?

MIRIAM

Hilton Head knows about gutters?

GOLDEN

If it wasn't for my annual gifts-

MIRIAM

You! You, Mr. Golden. We're playing. The war is over. You're an honorary one of us. *(to the others)* I'm going to like arguing with this one.

ABE

So, are we ready for discussion?

FRIEDMAN

Where have you been? We are discussing.

NATE

This is how we cockers discuss.

EZRA

What if there comes along another buyer, a Jewish buyer, with a better offer?

FRIEDMAN

What if the Messiah comes this afternoon? What are we talking about? Where do we think this buyer is coming from? I say, "Take the money and run."

ABE

If we can hold on-

FRIEDMAN

On the other hand, how much?

NATE

Mr. President, explain all the choices, please.

EZRA (*unbuttoning his shirt*)

Does anyone else feel hot?

MIRIAM

Not now, EZRA.

ABE

So, Miriam, Nate, Friedman, Ezra, Paul Golden...

"A" we have faith in the future. We hang on until things turn around. We see the trend, and we have faith that Jews will return.

NATE

There is a trend? I don't see no trend.

MIRIAM

He means the coffee place.

ABE

"B" we consider an offer, the only offer we have, even though it is not perfect.

EZRA

While we kiss tradition goodbye.

ABE

"C" we continue to do nothing.

FRIEDMAN

So, tell me the difference between A and C.

MIRIAM

In one case we fall into doing nothing, and in the other case we choose to do nothing.

ABE

They use the word, "empowerment." We have the power to choose.

FRIEDMAN
And B again. I think I like B.

MIRIAM
B is desecration.

ABE
B is sell.

FRIEDMAN
Was there a "D?"

NATE
There's Golden's auction idea.

ABE
There's counter-offer. (*MIRIAM glares at him.*) I mean, if we're selling.

MIRIAM
I'm ready to vote.

NATE
Who else is ready to vote?

GOLDEN
Mr. President, I have a question.

FRIEDMAN
A question from the floor.

ABE
Your question, sir.

GOLDEN
Before Hilton Head, when I sold my place...in Orlando..the studio... there were codes to pass. Inspections. You'll have to fix up.

EZRA
What? Make all the repairs, and then just hand it over to someone else?

MIRIAM

Them. The turbans.

NATE

The buyers.

MIRIAM

I said!

ABE

We take out a loan that gets repaid when they buy. We get their cash, we give it to the bank. Everyone gets what they want. It happens all the time.

FRIEDMAN (*to ABE*)

Which side are you on anyway?

MIRIAM

Yes, the loans are easy, and the walls are easy, and the hole in the roof...easy. So, answer me this hard one, all of you smart people with all the answers, if we do something with this shul, I mean sell it or burn it or knock it down, so tell me, where do I meet Nate next Monday? Where does Friedman sing?

Where does Ezra come back to sleep? Where does Golden put his anger?

So, tell me? What happens to us? We are Etz Chaim. What happens to us?

NATE

When my family left Russia, some of them stayed behind. That shtetl, they said, it was their home. It was where they had their friends. It was where their parents were buried. It was what they knew. Home.

Then, years later the soldiers marched in, and all of them who stayed behind were lined up in the market square and shot dead.

In my head, I understand, like Golden says, we cannot be too sentimental. And yet, my heart...my heart—(*He is crying, then:*)

We wanted choices. Now we have them.

(*ABE's cell phone rings.*)

ABE
It's her.

MIRIAM
Don't answer it.

(Ringing stops.)

MIRIAM
Even among the Jews there are vultures.

(ABE's cell phone rings again.)

ABE *(to phone)*
Heidi! We were just talking about you. (pause) He did! More money? *(to the group, whispers)* More money. What should I do? *(to phone)* Hold on, you're breaking up.

EZRA
I believe in perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah.

ABE
(to phone) Hold on, I'm breaking up. How do I know I'm breaking up?

MIRIAM
Patshe, patsche.

NATE *(picking up the rhythm)*
Patsche, patsche.

ABE *(to phone)*
Heidi?

FRIEDMAN *(starting to dance by himself)*
Deedle-deedle-di...

ABE
PEOPLE! Quiet.

FRIEDMAN
We're voting.

ABE *(to phone)* Heidi? Yes. We're just-discussing-it now.

GOD! Let me think!

(to phone) Did I tell you, on my way here today, I saw a sign? No, not a sign from God, very funny, there was a billboard on the side of a building that said, "Space To Let," like they were renting. But someone had painted in, between the word To and the word Let, the letter I, so now it said "Space Toilet." Funny, right?

Yes, but here's the best part.....underneath, underneath across the whole thing, across the whole wall was a-- a banner, yes, a banner that said "New Lofts. Coming Soon. New." Yes. "Occupancy next spring."

NATE
Lofts?

MIRIAM
Abe, this is true?

ABE (to phone)
So, Heidi, so you tell Mr. Singh, thank you very much, but no thanks. Our shul is not for sale and please don't chase us down the street. (pause) Yes, yes, I have a few sweet words for you, too. (He closes the phone. Looks around.)

Done.

(pause)

(GOLDEN stands, unable to speak.)

EZRA
The war is over, Golden.

NATE
Schoen.

(pause)

MIRIAM
Beautiful.

(pause)

FRIEDMAN

Done.

EZRA
New lofts?

(pause)

ABE
New occupants.

MIRIAM
Jewish? I'm just asking.

(pause)

NATE
Mr. President...good job.

EZRA
We should pray.

FRIEDMAN
Etz Chaim lives! We should celebrate. (*Picks up a bucket
and bangs in like a drum.*) With drums.

MIRIAM
With timbrels.

(She begins to dance. Nate and Friedman join in.)

ABE
People, people, we have work to do, bills to pay. Electric.
What else?

EZRA
God-willing, tomorrow we'll look at bills.

NATE (*to ABE*)
Tomorrow you'll sell a painting, maybe.

MIRIAM
Today we dance.

FRIEDMAN
Yes, tomorrow is another day. Yes, Mr. Golden?

NATE

Let's make more room for dancing.

(He moves some of the buckets to the side. FRIEDMAN stands on one of them.)

FRIEDMAN

It's show time!

MIRIAM *(trying to lift a pew.)*

Oy, these benches. Golden, we could use a hand.

(NATE, FRIEDMAN, MIRIAM, EZRA, ABE are dancing, drumming, stomping, GOLDEN off to the side.)

(Suddenly, a large chunk of plaster falls through the hole in the ceiling. Everyone looks up.)

EZRA

A sign!

MIRIAM

Of what?

(Fade to dusty light through the hole, then fade to black.)

END