

# **PASSING THE LOVE OF WOMEN**

A Play by Motti Lerner and Israel Zamir

Adapted from the story "Two" by Isaac Bashevis Singer

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### The Cast

1. Yudl Kuznitzer – the rabbi of Frampol (50)
2. Elke - his wife (47)
3. Reyzele – Yudl and Elke’s daughter (17)
4. Ziesl – their son (19)
5. Azriel – a yeshiva student (21)
6. Esther’l – Ziesl’s wife (17)
7. Shmuel Isser – Her father (50)
8. Feybush – a Lublin merchant, Reyzele’s husband (30)
9. Alter – Ziesl and Azriel’s landlord in Lublin (50).
10. Frume – Alter’s wife (40)
11. Elkhonen – a wedding jester and beggar.

Note: Shmuel Isser and Feybush are played by the same actor.

*The play is set in various parts of the town of Frampol and the city of Lublin in the mid-nineteenth century. Often more than one scene takes place onstage at the same time. When this happens, the stage set has to allow for three or four simultaneous focuses.*

## ACT ONE

### Prologue

*The graveyard in Lublin. A stormy night with thunder and lightning. Rain. A hurried funeral is taking place. Three men bundled in heavy overcoats are burying two bodies in adjacent graves. The men are Feybush, Alter, and Elkhonen the jester. Two women look on in anguish. The elder of them is Elke. The younger is Esther'l. Yudl's ghost, wrapped in a prayer shawl, watches from afar. The darkness and rain blur the figures. They shout above the din of the storm to be heard.*

Elkhonen:       *(To the audience)* The graveyard in Lublin. A stormy night with thunder and lightning. Rain. A hurried funeral is taking place. It's too dark to see who's there. That's Feybush. That's Alter. And this is me, Elkhonen the jester. Two women are looking on. That's Elke. The young lady next to her is Esther'l. Rabbi Yudl is watching from afar. Or rather his ghost is. They're shouting to make themselves heard above the storm.

Feybush:       *(To Elkhonen)* Dig deeper! Hurry... Hurry.

Alter:           Deeper. Deeper.

Feybush:       Put the woman here.

Alter:           Face up.

Feybush:       The man goes next to her.

Elkhonen:      Who is she? Who is he?

Feybush:       Careful. Careful. Put him here.

Elkhonen:      Who are these people?

Feybush:       Hurry. Hurry. Now cover them with dirt.

- Elkhonen: Without the Kaddish? Without the el malei rahamim<sup>1</sup>? Without a proper funeral?
- Feybush: That's enough, Elkhonen.
- Elkhonen: Don't they have any family? Parents? Uncles or aunts?
- Feybush: Pile on more dirt. Cover them well.
- Elkhonen: What was their sin? Murder? Theft?
- Feybush: One more word and you can forget about your wages.
- Elkhonen: *(To the audience)* Without washing and cleaning them? In their street clothes? With no sign? Not even a hint? It's a horrible sin. There's never been anything like it in this city. *(To Alter)* At least tell me their names so that I know I'm not party to some crime.
- Alter: The man is Azriel, son of Khane.
- Elkhonen: Azriel Khanes? And the woman, his wife?
- Alter: Her name is Ziese. No one knows the name of her parents.
- Feybush: Let's go.
- Alter: *(To Feybush)* I'll give their things to charity without delay.
- Feybush: *(To Elkhonen)* And you, watch your tongue. One careless word and you've besmirched the entire city.

*The men take their picks and shovels and join the women. A woman enters. She is wrapped in a coat and her hair is awry. She hurries to the graves and begins to dig.*

- Reyzele: You're mine, Azriel. You're mine. You betrothed me with your love and I'm your wife forever. If you're dead I'll die with you and lie by your side until Judgment Day. All they've said about you is a lie. I'm the only one you ever desired. It's raining God's tears for our love.

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<sup>1</sup> God Full of Mercy – a name of a prayer

Yudl: Don't, Reyzele. Don't. It's almost dawn. *(She doesn't answer)* Go home, Reyzele. Go back to your husband. Your life is still ahead of you. *(She doesn't answer)* Don't you know who I am? Reyzele, I'm your father.

*She doesn't recognize him. The storm grows worse. Music is louder. Darkness.*

## Scene 1

*A spotlight falls on the study house of Frampol. Rabbi Yudl stands by an open volume of the Talmud on his lectern. Several of his students are at their lecterns, too. Among them are Ziesl and Azriel.*

Elkhonen: *(To the audience)* A winter day in the town of Frampol, a two day's walk from Lublin. This is where it all began. Rabbi Yudl rose early that morning to give his students a lesson in the study house.

Azriel: But doesn't the Mishnah say that whoever performs a single commandment -- just one -- is rewarded with a good and long life?

Ziesl: Not in this world. Only in the world to come.

Azriel: But Rashi<sup>2</sup> says *be'hai alma* -- that means in this world.

Ziesl: He says a good and long life is the reward, only if this commandment is the one that tilts the balance of all of that man's deeds.

Azriel: *(Interrupting)* That's what I said. A good and long life in this world.

Ziesl: *(Stubbornly)* After the resurrection of the dead. You know very well that Rabbi Ya'akov says that performing commandments has no reward at all in this world.

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<sup>2</sup> A great Scholar of the Talmud

Azriel: But it does! The righteous man is rewarded by being made to suffer in this world so that he will have done penance for his sins before he dies, and then will live in perfect bliss in the world to come. *(Ziesl rises as if to go)* What's the matter, Ziesl? What's wrong? *(Ziesl says nothing)* Say something! What is it?

*Ziesl says nothing. He does not seem able to express his feelings.*

Elkhonen: That's Ziesl, Rabbi Yudl's son. He rose even earlier than his father today to study with Azriel, his closest friend. It seems something is troubling him.

*Reyzele enters, looking for Yudl.*

Reyzele: Father? Father?

Yudl: Reyzele? An unmarried girl in the study house? Turn around and leave at once!

Reyzele: I've brought you your medicine, father.

Yudl: *(Sternly)* For heaven's sake, Reyzele.

Reyzele: It's a matter of life and death. You have to take it for your health.

Yudl: But Temptation lies in wait for you everywhere here.

Reyzele: If we are permitted to violate the Sabbath for the sake of a person's health, I'm certainly permitted to bring you this medicine in spite of the fear of Temptation.

Yudl: You're not afraid of the Temptation, Reyzele. You give into it. You came here to see someone. And to be seen by him.

Reyzele: I plead guilty to the first charge. I did come to see someone.

Yudl: Hold your tongue! You can't just do as you please in this world.

Reyzele: I came to see my father.

- Yudl:           *(affectionately)* I'll speak to him, Reyzele. You know I can't bear seeing you unhappy. But there's a time for everything.
- Reyzele:       You gave me your word that you would speak to him today.
- Yudl:           The day is still long. We've only now said the morning prayer.
- Reyzele:       I've heard you say yourself that whoever forces his daughter to marry against her will is no better than her murderer.
- Yudl:           Whom am I forcing you to marry?
- Reyzele:       The matchmakers keep knocking on our door.
- Yudl:           Let them knock.
- Reyzele:       I'm seventeen years old, father, and I'm not marrying anyone but him.  
*(Yudl is silent)* If you have anything against him, tell me.
- Yudl:           *(Yielding)* I have nothing against him. I'll speak to him after the evening prayer.
- Reyzele:       Do it now, father. *(Yudl yields)*

*Elkhonen, having overheard and sensed Yudl's acquiescence, calls out to Azriel.*

- Elkhonen:      Azriel! Azriel Khanes! The rabbi wants a word with you.
- Yudl:           *(Hushing him)* Sshhh. *(To Reyzele)* be off, quick.
- Reyzele:       What about your medicine?
- Yudl:           Be gone!
- Elkhonen:      Azriel, Azriel Khanes!

*Reyzele hurries out. Elkhonen tugs at Azriel's jacket and leads him to Rabbi Yudl. Ziesl looks on anxiously.*

- Azriel:         Yes, Rabbi.

- Yudl: *(Hesitantly)* You know that all my students are planted deeply in my heart. You, though, are one of my finest trees. I have only your own good in mind.
- Azrie: Yes, rabbi.
- Yudl: I've been prodding you for a year already. What is the benefit of bachelorhood? Even the greatest scholar must obey the commandments of flesh-and-blood.
- Azriel: The only benefit of bachelorhood, Rabbi, is that it leaves a man more time For Torah.
- Yudl: You've been offered wives who will give you all the time you need. *(Azriel is silent)* Marriage is not only a burden, Azriel. He who brings no children into the world is likened to a murderer. *(He pauses)* My daughter Reyzele was just here.
- Azriel: *(Apprehensively)* Yes, rabbi.
- Yudl: You're worthy of Reyzele, Azriel. And though a man is no judge of his own daughter, she's worthy of you too. *(Sharing a secret)* You know she's been studying with me a little.
- Azriel: Yes, rabbi. But with all due respect, she's worthy of better men than me. I know that if I were to take a wife, I'd abandon her at once for my studies. That would be a great sin.

*Yudl notices that Ziesl is eavesdropping on their conversation. He takes hold of Azriel and steers him to a corner of the study house.*

- Yudl: A scholar needs a wife, Azriel. Otherwise his passions will overcome him and make him a sinner. And the greater a man is in Torah, the stronger his passions are. *(Azriel remains silent)* You won't find a better wife than Reyzele. But if you prefer, take another. Just do it before you fall prey to lewd thoughts.
- Azriel: I have no lewd thoughts, Rabbi. Your son Ziesl and I study day and night.



- Yudl: Azriel, two bachelors cannot share the same prayer shawl. Ziesl is getting married too. To Esther'l, the daughter of Shmuel Isser. Their engagement was held yesterday.
- Azriel: *(Stunned)* Ziesl is getting married?!
- Yudl: Azriel, if you wish to continue studying with him you'll have to take a wife too. *(Azriel says nothing)* You're no longer a boy. You can't remain a student here unless you take a wife. *(Azriel says nothing)* You have until Saturday night to give me an answer. *(Yudl sees that Ziesl is still listening and turns to him)* What are you up to? Why aren't you studying?
- Ziesl: I am studying.
- Yudl: After the evening prayer, you'll come to me and study with me.
- Ziesl: Yes, father.
- Elkhonen: *(Rattling his almsbox)* That's the spirit, boys! Don't leave the Torah for a second. "And thou shalt meditate on it day and night."
- Yudl: Let them be, Elkhonen. *(To Azriel)* Saturday night, Azriel.

*He takes hold of Elkhonen and pulls him outside. Azriel rejoins Ziesl.*

- Azriel: Mazel tov.
- Ziesl: Don't judge me harshly, Azriel.
- Azriel: And here I thought our partnership meant more to you than any woman.
- Ziesl: *(Desperately)* Listen to me for a minute.
- Azriel: I thought no pleasure in the world could get in the way of our studies.
- Ziesl: I didn't want to, Azriel. Believe me, I kept refusing. My father and mother signed the engagement behind my back.
- Azriel: We promised each other. We took a vow.

Ziesl: I begged them. Nothing could change their minds. (*He takes a gold watch from his pocket*) Shmuel Isser stuck this in my hand. My name was already on it. See? I gave it back to him. He stuck it in my pocket. I gave it back to him again. He stuck it.

Azriel: And in the end you gave in. I refused to marry your sister Reyzele in order to go on studying with you.

Ziesl: I can't live without studying with you either.

Azriel: It looks like you can live very well. (*He turns to go*)

Ziesl: Wait. We haven't finished the page. Azriel! I'm not renouncing our vow. Azriel! (*He follows him*) If this ill wind takes us from our studies, we'll be punished in the life to come.

## Scene 2

*The study house courtyard. Reyzele and a neighbor are setting a table for Ziesl's wedding, loading it with trays full of appetizers. Although he is supposed to be helping, Elkhonen the jester stands idly pestering Reyzele with questions.*

Elkhonen:       What is it, Reyzele? Why do you look so sad? You're brother is getting married. Even the bones of the dead are rattling with joy in the graveyard. Have the moths eaten your trousseau? (*Reyzele says nothing*) Or are you mourning because your darling Azriel hasn't come to dance at your brother's wedding?

Reyzele:        I'm not mourning. I'm happy.

Elkhonen:       You're so happy you'll soon have everyone here in tears.

A Neighbor:     (*Coming over*) Don't worry, Reyzele. I'm sure Azriel will arrive soon. This morning I whispered your two names seven times and suddenly heard the cooing of doves.

Reyzele:        And I'm sure that the Holy One Blessed Be He doesn't want me to marry Azriel, and will soon find someone else for me.

Neighbor:       All the more reason to be happy!

Reyzele:        I am happy.

Elkhonen:       As happy as if the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed before her eyes!

Neighbor:       She says she's happy, and she's happy!

Elkhonen:       As happy as the Jew traveling in a coach with two goyim. All of a sudden one of the goyim says.

Neighbor:       Go tell your jokes to the wedding guests, Elkhonen. And keep your hands off the food.

Elkhonen: Nothing could be further from my mind. Eat before your time, and you die before your time.

*She takes Reyzele and steers her to the courtyard, Elkhonen turns to the audience.*

Elkhonen: Do they take us all for idiots? Do they think no one knows what's grieving them? Well, I'm not blind and I know. I'm just not breathing a word of it, because if anyone knew what I know, they'd grieve too, and if they grieve I'll get no laughs and no pay. *(He sees Elke and Ziesl)* Sshhh, the groom.

*Elke enters, leading Ziesl to the jug of water which is on the table.*

Elke: Drink, Ziesl. *(Ziesl refuses)* Didn't you hear your father say you're permitted to drink?*(Ziesl shakes his head)* Where does it say the groom must fast right through the wedding ceremony? You might at least wet your lips.

*Ziesl refuses. Shmuel Isser enters.*

Shmuel Isser: What's the matter, in-law?

Elke: *(Whispering to Ziesl)* I beg you not to embarrass the bride or her father.

Shmuel Isser: Why is the groom teary-eyed? Is he sick?

Elke: He's weak from fasting. His mouth is dry.

Shmuel Isser: I beg your pardon, rebbitsin<sup>3</sup>, but I can see he's feeling poorly.

Elke: Never you mind, Shmuel Isser. He'll drink some water and feel better.

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi's wife

Shmuel Isser: Be so kind, rebbitsin. If my wife Sheyne Beyle, may she rest in peace, were alive, she'd do the asking. But Esther'l is my only daughter. Be so kind, rebbitsin: if the groom, God help us, has something wrong with him, it would be best to. Not that we'd like to call it off, but we need to know before the ceremony.

Elke: There's nothing wrong with him.

Shmuel Isser: If he has the falling sickness, God forbid, there's a well-known remedy, the pubic hairs of a red heffer.

Elke: He doesn't have the falling sickness. He's fasted all day while praying and saying blessings and reading The Song of Songs. *(She wets Ziesl's face with water)*

Elkhonen: It's like the story of that groom who discovered on their first night that his bride was pregnant. Do you know what he did?

Elke: What? Who? What are *you* doing? I told you to save your laughs for the guests.

Elkhonen: The guests are laughing already. Only the groom is crying. *(Discreetly)* If you'll allow me, rebbitsin, I'll make him laugh too. *(He turns to Ziesl)* Well, do you know what he did?

Elke: That's enough, Elkhonen.

*Elke and Shmuel Isser help Ziesl to return to the synagogue courtyard.*

Elkhonen: *(To the audience)* Well, when the groom discovered that his bride was pregnant, he didn't relent until he got her to admit that the richest Jew in town had had his way with her.

*Yudl, and the bearers of the wedding canopy enter. Elke and Shmuel Isser lead Ziesl and Esther'l to the canopy. Elkhonen changes his tone.*

Elkhonen: And here, chaste and gracious, is Esther the bride, as beautiful and saintly as Queen Esther in the Bible. God grant we soon be redeemed by the fruit of her womb. And in this corner is the illustrious bridegroom, the great-great-grandson of the renowned Rabbi Mendl of Koznitz! A fine-looking lad, a paragon of excellence, a fetching sight for the fair sex! May such be the lucky fate of all brides and grooms favored by the Holy One Blessed Be He! O love! O pleasure! O sweet dalliance! Let the groom gaily press the bride to his bosom – let him satisfy and gratify her – hand in hand and mouth to mouth -- yea, may they become one flesh. As it says in our Holy Scripture, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother for the cleavage of his wife”.

Elke: That’s enough, Elkhonen.

Chorus: Sounds of gladness, sounds of joy,  
 Happy girl and happy boy!  
 Love, rejoicing, friendship, peace,  
 Laughter, merriment, and bliss!  
 And suddenly – a shofar blast!  
 Now the judgment has been passed.  
 Either Godliness surrounds them,  
 Or a living death will drown them.

*Yudl begins the ceremony. A student hands him a cup of wine. Ziesl looks desolate.*

Yudl: Blessed art Thou O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who createth the fruit of the vine.

Congregation: Amen!

Yudl: Blessed art Thou O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who hath sanctified us with His commandments, and barred to us what is forbidden, and prohibited those betrothed to others, and allowed us what is ours in holy matrimony.

Congregation: Amen!

Yudl: Blessed art Thou O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who sanctifieth His people Israel by holy matrimony.

Congregation: Amen!

*Yudl hands the cup of wine to Ziesl. Suddenly Ziesl notices Azriel standing by his side beneath the wedding canopy. No one else sees him.*

Yudl: The bride and groom will now drink from the cup.

Azriel: Don't drink, Ziesl. *(Ziesl does not take the cup)*

Yudl: *(Again)* The bride and groom will now drink from the cup.

Azriel: *(To Ziesl)* If you don't drink, the blessing is invalid and no marriage has taken place.

Yudl: Drink, Ziesl. *(Ziesl sips from the wine)* And now the groom will give the bride to drink, too.

*Ziesl makes a motion to hand the cup to Esther'l. Azriel prevents him.*

Azriel: Do you want her, Ziesl? Do you?

*Esther'l drinks from the wine. But Elke is still worried.*

Elke: Yudl, be quick.

Yudl: And now the groom will give the bride the ring and say, "Behold thou art sanctified to me by this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel."  
*(Prompting Ziesl)* "Behold thou art sanctified to me."

Azriel: Your whole life hangs on a word.

*Ziesl does not know what to do. He holds the ring, wavering.*

Shmuel Isser: Rabbi, what's wrong with the groom?

Elke: Nothing.

Yudl: *(Prompting)* "Behold thou art sanctified to me."

Shmuel Isser: Maybe he has a dybbuk in him? I thought I smelled something foul.

Elkhonen: A dybbuk? Where? Here? Here? Or maybe here? *(Looks under Elke's dress)*

Elke: Have no fear, Ziesl. She'll make you a good wife. Her mother, may she rest in peace, was a woman of great virtue. I'll teach her the rules of womanly conduct as if she were my own daughter.

Azriel: Say no, Ziesl.

Yudl: God above is the maker of all matches, Ziesl. Say no and it is Him you defy.

Elke: Hurry, Yudl.

Yudl: *(Insistently)* "Behold thou art sanctified to me by this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel."

*Ziesl slips the ring onto Esther's finger.*

Ziesl: Behold thou art sanctified to me by this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel.



*Azriel lifts the veil from the bride's face and throws it on the floor.*

Azriel: (To Ziesl) I will haunt you wherever you go, Ziesl. At home and abroad, awake and asleep, I will poison your thoughts and ruin your joys. You will know no peace until the day you divorce her. *(He turns and exits)*

*Ziesl faints. Elke props him up. Yudl rushes to the rescue.*

Yudl: *(Hurriedly)* The bride is sanctified! Blessed art Thou O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who createth the fruit of the vine. Blessed art Thou O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who hath created all things for His honor. Blessed art Thou O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who maketh mankind.

Shmuel Isser: The glass. *(He places a glass beneath Ziesl's foot and breaks it)*

Elke: Mazel tov! Mazel tov!

Congregation: Mazel tov! Mazel tov!

*Music. Elke and Yudl support Ziesl and everyone exits except Elkhonen.*

Elkhonen: *(Calling after them)* And my wage, rebbitsin? Where is it? The bride and groom who fail to reward their rejoicer on their wedding day will never rejoice again! Rabbi Yudl! *(He turns to the audience)* While we wait for this groom to recover, here's the one about that groom who discovered on his wedding night that his bride was pregnant. He didn't relent until he got her to admit that the richest Jew in town had had his way with her. At the crack of dawn, he was off to the man's house. The Jew confessed and said, "What's done is done. I have no children. If your wife gives birth to a daughter, I'll support all of you for a year. If it's a son,

I'll make it two years." The groom agreed. As he was leaving, the Jew asked him to be careful when having sex with his wife, so as not to cause her to miscarry, God forbid. "Don't you worry," the groom replied. "If she miscarries I'll bring her back to you and you can get her pregnant again."

*(He laughs)*

### Scene 3

*The Kuznitzers' home. Night. Elke and Esther'l enter. Esther'l is wearing a lacy white nightgown and carrying a bucket. She sets it down and sits on the edge of the bed. Elke circles the bed, scattering a powder against demons.*

- Elkhonen: Sshhh. It's nighttime. The moon has risen. Ziesl and Esther'l's bedroom.
- Elke: This powder stinks of pig turds. And yet demons have been known not to Fear it – especially the demons of licentiousness and lewdness. If a lewd thought should pass through your mind for even a second, take this amulet, Esther'l, kiss it, and say the “Hear O Israel”<sup>4</sup> three times.
- Esther'l: Yes, mother-in-law.
- Elke: And if you have reason to believe that a lewd thought possesses Ziesl, shut your eyes and think of God's unutterable name.
- Esther'l: Yes, mother-in-law.
- Elke: And let him have his way with you willingly and fearlessly, my child. The blessed Lord has endowed you with all that is needed for observing this commandment. If you see that he needs help, don't be embarrassed. Just... *(She whispers something in Esther'l's ear)*
- Esther'l: *(Taken aback)* What? *(Elke whispers again)* Really?
- Elke: Really. And if, God forbid, he still doesn't... *(More whispers)* then go right ahead and... *(Still more whispers)*
- Esther'l: Really?!!

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<sup>4</sup> “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one” – a biblical verse recited, among other times when in great or mortal danger.

Elke: The wives of the greatest saints do such things. And do all you can to strengthen him. He is sensitive and weakened by his fast. And the blessed Lord will reward you and give you sons. *(She kisses her, turns to go, then comes back)* There's water in the bowl. He mustn't get out of bed in the morning before washing his hands.

*Esther'l is alone. Then Ziesl enters, wearing his gabardine. He regards her hesitantly.*

Elkhonen: The whole town is still awake. Men and women, young and old, sit at home and hold their breaths, straining to hear the echo of the groom's steps as he makes his way to the bridal chamber.

Ziesl: Mazel tov.

Esther'l: Mazel Tov to you too.

Ziesl: Forgive me, Esther'l, for embarrassing you beneath the wedding canopy.  
All of a sudden I felt short of breath.

Esther'l: It wasn't my fault, Ziesl. A breeze lifted my veil.

Ziesl: I saw. *(Silence)*

Esther'l: And I saw you didn't desire me.

Ziesl: No, no, that's not so.

Esther'l: My heart tells me you don't desire me now either.

Ziesl: God forbid! How can I not desire you when you are sanctified to me?

Esther'l: *(Despairingly)* Forgive me, Ziesl. No one asked me if I wanted you either. I behaved like a Jewish girl should. From the moment we were engaged, I prayed to the blessed Lord to make you want me.

Ziesl: Don't cry, Esther'l. Of course I want you. A commandment performed unwillingly has no value. Giving joy to a wife is a great commandment and I am fully prepared to observe it.

*He sits on the edge of her bed and holds her hand. She kisses it and removes his gabardine. He is at a loss. The spotlight falls on Azriel. Only the astonished Ziesl can see him.*

Esther'l: I too am fully prepared.

Azriel: Well, what are you waiting for?

Esther'l: You needn't be afraid of me, Ziesl. I promise to obey all your wishes. You won't hear any complaints from me. I'll obey every bit of the commandment. *(She undresses him.)*

Azriel: Have you gone to the bathroom? He who couples when he needs to urinate will raise a generation of bed-wetters.

Ziesl: *(To Azriel)* That's enough.

Esther'l: What's wrong?

Ziesl: I think I'd better keep my undershirt on.

Azriel: If you can't manage it, ask her to do what the wives of the great saints do. *(Whispering)* Even Rahab in the Bible used her mouth.

Ziesl: *(To Azriel)* Please, Stop it.

Esther'l: You mustn't think I'm too passionate, Ziesl. All I want is for you to want me.

Ziesl: I've already said I do.

Azriel: You don't. You married her because you had to, you're speaking to her because you have to, and you'll couple with her because you have to.

Ziesl: *(Noticing his skullcap has slipped off)* Where is my yarmulke?

- Eshter'l: Here. *(Takes his hand and presses it to her breast)*
- Ziesl: *(To Esther'l)* One minute. A man is forbidden to possess his wife until he has persuaded her.
- Esther'l: I'm persuaded
- Ziesl: A man must not obey his blind desires. He must obey the commandment as if he had no choice.
- Esther'l: My only desire is for you to want me.
- Ziesl: *(Hesitantly)* I stand before the blessed Lord ready to obey the commandment of procreation that He has imposed on me. *(He embraces her and falls on the bed with her.)*
- Aziel: You have lost your world in the twinkling of an eye, Ziesl. Already she disgusts you. Her mouth. Her tongue. Her sweat. Her fluids. You will never desire her again. You will hate her and hate yourself for as long as you live. *(He exits.)*

### Scene 4

*Night. Music. Azriel steps out into the street with a bundle of his belongings. He walks for a long time before reaching the coachmen's market.*

- Elkhonen:       *(To the audience)* The coachmen's market in Frampol. Night. Far away a frog croaks. An owl sits in a fir tree. A coach from Warsaw is parked in a corner, its two horses snoring on their feet. A homeless man rummages through a pile of garbage. A Hasid off to see to a prostitute hides inside his coat. *(Encountering Azriel)* Hello there, Reb Azriel! Where are you bound for in the dead of night?
- Azriel:           For wherever a voice from Heaven guides me.
- Elkhonen:       For wherever a voice from Heaven guides you? Well, well! Are you sure it's not your lustful nature that's guiding you?
- Azriel:           I'm going to Trysk.
- Elkhonen:       To Trysk? Ai ai ai. How wonderful to be a bachelor unsaddled with a wife! You can seek your pleasure anywhere – in Trysk, in Zamosc, even in Warsaw.
- Azriel:           Let me be, Elkhonen.
- Elkhonen:       And so Reb Azriel is off to Trysk to sate his lust for a woman?
- Azriel:           No. In fact, since you mentioned Zamosc, perhaps I'll go to Zamosc.
- Elkhonen:       You have a woman in Zamosc too? Ay ay ay! With a woman in both Trysk and Zamosc, it's no wonder Rabbi Yudil drove you away. *(He laughs)* On the subject of lust, have you heard the one about the three yeshiva boys and the wife of the Rabbi of Kotsk?
- Azriel:           No, I can't say I have.
- Elkhonen:       You haven't? Good grief! Well then, one winter night three yeshiva students are warming themselves by the synagogue stove. "God Almighty," the first says, "if only in the world to come I could sleep by the side of Moses, may he rest in

peace.” The second says, “If only I could sleep by the side of Maimonides<sup>5</sup>, may he rest in peace.” “If only I,” says the third, “could sleep by the side of the wife of the Rabbi of Kotsk.” His two friends are astonished. “But the wife of the Rabbi of Kotsk is still alive,” they say. “And what am I?” the third student replies. “Already dead?” (*He laughs. Azriel remains silent*)

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<sup>5</sup> A famous Jewish scholar



## Scene 5

*Morning. Ziesl's house. Ziesl and Esther'l are still in bed. Elke enters.*

- Elke: Mazel tov! May you be blessed with sons and grandsons and great-and- great-great-grandsons, and may you live to see them all bar-mitzvahed and married.  
*(Turning to Esther'l)* Esther'l, my dear. *(She whispers a question in her ear)*
- Esther'l: Yes, mother-in-law. *(Elke whispers another question)* Yes, mother-in-law.
- Elke: *(To Ziesl, with a big smile)* Well-done, Ziesl.
- Ziesl: *(Signaling her to leave)* It's late, mother. I'm in a hurry to get to the study house.
- Elke: You have a holiday, Ziesl. Your father forbids newlyweds to go to the study house for the first week after their wedding.
- Ziesl: I'm not neglecting my studies even for a day.
- Elke: You have to stay home and please your wife.
- Esther'l: If what he wants most is to study, let him go to the study house.
- Ziesl: I'll get dressed.
- Elke: Permission is the prohibiter's to give, Ziesl. If you want to go to the study house, you'll have to ask your father.
- Ziesl: No one needs permission to study Torah, not even from his own father. Now let me get dressed.
- Elke: I'm going to your father anyway. If he doesn't agree, you're not going.

*She exits. Esther'l dresses and brings Ziesl the bowl of water. He dips his hands in it.*

- Esther'l: I'll bring your lunch to the study house, Ziesl.
- Ziesl: Thank you.

Esther'l: And here are your tefillin.<sup>6</sup> *(She lays the leather thongs of his phylacteries by his side and seeks to embrace him but feels his reluctance)* I'll make you a good wife, Ziesl. I may not have much learning, but I know what a woman needs to know. I'll run the household and I'll give you many children. All I'll ask for myself is to be wanted by you. *(Ziesl makes no response)* Very well, I won't ask even that. *(She brings him his clothing)* Here are your clothes, Ziesl.

*Yudl enters. He takes Ziesl's clothes away from Esther'l.*

Yudl: Leave us, my child. *(Esther'l leaves)* Your mother tells me you wish to defy me. I forbid you to go to the study house. And I forbid you to see Azriel. Your study partnership is over until he marries.

*Rezele enters.*

Rezele: He's gone.

Yudil: Who's gone?

Rezele: Azriel. He's gone. I saw him with a bundle in the coachmen's market. You promised that you'd talk to him. Why did you drive him away?

Yudil: I didn't.

Ziesl: *(To Rezele)* You saw him in the coachmen's market, with a bundle?!

Rezele: *(To Yudil)* What was his sin? What was mine?

Yudil: But I didn't drive him away.

Rezele: Where will I ever find a scholar like him? How can I live without him?

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<sup>6</sup> Phylacteries

*Reyzele leaves in tears. Yudil follows her but stops and warns Ziesl.*

Yudil:           You are not going after him. I forbid you to leave this house. You stay home with your wife for a week and give her pleasure until God is pleased with you.

*Ziesl is left by himself. He hesitates for a moment, then goes to Esther'l's closet, chooses a dress, and puts it on. He ties a kerchief around his head, takes a shopping basket, and leaves.*

## Scene 6

*The coachmen's market in Frampol. Azriel is sleeping on his bundle. Elkhonen is asleep by his side. Ziesl enters, dressed as a woman. He addresses Azriel in a whisper, so as not to wake Elkhonen.*

Ziesl: Reb Azriel? Reb Azriel?

Azriel: Yes?

Elkhonen: *(Awakening)* Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Are you the woman from Trysk or from Zamosc?

Ziesl: What? No, no, I'm from Tomashov.

Elkhonen: *(To Azriel)* You also have a woman in Tomashov?

Azriel: *(To Ziesl)* Who are you? What do you want?

Ziesl: I have a message for you.

Azriel: For me?

Elkhonen: Why not for me?

Ziesl: *(To Elkhonen)* I'll ask you to leave us alone, mister.

Elkhonen: Far be it from me to leave unprotected a yeshiva boy from Frampol with a woman from Tomashov.

Ziesl: Get out of here, mister – now!

Elkhonen: I'm out. *(He moves away)* And all ears.

Azriel: Who are you?

Ziesl: *(Whispering)* Don't you recognize me?

Azriel: Ziesl? What are you doing dressed as a woman?

Ziesl: I came to talk to you.

Azriel: As a woman?

Ziesl: My father forbade me to see you. I had to sneak out. I have to talk to you.

Azriel: There's nothing to talk about.

Ziesl: You can't leave me, Azriel. I have no one else in this town to study with.

Azriel: You broke our vow and took a wife, and.

Ziesl: *(To Elkhonen, who has crept closer)* Mister, if you don't make yourself scarce you'll feel the flat of my hand. *(To Azriel)* Please, Azriel. Quarreling will do no good. Stay. I have to get home. Esther'l will soon be back.

*Reyzele and Elke enter, carrying baskets. Reyzele sees Azriel and is startled.*

*Neither woman recognizes Ziesl – who, scared to death, does his best to hide his face.*

Reyzele: *(Incredulous)* Azriel! Talking to a woman in the marketplace!

Elke: Maybe he's buying something for his journey.

Elkhonen: He's not buying and she's not selling. She's his wife from Tomashov.

Reyzele: His wife?!

Elkhonen: A little bird told me he has wives in Trysk and Zamosc, too.

Elke: Don't pay him any mind, Reyzele. He's caused you enough distress already.

Reyzele: *(To Azriel)* You have a wife in Tomashov that no one knew about? All this time that you sat at my father's feet you were deceiving him?

Azriel: No, Reyzele, please try to –

Reyzele: You knew how you were tormenting me. Why did you let me suffer? Have you no heart?

Azriel: She's not my wife, Reyzele. I've never been married. *(Gropingly)* This woman is a widow. She's selling the books left her by her late husband.

Elkhonen: I tell you, she's his wife. They'd never allow themselves to stand so close and whisper like that if they weren't married. *(To Ziesl)* Tell her who you are.

- Elke: Let's go, Reyzele.
- Reyzele: *(To Ziesl)* Are you his wife or aren't you?
- Elke: Of course she isn't. If he wanted a wife, he would have married you. *(To Azriel)*  
Haven't you tortured her enough without forcing her to see you with a slut in the marketplace?
- Elkhonen: A slut? *(To Ziesl)* Pardon me, my dear lady, did you hear that? The rabbi's wife called you a slut.
- Ziesl: *(In a whisper)* Shut your mouth, you trash.
- Elkhonen: Did you hear that, rebbitsin? This woman called you trash.

*Elke brandishes her basket at Elkhonen and he backs off.*

- Reyzele: *(To Azriel)* Now I know why you didn't want me. There was nothing wrong with me. There was something wrong with you, you swindler.
- Elke: Stop that, Reyzele!
- Azriel: Please, Reyzele. Believe me, this isn't my wife. I'm just buying a book from her.
- Reyzele: A book? Where is it? Show it to me! *(To Elke)* I don't want him any more even if she isn't his wife.
- Azriel: I beg you, Reyzele. I don't even know this woman. It was she who approached me. It's only because I don't want to shame her that I –
- Rezele: And what about shaming me? You told my father you didn't want me because you wanted to study, and now you've left your studies to gab in the marketplace with that kind of a woman!
- Azriel: That's not it at all, Reyzele.
- Elke: *(To Azriel)* Be quiet! *(To Reyzele)* Let's go.
- Reyzele: I'll be happy to. *(They exit)*

Elkhonen: Well, Reb Azriel, do you see now what I've rescued you from?

Azriel: *(To Elkhonen)* Make yourself scarce, Elkhonen.

Elkhonen: And my wage?

Ziesl: Beat it! *(He threatens him with his basket)*

Elkhonen: At least for not giving you away.

Azriel: She said beat it! *(He drives him off with a kick and turns to Ziesl)* We can't stand here talking, Ziesl. There are too many ears and tongues around. This coach is leaving for Lublin. I'm taking it.

Ziesl: I'm coming with you.

Elkhonen: Me too.

Both together: Scram! *(Elkhonen beats a hasty retreat)*

Ziesl: Wait, Azriel. Wait.

Azriel: You'll come with me dressed as a woman? What will we say if we're asked who we are?

Ziesl: We're man and wife. Who's going to ask?

Azriel: And Esther'l?

Ziesl: Studying with you means more to me than Esther'l.

Azriel: You've already married her.

Ziesl: I'm leaving her for you, Azriel.

Azriel: I don't want you to do anything for me anymore. *(He exits)*

Ziesl: Wait, Azriel, wait. *(He follows him)*

Elkhonen: Wait for me, too! I have business in Lublin. A wedding. No, a funeral. No, no. A Bris. *(He follows them)*

## Scene 7

*Ziesl and Esther'l's house. Elke and Reyzele enter from one side of the stage. Yudl, suffering from his heart, enters from the other side. Panting, he sits down on the bed.*

Elke: He isn't in the bathhouse and he isn't in the synagogue.

Yudl: He's not in the study house, either.

Reyzele: He's vanished into thin air.

*Esther'l and Shmuel Isser enter. Esther'l is dejected and forlorn.*

Shmuel Isser: The demons must have run off with him.

Yudl: Hush.

Shmuel Isser: I could feel their hot breath as they danced around him under the wedding canopy.

Yudl: *(Angrily)* Hush!

Elke: The rabbi said hush!

Shmuel Isser: We had better check the mezuzahs on the doors. He hasn't been magically transported to the Holy Land, that's for sure. Maybe he fell ill. Do you think he went to ask the doctor about that attack of weakness?

Elke: He didn't feel any weakness.

Shmuel Isser: I hope he didn't drown himself in the river in a fit of melancholy.

Elke: He's not melancholic.

Shmuel Isser: *(To Esther'l)* Perhaps he read forbidden books? Perhaps he dreamed of bringing the Messiah and joined the sect of the Sabbatians.

Yudl: Heaven forbid. *(To Esther'l)* You didn't notice anything? Nothing strange?



Esther'l: No.

Elke: The two of you didn't quarrel, Esther'l, did you?

Esther'l: No.

Yudl: *(It dawns on him)* Perhaps he's joined Azriel and he's studying secretly with him.

Reyzele: *(Anguished)* Azriel has left without him.

Yudl: Left?

Reyzele: To Lublin.

Elke: With a strange woman in a good dress.

Esther'l: *(Dumbstruck)* With a woman in a good dress?

Elke: What is it, Esther'l?

Esther'l: *(Fighting back her tears)* Nothing. Nothing at all. For a second I was afraid that.  
I must be losing my mind.

Yudl: *(To Elke)* Go pack my bag. I'll go after Azriel to Lublin.

*They exit after him.*

## Scene 8

*The coachmen's market in Lublin. Music. Passers-by cross the stage.*

- Chorus:           The city of Lublin has action galore,  
                       The town and the gown, the rich and the poor,  
                       Tots, graybeards, and damsels and students of law --  
                       O Lublin has all this and more!
- Elkhonen:        Any boy can come to Lublin and flout the Sabbath in public and no one will ask  
                       who his father is.
- Chorus:           Avenues, alleys, courtyards, and homes,  
                       Cellars and attics and alcoves and rooms,  
                       Towers and spires and belfries and domes –  
                       O Lublin has all this and more!
- Elkhonen:        Any girl can come to Lublin and sell herself in the streets and no one will ask  
                       who her mother is.
- Chorus:           Arcades and markets and vendors and stands,  
                       Travelers, tourists, folk from all lands,  
                       Droshkies and wagons and trolleys and trams –  
                       O Lublin has all this and more!
- Elkhonen:        Any scholar can come to Lublin and lose his faith and no one will ask who his  
                       rabbi is.
- Chorus:           Tailors and tinkers, butchers and bakers,  
                       Carpenters, cleaners, and candlestick makers,  
                       Rabbis and beadles and touts with their takers –  
                       O Lublin has all this and more!

Elkhonen: Any man or woman can rent a room in Lublin and no one will ask what they do  
in it.

Chorus: Here is a couple that's just driven in.  
He has a bundle, she has a bin.  
They haven't a notion, not her and not him,  
That it's all just about to begin.

**Scene 9**

*Lublin. The home of Alter and Frume. Azriel and Ziesl (dressed from now on as a woman) enter. They are soaked to the bone.*

Alter: This room will do in a pinch. My wife Frume will bring pillows in a jiffy. You say bandits robbed you in Lublin?

Azriel: Not in Lublin, Reb Alter. On the way to Lublin. They fell on us and took All we had.

Alter: All you had?

Azriel: Apart from this bundle and that little bag that my wife Ziese is holding.

Alter: You'll say a prayer of thanks for your deliverance in synagogue this Sabbath. That will be three zloty.

Azriel: Three zloty?

Alter: In advance.

Azriel: But we've been left with the dust in our pockets. Give us a few days to Find work.

Alter: You? Those hands of yours haven't done a stitch of work in your life. And your wife Ziese too, God keep her, is too sweet to scrub floors for a living.

Azriel: I can find work as a tutor. I've studied since I was a boy.

Alter: A tutor? We have more tutors in Lublin than pupils.

Azriel: Then I'll apprentice myself to a Torah scribe or to a cantor.

Alter: Three zloty.

Azriel: I'll go to the market in the morning. (*Alter shakes his head.*)

Ziesl: Just a minute, Reb Alter. We have one thing the bandits didn't find. It's the gold watch my husband got for our engagement. *(He takes out the watch and shows it to Alter.)*

Alter: A gold watch? *(He takes it.)* That's better. I see that when you open your mouth, Ma'am, every word of yours is a pearl. I'll take this as a deposit.

*He puts the watch in his pocket. Frume enters, carrying pillows and blankets.*

Frume: Robbers, God help us! You're lucky that Lublin is a friendly place. Where did you say you were from?

Aziel: Zanz. *(But Ziesl says **Kotzk** at the same time)*

Ziesl: *(repeats)* Zanz.

Frume: Zanz? My sister Yentl, may she rest in peace, used to live in Zanz. Her husband was Nachman Veisfish the butcher. *(To Ziesl)* It's been ten years since we've heard from him or his children. How are they? The poor woman! May we spared her fate. What a saint she was.

Ziesl: A perfect saint.

Frume: Her son is a brilliant young man.

Ziesl: A genius.

Alter: Let's go, Frume.

Frume: And her daughters? Are they married? Chayah'le was a bit lame.

Ziesl: Right. A bit.

Frume: And Tovah'le was always sick.

Ziesl: Very sick.

Alter: Frume, let's go.

Frume: I was told by a seamstress from Zanz who made bridal veils that she married a chimney sweep.

Ziesl: By the name of.

Frume: Don't even mention his name! He ran away after a year without a divorce and left her stranded for life.

Alter: They have their own troubles, Frume. They don't need to hear about other people's. *(They exit)*

*Ziesl and Azriel are left by themselves. Unsure what to do next, they look at each other timidly.*

Elkhonen: Night has descended. The moon is up. The streets of Lublin are silent. Not a bark, not a bleat. Azriel and Ziesl are alone in their new home. No one can see them, no one can hear.

*Ziesl and Azriel take each other's hands and stare at the floor. Then they embrace. After a moment, Azriel breaks away.*

Azriel: That's enough, Ziesl. Stop.

Ziesl: Why?

Azriel: I can't.

Ziesl: Why not?

Azriel: You know we're forbidden to each other.

Ziesl: I do. But the heart craves most of all what's forbidden.

Azriel: And you knew what your heart craved all along?

Ziesl: No. Did you?

Azriel: No.

Ziesl: I do now, though. And so do you.

Azriel: But he who lies with a man as if he were a woman shall be put to death.

Ziesl: Have you lain with a man as if he were a woman?

Azriel: We haven't come here just for the sake of Heaven.

Ziesl: What's done is done, Azriel. I left my wife. I broke the commandment, "No man shall wear a woman's clothes."

Azriel: *(Interrupting him)* Do you want a reward for your sins?

Ziesl: I want to atone for them. By staying together we can strengthen each other's faith and make atonement.

Azriel: And yet I know I should flee from this.

Ziesl: You can run away from me, but you can't run away from your love for me.

Azriel: *(Despairingly)* You know that love can lead one astray, Ziesl.

Ziesl: If love has led us astray, then strays are what we were meant to be.

*They embrace and kiss passionately. Esther'l and Reyzele enter the room, dressed as brides.*

Esther'l: You took me as your wife under the wedding canopy, Ziesl. You consummated our marriage. *(Ziesl says nothing)* A week has gone by since you left and I can't stop crying. My heart is full and the bed beside me is empty.

Reyzele: You're the only man I want, Azriel. You're the match made for me in heaven. Just give me a sign and I'll follow you wherever you go.

Esther'l: You saw how the Master of the Universe blessed us on that night. You desired me with every limb of your body. I will wait for Him to bless us again, and for your soul to desire me too.

Reyzele: And you will wed me and come unto me and know me. You will see what a great and passionate love I have for you and how the womb that God gave me longs to bear your children, and God's presence will shine on us.

*But Ziesl and Azriel hug each other. Reyzele and Esther'l exit.*

Azriel: *(Breaks away)* I can't, Ziesl. I see God's angels looking down on me from Heaven in sackcloth and mourning. And I see bands of furies dancing around the barrel of burning tar being heated for me in Hell. *(Rushes out of the room. Ziesl breaks into tears. After a while Azriel returns)* I can't be with you, Ziesl. But I can be without you even less.

*They embrace. The Chorus enters behind them.*

Chorus: He that committeth adultery with another man's wife shall surely die! He that lieth with his father's wife hath uncovered his father's nakedness – he shall surely die! He that lieth with his betrothed, both shall surely die! He that lieth with a man as he lieth with a woman, both have committed an abomination – they shall surely die! He that taketh a wife and her mother, it is wickedness – they shall be burnt with fire, both he and they! He that lieth with a beast shall surely die, and ye shall slay the beast! And if a woman approach unto any beast, and lie down thereto, thou shalt kill the woman and the beast – they shall surely die and their blood shall be upon them! Their blood shall be upon them! Their blood shall be upon them!

Azriel: May the blessed One forgive us. *(They kiss)*



**Scene 10**

*The coachmen's market in Lublin. Elkhonen addresses the audience.*

Elkhonen: The coachmen's market in Lublin. A coach is arriving from Bilgorai. Reb Yudl gets off, exhausted from his travels. Two weeks ago, he left Frampol for Zanz. From Zanz he went to Zamosc, from Zamosc to Bilgorai, and from Bilgorai to Lublin. He is stooped from worry. Even before looking for a synagogue, he asks the coachmen if they have seen a yeshiva student from Frampol traveling with a strange woman. And guess whom he runs into!

Yudl: *(To Elkhonen)* I've heard that you traveled here in the same coach with Azriel Khanes.

Elkhonen: I did?

Yudl: *(Handing him a coin)* Take me to him.

**Scene 11**

*Morning. Ziesl and Azriel's room. Ziesl is by himself, dressed in his underpants and a large, ritually fringed undershirt. He is about to strap on his phylacteries.*

*Suddenly he hears Frume's voice.*

Frume: Ziese? Ziese, my darling. Ziese?

Ziesl: *(Hurriedly hiding the phylacteries and putting on women's clothes)* Just a minute, Frume.

Frume: What's taking so long, Ziese? Are you hiding a treasure in there? Or are you putting on one of those creams that make you so beautiful? Come, Ziese. The day is short and there's much to be done.

Ziesl: Just one minute.

Frume. I've brought you some Sabbath candlesticks. And a needle and thread to mend the hole in your husband's gabardine, may he have a long life. *(Comes in)*

Ziesl: Please excuse me, Frume. I must have dozed off. The less a body does, the more tired it makes her. My husband went early to synagogue and I'm waiting for him to return.

Frume: And I hope mine never returns. *(Ziesl is startled)* You heard me. The cad took me from my father's home against my will. For five years I didn't bear that lowdown miser any children. Every month he beat me until I screeched like a cow about to be slaughtered. One day I took myself in hand and went to see the rabbi. He gave me an amulet, and since then I've given birth to six boys as mean and stingy as their father.

Ziesl: May the blessed Lord answer my prayers too.

Frume: Amen to that. May it be His will. You're young and healthy and perfectly made for a woman. Do you know why the blessed Lord has given you such charm and beauty? Do you? (*Ziesl doesn't know what to answer*) Because He wants to adorn His world with beautiful children. This Saturday night, as soon as the Sabbath is over, I'll take you to the bathhouse. You'll purify yourself and be given God's blessing.

Ziesl: Please. I'd rather not. I don't need to go to the bathhouse. You see... (*He clears his throat*) It's been four years since... I last... You know what I mean.

Frume: Had your monthly? But that's just it! I didn't have mine for five years. But then I purified myself and was given God's blessing and it returned. And when you are like other women again, you'll lose that fuzz beneath your nose and be more beautiful than ever.

Ziesl: Maybe the Saturday night after this one.

Frume: Why postpone a commandment? By then you could have done the commandment again and again and again. (*She broaches the subject she has really come for*) And if, while you're waiting to get pregnant, my husband, damn his soul, makes eyes at you, just let me know and I'll make him wish he never was born.

Ziesl: God forbid!

Frume: It wouldn't be the first time. A year ago he rented this very same room to a married couple that...

Ziesl: (*Hearing footsteps*) Shhh. My husband is coming.

Frume: Let him hear too.

*But Ziesel leads her out. Azriel enters.*

Azriel: (*Entering*) Whom were you talking with?

Ziesl: Frume.

Azriel: What did she want?

Ziesl: She saw we had no candlesticks and brought us some of her own.

Azriel: Well?

Ziesl: Well what?

Azriel: Why don't you kiss me??

Ziesl: I'm afraid she might be peeping through the keyhole.

Azriel: What could she see? A man kissing his wife? (*They kiss*) Mazel tov. I've found a shop.

Ziesl: A shop?

Azriel: A notions store. Come Sunday, God willing, I'll be a shopkeeper. By the end of the month we'll be able to get your watch back.

Ziesl: But what about me?

Azriel: While I'm minding the store, you can study here at home. And when I'm in the study house, you can mind the store.

Ziesl: (*Dumbfounded*) You mean I won't be going to the study house any more?

Azriel: How can you go to the study house dressed as a woman?

Ziesl: There are things about me that clothes can't change, Azriel. I'm not a woman and I'm not about to sit here gossiping with Frume.

Azriel: Once we're established, we'll take a helper in the shop and study together here all day.

Ziesl: Lublin is a big town. If we move somewhere else we'll be rid of Alter and Frume, and I can go back to being who I am.

Azriel: And live together with me? Two men in the same room? We'll be stoned to death!

Ziesl: We could live as neighbors in separate rooms.

Azriel: But we want to be together. If I could look like a woman, I'd gladly do it. I'd be as ready to do it for you as you are for me.

Ziesl: Azriel, I want to be in the study house. To sit at the feet of great rabbis. To go to synagogue. To pray with other Jews. To be called to the Torah. I'm a Jew.

Azriel: Within these four walls, we'll pray together every day. We'll study Torah. It's only in public that you have to be a woman. Even if we didn't live together, two bachelors like us wouldn't be allowed to be study partners. If they didn't stone us, they would drive us out as your father did. And I also like you in these clothes, Ziesl. They become you. I like calling you "Ziese" too.

Ziesl: (*Hurt*) I can see you don't want me. What you want is a woman.

Azriel: God forbid. I want you just as you are. But two bachelors can't share the same prayer shawl. The only way we can live together is for the whole world to think you're a woman.

*Azriel goes guiltily over to Ziesl and hugs him. Soon Ziesl moves away.*

Ziesl: Take off your gabardine.

Azriel: Why?

Ziesl: It has a hole I want to mend. (*He goes to get his sewing things*)

Azriel: I'll mend it myself.

Ziesl: Wouldn't you love me more if I mended it?

Azriel: No, I swear I wouldn't. (*He reaches for the kit*)

Ziesl: Let me do it. Every stitch I make in your gabardine sews you closer to me. (*He suddenly stops sewing and hands Azriel his scissors*) Here, cut off my hair.

Azriel: For God's sake, why?

Ziesl: Cut off my hair. If I have to be a woman for your sake, I'll be a woman and serve the blessed Lord as a woman. And the rabbis say a woman's hair is a temptation that must be removed. (*Azriel embraces him emotionally. Music. Darkness*)

**Scene 12**

*The street in front of Alter's home. Yudl, Alter, and Elkhonen enter.*

Yudl: I'm telling you, it can't be.

Elkhonen: (To Alter) I told you so!

Alter: Why would I lie to you?

Yudl: This Azriel came to your house with a woman?

Elkhonen: (To Yudl) I told you so!

Alter: Yes, rabbi.

Yudl: And he said this woman was his wife?

Alter: Yes, rabbi.

Yudl: It can't be.

Elkhonen: (To Alter) I told you so!

Alter: It certainly can be. The woman who was his wife even gave me a gold watch for a deposit that her father gave Azriel for his engagement. (He shows Yudl the watch)

Elkhonen: (To Yudl) I told you so!

Yudl: (Struggling to understand) The woman's father? He gave him this watch? Take this. (He hands Alter some money and takes the watch from him)

### Scene 13

*Ziesl and Azriel's room. Ziesl is sewing. Yudl enters. Ziesl hurriedly hides his face.*

Yudl:           Where is Ziesl, Azriel?

Azriel:         Ziesl?

Yudl:           My son Ziesl, where is he?

Azriel:         I don't know, rabbi.

Yudl:           *(To Ziesl)* Are you his wife?

Azriel:         She is, rabbi.

Yudl:           And this is the watch you were given by her father? *(He shows it to him)* It's Ziesl's. His name is engraved on it. You gave his watch to your landlord as a deposit and you don't know where he is?

Azriel:         *(Fumbling)* Ziesl gave me his watch back in Frampol.

Yudl:           Take care, Azriel. "And from falsehood thou shalt keep away." Where is Ziesl? Is he alive?

Azriel:         I don't know, rabbi. He gave me his watch before I left Frampol so that I would have something to live off in Lublin.

Yudl:           And what did he himself do? Go to America?

Azriel:         I don't know, rabbi.

Yudl:           Is he hiding in some yeshiva hereabouts? Do you still study together?

Azriel:         Absolutely not.

Yudl:           *(Firmly)* Tell me where he is, even if he's committed some sin. He who assists a friend in crime is likened to his murderer. Talk! *(Azriel shrugs, at a loss for words. Yudl turns to Ziesl)* Who are you, woman? Are you his wife? Since when? I'm Rabbi Yudl of Frampol. Do you know anything about my son Ziesl? *(Ziesl*



*tries to leave. Yudl blocks his path*) Wait! You're not leaving before you tell me where he is.

Azriel: She knows nothing, rabbi. She's frightened because she's living with me out of wedlock.

Yudl: Out of wedlock?! *(He feels weak and sits on the edge of the bed)*

Azriel: *(Worriedly)* Rabbi! *(To Ziesl)* Hurry up and bring some water. *(To Yudl)* It's true. We're not married. But I've betrothed her with my word and she's permitted to me. We'll soon have a proper wedding.

Yudl: *(To Ziesl)* Where are you from, my child?

Ziesl: *(Hesitating)* From Tomashov.

Azriel: *(Emphatically)* From Tomashov.

Yudl: What have you done wrong that makes you look away from me? *(Ziesl says nothing. Yudl tears the kerchief from his head)* Ziesl... what is the meaning of this?

Ziesl: I have no one to study Torah with except him.

Yudl: But you're a Jew. Since when does a Jew dress as a woman to study Torah? Since when does a Jew desert his wife to sit in a study house? Master of the Universe, what is Torah without the fear of sin? Can such sin become a stepping stone to virtue? Have you both gone mad?! You've sentenced yourself to perdition in this world and the next.

Ziesl: There is no sin that hasn't its atonement, Father. We can atone for this sin too.

Yudl: A sin can be atoned for only when the sinner confesses it and relinquishes it by penance and praying for mercy!

Ziesl: We'll do penance and pray for mercy.

Yudl: Your prayers will not be answered unless you abandon your sin.

Ziesl: I can't live without him, father.

Yudl: And what about your mother? And your wife? Is she to remain alone for the rest of her life?

Ziesl: I'll give her a divorce in front of you right now.

Yudl: Ziesl, my dearest. You could have been a great rabbi. Will you throw it all away for this dreadful passion? The day will come when you will stand before our Father in Heaven, blessed be His name. His eyes see and judge all and He will punish you for your deeds. *(Ziesl cannot bear to listen to his father and runs out. Yudl seeks to follow him)* I don't want to lose you, Ziesl. If you want that badly to study with him, he can return to Frampol. My own honor means nothing to me.

Ziesl: What's done is done.

Yudl: You have my word that I won't tell a soul. *(He collapses)*

Ziesl: Father!!

*Azriel notices the watch that Yudl has put down and takes it before joining Ziesl. A crowd forms around Yudl's corpse. Azriel quickly pulls Ziesl away from it. Darkness.*

## End of Act One

## **Act Two**

### **Prologue**

Elkhonen: Nine moons have gone by. After the death and burial of her father, and her mourning for him and for her vanished brother and for Azriel, Reyzele married Feybush, a wealthy merchant and childless widower from Lublin. (*Feybush puts a scarf over Reyzele's shoulders*) You've never seen a sadder wedding. Reyzele didn't stop mourning when Feybush took her back with him to Lublin, along with her mother Elke and her abandoned sister-in-law Esther'l. (*Elke and Esther'l, carrying suitcases, join Feybush and Reyzele*) Reyzele wasn't the only mourner. Elke mourned for her husband and son, Esther'l mourned for her husband and herself, and Feybush mourned his bringing home three mourning women. In a word, what bliss! And all that time, Ziesl and Azriel were living in Lublin with Reb Alter and his wife, eking out a livelihood in their little notions store.

**Scene 14**

*A notions store whose entire merchandise is spread out on one shelf. Ziesl sits sewing baby clothes. Azriel enters, holding a volume of the Talmud.*

- Ziesl:           What did he say? (*Azriel says nothing*) What did the rabbi say?
- Azriel:           Whatever he said, it wasn't what we wanted to hear.
- Ziesl:           What was it?
- Azriel:           He said that he who interprets the Torah against accepted opinion has no share in the world to come, no matter how learned or righteous he may be.
- Ziesl:           The ancient sages said that long ago. They just never said what accepted opinion was.
- Azriel:           It's what is written in the Codes of Law.
- Ziesl:           But there weren't any Codes of Law in those days.
- Azriel:           (*Annoyed*) I'm talking about the law that exists and you're talking about the law you wish existed. A woman's soul can't dwell in a man's body. The Holy One Blessed Be He created everything in pairs. Heaven and earth, sun and moon, this world and the next – and man and woman. A woman is someone God created as a woman.
- Ziesl:           You're talking about her body. But what about her soul? Before descending to this world, the souls crowding around God's throne are not divided into male and female. If my soul was given a female form when it entered this world, and if I pray to the Shekhinah, which is God's female side, then the only difference between me and a woman is my body and I'm permitted to you.
- Azriel:           If you're permitted to me, that means I have to marry you.
- Ziesl:           I've said I'm ready to marry you.

- Azriel: That was the rabbi's point! He who interprets the Torah illicitly has no share in the world to come.
- Ziesl: You just don't want to marry me.
- Azriel: I don't want to because you're not a woman and I don't want you to be one.
- Ziesl: But my body is only the clothing of the soul God gave me – and my soul is a woman's. You'd be marrying my soul, not my body, and that's permissible.
- Azriel: And what makes you so sure you have a woman's soul?
- Ziesl: I feel like a woman. I love like a woman.
- Azriel: I asked you to stop that!
- Ziesl: Go explain to the rabbi –
- Azriel: *(Frustrated)* You don't have a woman's soul. And I don't want you to love me like a woman. I want you as you are. The way God made you. *(Ziesl says nothing)* If I go to the rabbi and say you're a woman, I'll be telling a lie and making him sin too.
- Ziesl: I've found a way out – and you refuse to take it.
- Azriel: *(Despairingly)* We're up against a wall, Ziesl. There is no way out.

*Alter approaches the shop. Elkhonen surprises him.*

- Elkhonen: She's not alone.
- Alter: Who isn't?
- Elkhonen: Your lady love.
- Alter: Beat it before you catch it from me.
- Elkhonen: First give me my wage for warning you.
- Alter: You'll get your wage in Hell. *(To Ziesl and Azriel)* Good day!
- Azriel: Good day, Reb Alter.

- Alter: Well, well. So you've become a shopkeeper. And here I thought you were a scholar who spent his days in the study house.
- Azriel: If there's no bread, there's no Torah, Reb Alter.
- Alter: Bread? I'm your only customer.
- Azriel: If you're a customer, what are you shopping for?
- Elkhonen: *(To Alter)* What are you shopping for?
- Alter: *(Coming up with something)* For a candle... a candle for the memorial day of my late mother-in-law. Her one good deed in this life was to depart from it. *(He laughs)*
- Azriel: I don't stock candles.
- Elkhonen: *(To Alter)* He doesn't stock candles.
- Alter: I'll wait here while you bring me one. *(He points to Elkhonen)* You won't be leaving me alone with your wife.
- Elkhonen: Definitely not.
- Azriel: I'll be right back. *(He exits)*

*Alter hands Elkhonen a coin to get rid of him. Elkhonen takes it but goes on watching.*

- Alter: *(To Ziesl)* And how is the rebbitsin?
- Ziesl: I'm not a rebbitsin, Reb Alter. I'm only a seamstress.
- Alter: A seamstress?! Well, you look like a rebbitsin and talk like a rebbitsin, so you must be a rebbitsin. *(He laughs)*
- Ziesl: I'm a simple seamstress, Reb Alter.
- Alter: And what is the rebbitsin sewing?
- Ziesl: Bonnets.
- Alter: Can I buy this bonnet for one of my grandchildren?

Ziesl: Of course you can. *(He hands it to him)*

Alter: But if I buy this bonnet today, what excuse will I have to come to your shop tomorrow? *(He laughs)*

Ziesl: Reb Alter! I'm a married woman.

Alter: So was Bathsheba. And she still didn't chase David away. *(He laughs)*

Ziesl: *(Shouting)* Don't come near me!

Alter: Sshhh. Why shout?

Ziesl: I said stay away!!!

*Elkhonen is agitated. Azriel returns, holding a candle.*

Azriel: Here you are. Now be on your way.

Alter: You're in a hurry to get rid of me because you don't want to pay the rent.

Azriel: I'm in a hurry because your mother-in-law is sitting in darkness in the world to come, waiting for you to light this candle. *(He laughs like Alter)*

Alter: She can wait until Hell freezes over. I want my rent now.

Azriel: Don't worry. We'll pay it. Soon.

Alter: I've been hearing that for the past three months.

Azriel: In a few days, God willing, Ziese will sell the bonnets she's made and you can stop pestering her.

Alter: I'm pestering her? Me? Pestering? Watch your tongue, Azriel. Otherwise I'll tell all Lublin what I saw from your doorway one day.

Azriel: *(Worriedly)* What did you see?

Alter: What did I see? What did I see? I saw your wife standing at the table, reading a volume of the Talmud like a scholar. *(He rocks back and forth)*

Ziesl: I think, Azriel, that I should go to the market and buy fabric to sew the shroud of a certain lout in Lublin. *(Exits)*

Alter: Did you hear that? Did you hear that?

Azriel: Never mind, Reb Alter. You'll get your rent by the first of the month.

Alter: Not by the first of the month. Tomorrow! *(He turns to go)*

Azriel: *(Calling after him)* What about the money for the candle, Reb Alter?

Alter: You can deduct it from what you owe me.

*He starts to leave and bumps into Elkhonen, who holds out a hand for his money. Alter makes do with giving him the candle. Just then Elke, Reyzele, and Feybush appear, walking toward the shop. Elkhonen turns to the audience.*

Elkhonen: There's Elke, as cheerful as ever despite the ordeals she's been through. There's Esther'l, who isn't cheerful at all, being not only an abandoned wife but a very pregnant one. And there's Reyzele and Feybush, who are positively cheerless, because in spite of all the worldly goods he's lavished on her, she still hasn't gotten pregnant -- which is why they're now shopping for an amber necklace, well-known fertility charm.

*Elke, Reyzele, and Feybush enter the store. Azriel hurriedly turns his back to them.*

Elke: Good morning, my good Jew. Would you happen to have an amber necklace, the kind given to women who... *(She recognizes Azriel)* Azriel? Azriel Khanes?

Azriel: *(Awkwardly)* Yes, rebbitsin.

Elke: Is this your shop?

Azriel: Yes, rebbitsin. What are you doing in Lublin?



- Elke: Haven't you heard about Rabbi Yudl, may he rest in peace?
- Azriel: May he rest in peace?!
- Elke: He went looking for Ziesl, who vanished into thin air. His heart gave out when he reached Lublin. *(Wiping a tear)* Azriel, you haven't come across Ziesl anywhere in Lublin, have you?
- Azriel: Ziesl? I haven't had word from him since leaving Frampol.
- Elke: *(Tearfully)* Esther'l is about to give birth and her child will never see its father.
- Feybush: Is this the Azriel Khanes you...
- Azriel: I'm sorry, sir, that I don't have the amber necklace you're looking for. But I promise that tomorrow...
- Feybush: *(Taking Reyzele's arm)* Reyzele shouldn't be standing in the same place with him.
- Elke: I tell you, there'll be no end to misfortune until he forgives us for driving him away from of Frampol.
- Feybush: Let's not shame her even more by doing business with him.
- Elke: What makes you think she's ashamed?
- Feybush: I'm her husband and I can see how upset she is.
- Elke: She's upset because we didn't find an amber necklace.
- Feybush: Then why are we standing here gabbing?
- Elke: We're not gabbing. If Azriel forgives us, the Holy One Blessed be He will have mercy on Reyzele and give her a child.
- Reyzele: *(Flaring up)* That's enough. Stop it. Let's go!
- Elke: We're going.

*As Elke, Reyzele, and Feybush leave the shop, they pass Ziesl, who has returned and has been observing them. He hurriedly averts his face. Although Elke senses something, Reyzele tugs at her and they go. Ziesl stops. A spotlight falls on Esther'l. She is at Feybush's and big with child.*

Esther'l: Sleep, my precious baby, sleep.

Father's ship has sailed away,

Taking him to where he may

Study Torah all the day.

Sleep, my precious baby, sleep,

Father's ship is made of gold.

When he sails back to you he'll hold

In his arms a Torah scroll.

Sleep, my precious baby, sleep.

Father is a righteous Jew.

If you study Torah too,

God above will pity you.

*Ziesl looks at her longingly. At the song's end he enters that shop and is astonished to see Yudl's ghost sitting there on his own chair.*

Yudl: Sit down, Ziesl. (*Ziesl remains standing*)

Elkhonen: That's Rabbi Yudl. More precisely, it's his ghost, which has returned to make good on what he failed to do in his former life.

Yudl: Sit down. I forgive you, Ziesl, for leaving me dead in the street. Now the time has come. Go back to your wife. She's pregnant and will bear you a son. You were meant to be a great scholar and mover of mountains, not a penniless seamstress. Go back to the Torah. Go back to serving the blessed Lord. Go back now, before your secret becomes known and it's too late. Ziesl, my darling boy, God blessed me with you to inherit my place. I pray for you. I ask God to forgive you. (*To Azriel, who is startled*) I'll ask God to forgive you too, Azriel. If you want to be a man among men again, take hold of yourself and act. You're still free to take a wife. You need only amend your ways and pray for the mercy of Heaven, and the Holy One Blessed Be He will find you a woman to bear you a son and keep your seed from extinction.

Azriel: I don't want a woman. (*Yudl leaves. Ziesl turns to Azriel in surprise*) And I don't want you to be a woman either. (*He exits*)

Chorus: Women are a different species,  
 Lazy, jealous, and egregious,  
 Temperamental and voracious,  
 Unreliably loquacious!  
 Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who hath not made  
 you a woman.

Can a woman be a scholar?  
 Can she join a prayer quorum?  
 All she's good for is to follow  
 Her own husband with decorum!  
 Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who hath not made  
 you a woman.

Out of every ten words uttered,

Nine are by a woman muttered.

Every woman is a witch –

Or better yet, a bitch, bitch, bitch.

Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who hath not made

you a woman.

Ziesl:

Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who hath made me

according to His will.

**Scene 15**

*Feybush's home. Evening. Reyzele sits crying on a bed. Feybush enters.*

- Feybush: Tell me why you're crying, Reyzele. *(Reyzele remains silent)* I'm not pushing you. *(She remains silent)* I know you'd rather not keep this commandment with me, even though you've been to the bathhouse. I'm not pushing you. A commandment performed unwillingly might as well not be performed. But I beg you to tell me your thoughts. What can I do to please you? There's no greater commandment for a man and a woman than having children.
- Reyzele: I don't know, Feybush.
- Feybush: If you're crying because you haven't conceived, that's the very reason we have to perform the commandment.
- Reyzele: I told you, I don't know.
- Feybush: You're crying without knowing why?
- Reyzele: I don't know and I don't want to know. If I knew, I wouldn't want to go on living.
- Elke: *(Enters)* She'll soon conceive. We haven't had a barren woman in our family for six generations.
- Feybush: She won't conceive until she stops crying, and she won't stop crying until she conceives.
- Elke: If you have any complaints, blame yourself. You know very well that your late wife departed from this world without conceiving either.
- Feybush: I'm not complaining, Mother-in-law. But I can't help wondering whether she wouldn't cry less if Esther'l didn't live with us and get bigger with child every day. I'm not tight-fisted. Let Esther'l find a place nearby and I'll pay the rent.

Elke: Esther'l will live in the same house as I do. If my son is lost, let me at least raise my son's son.

Feybush: And maybe it's not just jealousy of Esther'l's child that makes Reyzele cry. Maybe seeing Esther'l reminds her of her brother Ziesl and Ziesl reminds her of that Azriel, damn his soul, until she wilts like a blade of plucked grass.

Elke: What makes you think that? Are you a mind reader? Reyzele doesn't give a hoot for Azriel. Tonight she'll put on her nightgown and wear her amulet and say a blessing, and you'll recite Psalms and hold your amber, and ninth months from now you'll be cradling a son.

*Esther'l enters, bringing Feybush a cup of tea.*

Esther'l: And it please you, here's your evening tea.

Feybush: I don't want any evening tea and you needn't try so hard to please me. (*Exits angrily*)

Elke: Don't feel bad, Esther'l. He's angry because he ran into Azriel. (*Silence*)

Esther'l: Azriel?

Elke: He has a notions shop at the far end of the marketplace.

Esther'l: And Ziesl? Did he run into Ziesl too? And what about Azriel? Has he seen Ziesl?

Elke: He hasn't heard a word from him. (*She cries*)

*Esther'l hugs her. After a while, she takes her coat and leaves.*

## Scene 16

*Ziesl is sitting in the shop, dressed as a woman and sewing baby clothes.*

*Esther'l enters.*

Esther'l: Hello, Ziesl. *(Ziesl doesn't answer)* Your mother told me she met Azriel. *(He doesn't answer)* I knew you left Frampol with him. *(He still doesn't answer)* The day you left, I noticed my good dress was gone. And your mother told me she saw Azriel with a woman in a good dress.

Ziesl: Have you told anyone else?

Esther'l: I didn't want to disgrace you. I knew the blessed Lord would bring you back to me when I'm worthy.

Ziesl: It's I who am not worthy of you, Esther'l. You're a perfect saint and I'm an awful sinner. If I'm not sentenced to an early death in this world, I'm doomed to Hell in the next.

Esther'l: I'll wait for you anyway. *(She points to her stomach)* I'll give birth to him and raise him until you're ready to be his father.

Ziesl: I can't be his father, Esther'l. I'm no longer Ziesl.

Esther'l: No one can change who he is, Ziesl.

Ziesl: My name is Ziese, and I own a notions shop and sew clothing. I'll go to the rabbi today and give you a divorce. You have a long life ahead of you and.

Esther'l: I don't want a divorce, Ziesl, not even if I have to wait for you until I die. And your son feels the same way. He kicks in my womb and says, "You're my father and always will be."

*She takes Ziesl's hand and runs it over her stomach.*

Ziesl: *(Pulling his hand away)* I can't, Esther'l.

Esther'l: And what shall I tell the child when he's born? That his father turned his back on him even before he came into this world?

Ziesl: *(In a choked voice)* Tell him his father loved him with all his soul but didn't know how to love his mother. He went away and left him so as not to humiliate him.

Esther'l: If you don't love me, Ziesl, I'll die.

Ziesl: I don't love you, Esther'l. I never will. I beg you not to wait for me or to look for me or come here again. Have your son and bring him up to be a good Jew.

Esther'l: I can't stop loving you, Ziesl.

Ziesl: *(Firmly)* Please go.

*Esther'l turns to go. On her way out she is stopped by Yudl.*

Yudl: You only have to reveal the truth, Esther'l. He'll no longer be able to hide and will have to repent.

Esther'l: If I force him to repent, he'll never stop hating me. I'll wait for my love to bring him back to me.

Yudl: He has to be forced to come back. Your love will make him stay.

Esther'l: I can't compel him.

Yudl: What will become of his son? Will he have to grow up fatherless until his father repents?

Esther'l: *(Stubbornly)* His son can't compel him either. *(Exits)*



## Scene 17

*Ziesl and Azriel's room. A Sabbath eve. Ziesl is alone. The table is set. On it are a bottle of wine and a loaf of braided bread. Ziesl lights the Sabbath candles. Yudl's ghost stands beside him.*

*Reyzele, Elke, Esther'l and Feybush stand around the Sabbath table at Feybush's.*

Ziesl: Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who hath sanctified us by His commandments and commanded us to light a candle for the Sabbath. *(In a murmur)* May it be Thy will, O Lord my God and God of my fathers, to show kindness toward me and my husband and my mother and all my family, and to grant me and all Israel a long and good life.

*A scream resounds through Feybush's home. Esther'l is in labor. Elke hurries to carry her to her room. Reyzele remains behind to arrange the candles on the Sabbath table.*

Elkhonen: *(To the audience)* A Sabbath eve in Lublin. Ziesl – I mean Ziese – has spread a fresh tablecloth on the table, put on it the braided bread she has baked, and lit the candles. The Sabbath was being welcomed at Feybush's too. Yet before Reyzele could bless the candles, Esther'l went into labor. Elke quickly put her to bed and called the midwife. Ziesl, feeling her pains from afar, prayed as hard as he could in order to drive his wife's suffering from his mind.

Ziesl: *(Devoutly)* ...And bestow on us salvation and mercy, and bless us with great blessings, and let Your holy presence dwell among us. And may I raise wise and learned sons and sons of sons to love the Lord.

- Yudl: *(Insistently)* Esther'l is having a difficult birth, Ziesl. It's a sign to you from Heaven to repent. Return to her and she will live. Return and make up with her and she will bear a living son. What will you do if they die because of your sins?
- Zisl: *(Prays)* ...And grant that I may raise wise and God-fearing sons and grandsons. I pray that You hear this plea that I make to You for the sake of our mothers, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and may the light we light never go out.
- Yudl: Are you deaf? Esther'l is having a difficult birth. The angels are going to visit your sins on your wife and your son! *(Yudl loses his patience)* You are a mere human being, Ziesl. Who are you to dare say the Holy One Blessed Be He has erred when he created you as man? The hands lighting those candles are a man's. The voice blessing them is a man's. The heart behind that blessing is a man's. And the soul that God has given you is a man's soul.
- Zisl: Have I said God erred? He chose my soul to live this life as a woman, and put it in a man's body in order to test me. By behaving like a woman with joy I prove to God that I have not been deceived by my body and that I believe in Him and His ways, may He be blessed.
- Yudl: By behaving like a woman, you prove that you are a creature of lust. All the rest is words. And your wife and son will die. Just like I died. *(Ziesl keeps murmuring his prayers. Yudil is desperate)* I'll tell you why I died, Ziesl. Not from heartache, but from terror. I was terrified of the Almighty. Terrified to ask His forgiveness for showing you leniency. How could I dare tell Him that I loved you so much that I almost ignored your sinning? *(Ziesl doesn't answer)*
- Reyzele: *(Blessing the candles)* Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who hath sanctified us by His commandments and commanded us to light a candle for the Sabbath.

*She continues to pray in a murmur. Azriel, wrapped in a prayer shawl, kisses Ziesl and begins to say the blessing over the wine.*

- Azriel: “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because in it He had rested from all His work which God created and made.”
- Feybush: *(Raising his cup of wine)* Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who hath created the fruit of the vine.
- All: Amen.
- Yudl: *(To Reyzele)* ...And confess before the Master of the Universe that you can never stop thinking these thoughts.
- Reyzele: I confess before the Master of the Universe that I can never stop thinking these thoughts, though they begin in sin and in sin they end.
- Yudl: and that you know that Azriel is your match made in heaven.
- Reyzele: and that I know that Azriel is my match made in heaven and that Feybush is a match made by men.
- Yudl: and that you must divorce him.
- Reyzele: and that I must divorce him and marry the man who is meant for me and bear him a child. I pray to you, Master of the Universe, to forgive me. My love for Azriel is holy and its holiness atones for all my sins. *(She cries)*
- Feybush: *(Performing the ritual washing of hands)* Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who hath sanctified us by His commandments and commanded us to cleanse our hands.

Azriel: *(Saying the blessing over the bread)* Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who bringeth forth bread from the earth.

Ziesl: Amen.

Yudl: *(To Azriel)* All your prayers are lies, Azriel. All your Torah is a mockery if you don't desist from this sin. Not without reason has the Holy One Blessed Be He shut Reyzele's womb. It is a sign that she is not meant for Feybush. She can divorce her husband and be yours, Azriel. Take her for your wife. Take her for your wife. Take her for your wife.

Azriel: Yes, rabbi. *(He cries)*

Ziesl: Why are you crying?

*Azriel is silent. Frume enters.*

Frume: Good Sabbath, Ziese. *(To Azriel)* Good Sabbath to the man of the house. There's no better time than a Sabbath eve for good news. The Holy One Blessed Be He has made you a miracle, Ziese. You have a job.

Ziesl: Shouldn't we discuss such worldly matters after the Sabbath, Frume?

Frume: It's not a worldly matter. It's a sacred one. And it pays well, too.

Azriel: *(Annoyed)* Since when is pay sacred?

Frume: The job itself is sacred. *(To Ziesl)* You're the new keeper of the women's bathhouse! The bathhouse keeper who just died left no successor, and since you're known throughout Lublin as a chaste and modest woman, to which you can add my efforts on your behalf, you've been chosen for the job.

*Ziesl rises, aghast.*

Frume: It's a great privilege, Ziese. Don't think of it just as having to bathe and shave the heads and trim the nails of the women who come to you. You'll also give them your blessing and purify them for the commandment.

Ziesl: It's out of the question, Frume. I can't possibly be a bathhouse keeper.

Frume: You're a wise and clever woman who knows how to read and write, and your husband is a decent man too. If a bride should seek advice for her wedding night, you're just the person to give it.

Ziesl: I can't, Frume.

Azriel: *(Furious at Frume)* Leave us alone!

Ziesl: Azriel!

Frume: I'll forgive you, Reb Azriel, and come back tomorrow night after the Sabbath. Your Ziese is a saint and I can't bear to see her in such poverty. Good Sabbath.  
*(She exits)*

Ziesl: I can't be a bathhouse keeper.

Azriel: You certainly can't.

Ziesl: Let's leave this place, Azriel. We can't go on living like this in Lublin. Once anyone gets too close to us, our secret is bound to come out.

Azriel: I'm not leaving Lublin.

Ziesl: Esther'l already knows all about us.

Azriel: Esther'l?

Ziesl: She knew it on the day I ran away in her dress. Yesterday she came to the shop and told me. *(Silence)* Let's move somewhere else, Azriel, the sooner the better.

Azriel: So you say, but you don't really mean it. You're longing for Esther'l's baby. You want it more than you want me.

Ziesl: I want you. I want to go away with you.

Azriel: I'm not sure I want to go away with you. My life with you has become worse than death. I don't earn a living. I don't go to the study house. I don't pray in synagogue to spare your feelings. Where will I go away with you? To Warsaw? And what will happen there? Will you be given a womb and have seven children? You'll never be a woman and you're no longer a man. And because of you I no longer know what kind of man I am, either.

Ziesl: "Man," "woman" – what's in a word? I am what I am, as God created me. And you're as He created you. (*Azriel says nothing*) Would you like me to start dressing as a man again?

Azriel: I want to be a man again myself. A man among men, a good Jew in both God's and man's eyes. The day on which your sister Reyzele walked into our shop with her husband, who stood so naturally beside her without fearing sin or shame, I thought what a fool I was to have refused your father.

Ziesl: You would have been a fool not to refuse him. You could never love Reyzele.

Azriel: Of course I could.

Ziesl: You know you couldn't.

Azriel: You'd be surprised!

Ziesl: And you couldn't bring yourself to leave me. You're just tired of living in poverty. You only said that about Reyzele to get me to agree to be a bathhouse keeper. If that's what you want, I'll go to Frume and tell her I accept. Just don't let me hear the name Reyzele from your lips again. (*He exits*)

## Scene 18

*Azriel is in the shop. Alter arrives to collect the rent. Elkhonen surprises him.*

Elkhonen: She's not there.

Alter: Who?

Elkhonen: Your lady love.

Alter: Beat it before I give you a swift kick!

Elkhonen: Not before I get my wage. *(He sticks out his hand)*

Alter: My piles is what you'll get. *(To Azriel)* Good morning, Reb Azriel.

Elkhonen: *(To Azriel)* Good morning.

Azriel: If you're looking for my wife Ziese, Reb Alter, she's in the bathhouse.

Elkhonen: *(To Alter)* I told you.

Alter: *(Insulted)* I beg your pardon!

Azriel: That's one place where you can't follow her.

Elkhonen: *(To Azriel)* That's what I told him.

Alter: *(To Elkhonen)* Get out! *(To Azriel)* I don't want your wife. I want my rent.

Azriel: Didn't I tell you you'd have it on the first of the month?

Alter: I want it now.

Elkhonen: *(To Alter)* I want it too.

Azriel: If you're going to hang around here every day, I'll have to tell your wife Frume the reason why.

Alter: *(Angrily)* Just try it and you'll be out in the street. With that wife of yours! And with him too. *(He exits)*

Azriel: *(To Elkhonen)* What is it that you want, Elkhonen? If I had any money, I'd have given it to him.

Elkhonen: After what I just heard, I'm not asking for charity. This is blackmail. Do you want all Lublin to know that Reb Alter has his eye on your wife?

Azriel: You can tell all Lublin that I have my eye on his wife for all I care.

Elkhonen: But no one would believe me. They'd believe it about Reb Alter, though. Your wife's not bad-looking, you know.

Azriel: Here, take a coin.

Elkhonen: *(Takes it)* And for this coin, here's the one about the groom from Warsaw who marries a bride from Kasrilevke. He's been promised that she's the chastest, purest, most saintly maiden in the world. The night of the wedding he discovers otherwise, and goes to complain to the matchmaker. "Saintly? Chaste? Why, she slept with all the men of Kasrilevke!" "All the men of Kasrilevke?" says the matchmaker. "How many men there are in Kasrilevke?"

*He laughs. Azriel gives him a button and he leaves. Reyzele approaches. Elkhonen surprises her and sticks out his hand for a coin. She gives him one. He exits.*

Azriel: *(Approaches her)* Reyzele?

Reyzele: *(Shyly)* I've come for that amber necklace you promised to get.

Azriel: Come in.

Reyzele: I can't. We mustn't be alone together.

Azriel: But I know you followed your heart here. *(She enters)* I can't keep silent any more, Reyzele.

Reyzele: Please, don't say anything. It's already written on your face.

Azriel: Since you came to this shop, I can't stop thinking about you and the good life we could have had. The children we might have raised. I've been punished enough for turning down your father, may he rest in peace. And it's not only me.



Reyzele: That's all over and done with, Azriel. You have a wife and I have a husband. We're forbidden to each other.

Azriel: We won't be if we each get divorced. We could marry and move to another town without anyone knowing we were married before.

Reyzele: I can't do that. The blessed Lord has given me a husband. What reason do I have to divorce him?

Azriel: The blessed Lord has kept you and my wife childless. That's a sign we're not meant for them.

Reyzele: Don't say any more, Azriel.

Azriel: *(Passionately)* Each soul descends to this world by itself, male or female, Reyzele, and the Holy One Blessed Be He pairs them off like a button and its buttonhole. If we desire each other, that's because He matched us before we were born and now we want to do His will. Your thoughts are written on your face, too. We've suffered because I didn't do God's will. *(He moves toward her)*

Reyzele: *(Apprehensively)* I can't stay here any longer, Azriel.

Azriel: Reyzele...

Reyzele: I can't.

Azriel: Can you come tomorrow after the morning prayer?

Reyzele: No.

Azriel: I'm not letting you go unless you agree.

Reyzele: I can't.

Azriel: Think about it and tell me tomorrow.

Reyzele: I can't.

Azriel: Tomorrow after sunset.

- Reyzele: Don't pressure me, Azriel. You'll only make me sin even more, God forbid.  
*(Anguished)* Tomorrow night I'm going to the bathhouse to purify myself for my husband.
- Azriel: To the bathhouse?!
- Reyzele: And I'm afraid that when he performs the commandment, I'll think of you. *(She turns to go)*
- Azriel: You're going to the bathhouse?
- Reyzele: It's my time of the month.
- Azriel: Promise me you won't go.
- Reyzele: I'm his wife.
- Azriel: Please, Reyzele, for the love of God.
- Reyzele: You needn't worry, Azriel. I'm not going to conceive his child.

*Reyzele leaves. On her way out, she bumps into Elkhonen. He sticks out his hand. She gives him a coin and goes her way.*

## Scene 19

*The entrance to the bathhouse. In the background, women wrapped in sheets can be seen getting in and out of the water.*

Elkhonen:       *(To the audience)* Ziese the new bathhouse keeper, so it is said in the streets of Lublin, is a perfect saint. She can read and write and knows all the laws of purity and ablution. Best of all, she can keep a secret.

*Ziesl helps Frume, who has just finished bathing, to button her coat and tie her kerchief. Frume is in a bawdy mood.*

Frume:            So there I am in bed when he lies down next to me. He's got big ideas, but they're bigger than he is, and he begs me to lend him a hand. Don't think I lent him so much as a finger! You should have seen him huff and puff and get all tuckered out. *(She laughs)*

Ziesl:            *(Laughing too)* It's God's punishment for the beatings he gives you.

Frume:            *(Still laughing)* It's my greatest pleasure in life. *(Her laughter trails off and she hands Ziesl a coin)* Here, get yourself something for the Sabbath.

Ziesl:            Thank you, Frume. May you have a long life. I wish I had a way to repay you.

Frume:            You do. The next time that dirty old man makes eyes at you, raise a rumpus that brings everyone running. The bastard deserves to fry in this world too, not just in Hell.

Ziesl:            I'll do that.

Frume:            God bless you for it. *(She kisses Ziesl and leaves)*

Elkhonen:        *(To the audience)* One down and one to go.

*Seeing Elke and Reyzele approaching the bathhouse, Ziesl hurriedly covers his face with a sheet.*

Elke: This is my daughter, Reyzele. I'd like a word with you. *(To Reyzele)* You can undress. *(Reyzele begins to undress. Elke turns to Ziesl)* She's been married for eight months and still isn't pregnant. Her husband says he's every bit a man, but I say.... *(She whispers to her)* I've fed him bull's testicles and spread fish roe on their sheets, but it hasn't helped... *(She whispers)* The last resort is to give my daughter this potion that I've prepared. *(Remembering)* The most important thing is for you to say the blessing with all your heart before she bathes, and when you come to "The Lord supporteth the fallen and straighteneth the limp," to lay both hands on her head. Do it right and she'll conceive this very night.

Ziesl: Yes, ma'am.

*Elke hands a bottle to Reyzele, who pushes it away.*

Elke: You promised to drink the whole potion. *(Reyzele doesn't answer)* Don't you want to become pregnant? Tell me you don't and I won't bother you anymore. *(Reyzele still doesn't answer)* If you want a child, you have to do something about it.

Reyzele: *(Uncooperative)* Mother!

Elke: *(Handing the bottle to Ziesl while reminding him)* "The Lord supporteth the fallen and straighteneth the limp."

*She wipes away a tear and exits. Ziesl and Reyzele are left alone. There is an awkward moment. Ziesl casts down his eyes.*

Reyzele: Why are you looking down like that?

Ziesl: It's my custom to recite a few Psalms before proceeding.

Reyzele: God willing, I'll be blessed on your account.

Ziesl: You can get into the water. I'll be right back to bless you. *(He turns to go)*

Reyzele: But you're supposed to wash my body and trim my nails before I immerse myself.

Ziesl: Of course I am. It's just that since you're a rabbi's daughter, I'm going to fetch a pail of fresh water in your honor.

*Reyzele undresses and waits. All at once she bursts into tears. Ziesl returns with a bucket, a towel, and nail clippers. Reyzele wipes away her tears. Ziesl does his best not to look at her naked body.*

Ziesl: Give me your hand and I'll clip your nails.

Reyzele: Without a blessing?

Ziesl: I'm saying one. *(He mumbles something.)*

Reyzele: Amen. *(Ziesl clips Reyzele's nails in silence)* Why are you keeping your head down?

Ziesl: So that I don't jab you and make your finger bleed.

Reyzele: *(In a choked voice)* It's my womb that should bleed.

Ziesl: God forbid! How could it bleed if you've just finished counting seven days from the end of your period?

Reyzele: Each day I prayed for more blood to make me impure to my husband.

- Ziesl: God Almighty! What's wrong with your husband that makes you want to be Impure for him?
- Reyzele: Nothing is wrong with him. I just never wanted him and married him only because of all the troubles that befell us. My brother was kidnapped and disappeared and my father fell ill and died while looking for him.
- Ziesl: All the troubles that come to this world are only to test our faith in the blessed Lord when times are hard. The Holy One Blessed Be He has given you a husband. You must be strong in your faith and love him according to the Torah.
- Reyzele: I can't be strong. My heart does not belong to my husband. It belongs to another man who was pledged to me from Heaven.
- Ziesl: Another man?
- Reyzele: The man I wanted to marry before being wed to my husband. He wanted to marry me too, but his father made him take another woman.
- Ziesl: *(In shock)* You mustn't let yourself desire this man. It's as bad as Adultery, and an adulterous woman deserves to die. Even if he is worthy of your desire, he cannot possibly desire you. He knows you are married, and absolutely forbidden to him.
- Reyzele: But he does desire me, just as I desire him.
- Ziesl: How do you know?
- Reyzele: He told me.
- Ziesl: He told you?!
- Reyzele: While I was buying something in his shop.
- Ziesl: *(Thunderstruck, he stops clipping Reyzele's nails.)* God in Heaven! I can't let you bathe, until you tear him from your heart.
- Reyzele: I'd have to tear out my heart to tear him from it.

Ziesl: *(Firmly)* You have to collect yourself and fight back. Say the first blessing, shut your eyes, and picture your husband, may he live. Then bathe with the purest of intents and say the second blessing. Do it with all your heart and soul and the Holy One Blessed Be He will make a miracle and purify you. I'll stand off to the side and say Psalms. *(He takes Reyzele's arm and leads her into the water without looking at her)*

Chorus: Lord full of mercy, I stand before You naked and unrobed,  
Without covering or clothing, stain or dirt, ring or ornament,  
With head neither held high nor bowed low, but as I am.  
Lord full of mercy, bless my soul and I will be purified.

Lord full of mercy, I stand in Your pure waters  
With nothing in my hands or on my lips or before my eyes,  
And every thought, feeling, and movement turned to You in prayer.  
Lord full of mercy, accept me and sanctify me in Your compassion.

Lord full of mercy, now I rise from Your waters  
And return home to the husband You have sanctified for me.  
May my heart be whole and my thoughts pure and unsullied.  
Lord full of mercy, bless me that I may be prepared for him.

## Scene 20

*Night. Ziesl and Azriel's shop. Ziesl enters and begins to pack the shop contents. Meanwhile, Esther'l is sitting in Feybush's house, with her new born son in her arms. Elke is next to her. Azriel enters the shop.*

Ziesl: I beg you. Let's pack and leave this town at once.

Azriel: Now? In the middle of the night?

Ziesl: I can't spend one more day in Lublin.

Azriel: I did enough by following you here. I don't want to wander all my life.

Ziesl: I want to leave town because you don't love me in this place. You don't talk to me nicely any more. You wince when I lay my head in your lap.

Azriel: When do I have time to love you? All day you're gabbing in the shop with the customers and all night you're in the bathhouse staring at naked women.

Ziesl: *(Angrily)* What do I care about naked women? I'm in the bathhouse for your sake. I'm in the shop for your sake. It's all so you can be in the study house. For your sake I've stopped studying myself.

Azriel: That's just what I said. You should never have made me come with you to Lublin.

Ziesl: I didn't make you. You came because you loved me. You would have done anything for me.

Azriel: I did it in a moment of weakness. You knew this weakness and seduced me.

Ziesl: *(Angrily)* I'll tell you what's weak about you. It's not having been in love with me. It's having become loveless. You've turned into an idler. You've stopped going to the study house. You've made me stoop to being a seamstress and a bathhouse keeper to support you.

Azriel: *(Slapping him)* That's for all your support!



Ziesl: *(Angrily)* I'll tell you what else is weak about you. You're an adulterer. You want my sister Reyzele, even though she's married and strictly forbidden to you.

Azriel: That's a lie. I don't want her.

Ziesl: Then why did you tell her you do?

Azriel: I never did.

Ziesl: You told her in the shop. I want to leave town before you sin some more.

Azriel: It's not my sinning that worries you. It's your own self and your own neck. You're afraid I'll leave you.

Ziesl: That's perfectly true. I fear for myself too. I can't live without you. And I won't let you leave me even if you wanted to. *(Falls to the floor and holds Azriel feet)*

Azriel: I don't want to. As God is my witness. But I can't go on living with you. I'm tired of living a lie. I want to be an ordinary man. You have a child. What do I have? I want a child too. The whole world exists for the sake of schoolchildren at their studies. And I don't want my son to be a sinner like me. I want him to say the Kaddish for me. And you can't give me that son.

*Yudl enters, helps Ziesl to stand, up takes him in his arms, and shows him his son.*

Yudl: Take your son in your arms, Ziesl. Don't be a stranger to him. He's flesh of your flesh. *(Ziesl says nothing)* I'm begging you, Ziesl. *(Ziesl says nothing)* He's a living, breathing being. Soon the Holy One Blessed Be He will afflict him because of your sin. It's a sin. I wish it wasn't, but it is. It's a sin.

Ziesl: Even if I'm a sinner, father, once my sin has been purged by my sorrow and love, nothing will remain of it but a spark of pure holiness that will be so divine, that my entire soul will be redeemed by it. *(He rises and leaves)*

**Scene 21**

*Azriel is in his shop. Alter enters to collect his rent.*

Alter: Well now.

Azriel: Reb Alter, I have this watch. *(He gives it to him)* Sell it, deduct the rent money, and give me back.

Alter: *(Surprised)* Why, it's the same watch you gave me as a deposit when you first arrived in Lublin. I sold it to that rabbi from Frampol.

Azriel: I bought it back from him. It was a present from my father-in-law, may he rest in peace. Deduct the rent money and give me twenty zloty.

Alter: Twenty zloty?! *(He takes the watch and examines it)* Ten.

Azriel: Twenty, Reb Alter.

Alter: Do you take me for an idiot?

Azriel: Fifteen.

Alter: Ten. *(He turns to go)*

Azriel: Wait, Reb Alter. All right, ten.

Alter: Very good. I'll return with the money tomorrow.

Azriel: Not tomorrow. Today.

Alter: What's the rush?

Azriel: I have to go somewhere.

Alter: Go somewhere? Where?

Azriel: I have to take care of an uncle who is sick.

Alter: What about your wife?

Azriel: She'll stay here.

Alter: Very good, very good. But I only have five zloty in my pocket.

Azriel: Fine. I'll take five.

*They shake hands on it. Alter hands Azriel the money and takes the watch. Ziesl enters.*

Ziesl: This watch doesn't belong to Azriel, Reb Alter. It's not his to sell.

Azriel: It's mine. My father-in-law gave it to me for our betrothal.

Ziesl: And you're not going anywhere. I don't allow it.

Azriel: I'm not asking your permission.

Alter: I paid for it and we shook hands on it.

Ziesl: It's not his to sell!!

*Elke enters hurriedly, looking worried. Ziesl goes to a corner and hides his face from her.*

*She is too agitated to notice him.*

Elke: Quick, Azriel. I need twelve wax candles. We've been struck by misfortune. My little grandson is sick. He's burning with fever and covered with sweat.

*All at once she notices the watch that Alter is holding and takes it away from him.*

Elke: What are you doing with this watch? *(She looks at it carefully)*

Alter: I just bought it.

Elke: From whom?

Alter: From Reb Azriel. It was a present for his engagement to Zeise the bathhouse keeper.

Elke: This is my son Ziesl's watch. He was given it by his father-in-law. *(Alarmed)*  
Ziese? God Almighty! *(To Azriel)* Tell me that I haven't found my son – because  
if I have, I'll poke out my eyes.

Alter: I don't know who your son is, rebbitsin, but I know that this watch is mine.

Elke: *(Screaming)* Get out of here!

Alter: But my watch.

Elke: I said out! In another second the earth will open up and swallow you with all  
these sinners. Out! *(She pulls the kerchief from Ziesl's head)* What is this game  
you're playing, Ziesl? Have you gone mad? You have a wife and son. And your  
son is fighting for his life. Soon your sin will become known to all and you'll be  
stoned to death. I wish I knew a curse that could kill you. I have no more son. My  
son is dead. *(She exits)*

Azriel: And now follow her! Did you hear me? Get out! I don't want to see you  
anymore. I wish I had never met you. Go before I strangle you. Out!!

Ziesl: Where can I go?

Azriel: Anywhere. Just go!!

Ziesl: I'll go. But I'll be back tonight. I know you'll miss me by then. You can't find  
the holiness within you with anyone else but me.

*Ziesl leaves. Azriel goes to the back and starts to pack the shop's contents in a sack.*

*Elkhonen steals into the shop to take the watch, which has been left on the table. Alter  
gets there first, pockets it, and walks out. Azriel returns and sees Elkhonen.*

Azriel: Reb Elkhonen! I need you for an errand that calls for silence.

Elkhonen: *(Sticking out his hand)* How much?

Azriel: Here's a kopeck.

Elkhonen: A kopeck? What miserable little errand are you sending me on that's worth no more than a kopeck?

Azriel: Take two. Run to Feybush's house and tell his wife that I have the amber necklace she's looking for. Tell her to come to my shop right away.

Elkhonen: For another kopeck I'll bring her myself.

Azriel: Here.

Elkhonen: And for one more I promise not to tell anyone.

Azriel: Take it. It's my last.

Elkhonen: *(Sticking the coins in his pocket)* On second thought, Reb Azriel, it's not an errand I can carry out.

Azriel: Why not?

Elkhonen: Because I just saw Reb Feybush taking his wife to the bathhouse.

Azriel: To the bathhouse?! *(He drops his sack and runs out)*

*A spotlight falls on Esther'l, holding her baby. Yudl's ghost is next to her.*

Esther'l: Wake, my baby, do not sleep,  
Your father's ship has sailed away,  
Taking him to where he may  
Study Torah all the day.

Wake, my baby, do not sleep,  
Your father's ship is made of gold.  
When he sails back to you he'll hold  
In his arms a Torah scroll.

Wake, my baby, do not sleep,  
 Your father is a righteous Jew.  
 If you study Torah too,  
 God above will pity you.

Yudl: *(saying the mourner's prayer in the background)* May His great name be exalted and sanctified in this world that He created as He willed and in which His kingdom shall reign, in the days of your lives and the lives of the whole house of Israel, and say amen.

Esther'l: Wake up, my baby, wake up. It's feeding time. The Holy One Blessed Be He has given your mother full breasts for you. Wake up, Yudl. They're so heavy, my breasts. They're dripping wet. Soon they'll burst from such a flow of milk. Don't cause your mother pain, my son. *(She picks him up and sees that he is cold.)* Yudl?! *(Sobbing)* Yudl, my child...Yudl, my child...

*She hugs him. Elke enters and embraces her.*

**Scene 22**

*The bathhouse. A stormy night. Ziesl sits depressed on a bench. Reyzele is already immersed in the water. Azriel enters.*

Azriel: Reyzele! Reyzele! Reyzele!

Ziesl: *(sees him)* Azriel!!

*Reyzele emerges from the water.*

Reyzele: Azriel! *(She hurries to wrap herself in a towel)*

Azriel: Forgive me, Reyzele. Get dressed and let's get out of this terrible place.

Ziesl: You're not taking her, Azriel.

Azriel: I'm not asking anyone for permission.

Ziesl: She doesn't want to go with you.

Reyzele: Do you two know each other?

Azriel: Come, Reyzele.

Ziesl: You're not going with him, Reyzele. He's deceiving you. Even if you go with him, he can never love you.

Azriel: Come!

Reyzele: *(To Ziesl)* How do you know?

Azriel: *(To Ziesl)* Please, I beg you. I have a life and I want to live.

Ziesl: I have one too.

Azriel: Stop wasting time, Reyzele. One more word from her and we're ruined.

Ziesl: He can never love you, Reyzele, because he loves me.

Reyzele: You?! Who are you to him?

*Ziesl removes his kerchief.*

Reyzele: Ziesl?!

Azriel: Let's get out of here.

Ziesl: You're not going anywhere. *(He grabs Azriel)*

*The spotlight falls on Yudl.*

Yudl: Stop that, Ziesl. Your son is dead. Let go of him.

Ziesl: *(To Yudl)* He's mine. I can't live without him.

Yudl: Didn't you hear me? Your son is dead. Leave him alone.

Azriel: *(Struggling to break free)* Let me go, Ziesl! Stop it. Please, if my life means anything to you.

Ziesl: Your life means everything to me. More than my own life. But your soul means even more.

Yudl: Your son is dead, Ziesl. He's dead. God in Heaven has visited your sin on him.

Ziesl: My son is dead?

Yudl: And that death should be enough. Mourn him and repent and live. Please, Ziesl.

Ziesl: *(Comprehending)* My son is dead? My little boy is dead?

*Ziesl releases Azriel and moves away. Azriel embraces him to comfort him.*

Ziesl: *(To Azriel)* Not even death can come between us, never.

*Embraced, they tumble together into the water.*



Reyzele: Let go of him Ziesl!! Let go! Get out of the water. In a second you'll drown. Get out. Ziesl, my brother, I forgive you. Please. Azriel, here's my hand. Take it. Take my hand, Azriel. I forgive you too. I'll go with you anywhere. Take my hand, Azriel! (*Yudl hurries to her and embraces her*) Azriel!

## **Epilogue**

*The cemetery. Nighttime. It is storming. Reyzele lies sobbing between two mounds of earth. Yudl tries calming her.*

Elkhonen:       *(To the audience)* He wouldn't take her hand. He didn't want it.

Reyzele:         *(To Yudl)* He didn't want it. Neither did Ziesl.

Elkhonen:       She held out her hand to him.

Reyzele:         I held out my hand to him. I did. He didn't want it.

Chorus:          Lord full of mercy Who dwelleth on high,  
                       Provide them perfect peace on the wings of Your presence.  
                       In the ranks of the saintly and pure,  
                       Who shine with the radiance of Heaven.  
                       Shelter them forever in the safety of Your wings,  
                       And bind their souls in the bond of life.  
                       The Lord is their portion, and may they rest in peace where they lie.

**END**