

ROSENBLATT EXPRESS

A Play in Three Acts

by Ron Guetta

SCENE 1

Lights up on MICHAEL SAMELSKY - a middle-aged, New York Jewish impresario in a suit and bow tie.

MICHAEL

The audience loves huge success stories. Nobodies who come from nowhere and rise to overnight fame. It offers them inspiration... hope... The illusion that it could also happen to them, and if not to them, then to their “gifted” children. But there’s one problem with dazzling success. It dazzles, makes you think that your spot at the top is registered in your name. It isn't. You’re there under unprotected lease, and the Landlord can throw you out at any moment. You don't need to be Einstein to realize that when you're thrown from the highest peak, there’s a damn good chance that you will fall to the lowest low. I’d waited 33 years for my fiercest enemy, the wunderkind with the heavenly voice and divine luck, to be slapped down by the Big Boss above, and finally realize who works for whom here. When it happened, trust me, I was there to watch him fall from the Olympus flat on his *tuches*, and, why not, make a nice buck out of it along the way...

Lights up on a visibly lost and desperate YOSSELE ROSENBLATT, a 43 year old bearded religious Jew on a steamy subway platform, 1925. Michael approaches him, waving a Jewish paper.

MICHAEL

Yossele Rosenblatt! What a coincidence. I just read about your rise and fall. What a story! It moved me to tears. But, obviously, no *pisher* born here in Manhattan could ever accurately tell how things really were back in your glory days in the Old Country.

YOSSELE

Do we know each other?

MICHAEL

Michael Semelsky. Formerly Micha-el. Surely you remember me. You were ten years old. My father was 70...

SCENE 2

Stage left: Galicia, 1892. Leaning on his cane, a frail CANTOR SAMELSKY (70) checks his nearly empty synagogue and turns to his 20-something son Micha-el (later Michael).

CANTOR SEMELSKY

Is there anyone waiting outside, Micha-el?

MICHA-EL

No, father. No one.

CANTOR SEMELSKY

Are you sure?

MICHA-EL

Yes, I'm sure. You must start the service.

CANTOR SEMELSKY

With four worshipers? It's not even half a minyan. Damn wunderkind keeps stealing all my congregants. They said he would be here for just one Sabbath. This is the third in a row!

MICHA-EL

They don't let him go. They're shoving in lines, standing on rooftops, hanging from windows, as if the messiah has come. Ungrateful bastards. You've been giving them your heart and soul for 50 years now, always there to offer comfort and solace after God-knows how many pogroms and oppressions, and that's their thanks?

CANTOR SEMELSKY

Ten year old cantor! Who ever heard of such a thing? And who? The son of Rafael Rosenblatt! The worst cantor in Galicia.

MICHA-EL

This particular apple fell far from the tree.

CANTOR SEMELSKY

Apple? More like golden apple! They say he earned more this past year off that kid than he did his entire life.

MICHA-EL

Worry not, father. I'm putting an end to this farce.

CANTOR SEMELSKY

What?

MICHA-EL

Trust me, I have a plan. That little *pisher* is going to suffer the blow of his life.

Stage right: Light on a crowded synagogue. Yossele's father, RAFAEL, is seated next to a CONGREGANT. They're all waiting for the service to start.

CONGREGANT

I've been talking about him all week. What a voice! What purity of intent! And the way he improvises! Mark my words, one day your son will be bigger than Yerucham the Short.

RAFAEL

With God's help.

CONGREGANT

You close your eyes, listen to him and it's as if an invisible hand lifts you high from the filth down here, allowing you to forget our hardship and misfortune and breathe pure air from the Holy Land.

RAFAEL

Why do you think we drag ourselves from village to village in the rain and snow, if not to bring some joy into the lives of Jews like you.

CONGREGANT

At two rubles a ticket. Why not? This kid is worth every cent. Who knows, with such a gift, he could one day make it to the opera.

RAFAEL

Over my dead body! He was born for the synagogue, and in the synagogue he will remain! *(He pulls out a silver tuning fork and motions his son to start)* Yossele...

The voice of 10 year old Yossele reverberates in the synagogue, opening the Friday evening service with Lechu Neranena, mesmerizing the Congregants with his angelic chanting.

THE VOICE OF YOUNG YOSSELE

LECHU NERANENA LA'ADONAI NARI'A
LETZUR YISH'ENU. NEKADMA PANAV BETODA;
BIZMIROT NARI'A LO...

Suddenly, Micha-el Samelsky, the son of the cantor of the nearby synagogue storms in.

MICHA-EL

Stop! Stop everything!

Yossele's voice is silenced. The stunned Congregants whisper. Micha-el pulls out a letter and waves it in the air.

MICHA-EL

This is a letter I received this morning from Rabbi Ginsberg. He clearly rules here that allowing a ten year-old child, three years before the age of majority, to officiate, is desecrating of God's name!

CONGREGANT

That letter is a fake! You forged it, Semelsky!

MICHA-EL

I did not! Until he is Bar Mitzvah, he can't lead the service. It's that simple.

From among the worshippers, a frail old man rises. The Congregants whisper: "Rabbi Ginsberg". RABBI GINSBERG grabs the letter from Micha-el and checks it.

RABBI GINSBERG

This letter is not forged. I did write it with my own hands.

The Congregants are shocked. Micha-el celebrates his triumph.

RABBI GINSBERG

But now that I've heard the boy, I decree: his mouth is pure. His prayers will be heard!

A sigh of relief. Micha-el's face falls.

CONGREGANT

Go home, Semelsky. Go back to Papa.

Thoroughly humiliated, Micha-el turns around and walks out. Rafael signals his son to resume the service. The beautiful chanting of young Yossele is heard again in the synagogue.

THE VOICE OF YOUNG YOSSELE

Lechu neranena la'Adonai Nari'a letzur yish'enu. Nekadma panav betoda; Bizmirot nari'a lo...

Lights up on both Michael Samelsky - the Jewish impresario, and Micha-el - his younger self.

MICHAEL

So many years have passed and I still feel the knife-blade jabbed into my heart, that moment when I was humiliated before the entire small town of Zmigrod.

MICHA-EL

That dirt-poor, persecution-ridden, hell-hole that was my entire world...

MICHAEL

What was I thinking? That a letter from some second-rate rabbi would derail Yossele's phenomenal success?

MICHA-EL

I should have known that when our Heavenly Father wants you to make it, nobody can stop you. And Yossele...

MICHAEL

Our Heavenly Father didn't just want Yossele to succeed. He was obsessed with it. Everyone talks about the big money, fame, public's adoration...

MICHA-EL

If you ask me, Yossele's greatest success was Taube Kaufman.

MICHAEL

The gorgeous 12-year-old girl with the chestnut brown eyes and long, silky brown hair that the traveling child-star first met when he and his father hit Brzesko...

The voice of 12 year old Yossele emerges, singing a heartfelt Hasidic niggun (tune).

THE VOICE OF YOUNG YOSSELE

NA NA NA NAAAH... NA NA NA NAAAH... NA NA NAAH...

MICHAEL

His voice cast a spell on her as she went down the stairs to her father's living room, late for the Sabbath dinner. It sent unknown shivers down her spine when she sat down at the table opposite the young guest with the golden throat...

MICHA-EL

Her bold, steady gaze filled him with strange warmth that felt like the presence of a holy fire from a universe away...

MICHAEL

Their wordless encounter was quite brief, but the truth is that it actually never ended...

SCENE 3

An energetic 18 year-old Yossele, and his agitated father, Rafael, entertain Rabbi Ginsberg in their cozy living room.

RAFAEL

Rabbi Ginsberg, this is the seventh match-made-in-heaven that he rejects.

RABBI GINSBERG

Calm down, Rafael.

RAFAEL

Buchach... Munkacs... Lwów... Europe's most esteemed congregations want him as their chief cantor, and he has to ruin everything. Unbelievable!

RABBI GINSBERG

Maybe they'll agree to...

RAFAEL

No respected congregation will ever hire a bachelor as their steady cantor. Not after that terrible scandal in Korczyna.

RABBI GINSBERG

It is explicitly written that if one of the prospective partners firmly refuses the match then there is no way to--

RAFAEL

How can he refuse? (*Turns to Yossele*) You are presented with the best of the best, one beauty after the other from the finest families in Galicia, and none of them is good enough for you? Do you have any idea what type of odd creatures my father, may he rest in peace, introduced me to? Before your beautiful mother came along, that is...

YOSSELE

So I'm doing exactly what you did... Waiting for my one and only.

RAFAEL

Finally, we have a chance to reap the fruits after all those long years on the road... and you have to ruin everything!

YOSSELE

I'm sorry, father. I won't marry anyone other than Taube Kaufman.

RAFAEL

Her again? What's gotten into you? It was six years ago... Her father doesn't answer my letters. She's obviously already married.

YOSSELE

She's not! I know it, I feel it!

RAFAEL

Then they don't live in Brzesko anymore. Moved to the devil knows where. For heaven's sake, Yossele, why her?

YOSSELE

Do you remember what you used to tell me when I got homesick on the road and would cry because I missed mama?

RAFAEL

That I would buy you a candy apple on a stick?

YOSSELE

No. That God blessed me with a gift and if I don't embrace it with joy, He would take it away from me.

RABBI GINSBERG

That's what you told him?

YOSSELE

He blessed me with another gift, father, and I must embrace it with joy.

Yossele gets up on his feet and turns to the door.

RAFAEL

Where are you going?

YOSSELE

To the devil knows where.

RAFAEL

What?

YOSSELE

I will find her. You will see.

RAFAEL

Meshuggeneh!

RABBI GINSBERG

Yossele! (*Yossele turns his head*) Good luck!

SCENE 4

The sound of an upbeat Klezmer tune. Rafael and a WEDDING GUEST hold the poles of the chuppah with no one under it yet.

RAFAEL

He went from one town to another, sent messengers, posted ads in newspapers. *Gornisht mit gornisht*. Taube Kaufman disappeared as if the earth had swallowed her up.

CELEBRANT

So how did he find her?

RAFAEL

He didn't. She found him! She hadn't stopped talking about him for six years, and refused every shidduch offered to her until her desperate father gave up and started searching for me.

CELEBRANT

What can I say, it's a match made in heaven. With God's help, in nine months or so we'll celebrate a *brit milah* here, ha?

RAFAEL

No, no! We're leaving tomorrow morning. Yossele has an audition at the Grand Synagogue of Hamburg!

CELEBRANT

Hamburg? The *yekkes* will take an *ostjuden*? Forget about it! They would appoint a stray cat as a cantor before they take one of us.

Rafael's expression conveys: We'll see about that. An alarmed Rabbi Ginsberg approaches him.

RABBI GINSBERG

Where in the world are the bride and groom?

SCENE 5

Glowing in her white wedding gown, beautiful TAUBE KAUFMAN (18) is seated in front of the bedroom mirror, her lovely brown hair falling on her shoulders. Yossele shows up, looks around, making sure nobody is there to notice him, and only then approaches Taube.

YOSSELE

What is it, love?

TAUBE

My hair... I can't cut it.

YOSSELE

What do you mean? All brides do it. Our mothers... our grandmothers... They all did it.

TAUBE

I know, I know.

YOSSELE

Rabbi Ginsberg won't marry us without a little trim.

TAUBE

It's not 'a little trim'. It's my hair, my hair that I love so much.

YOSSELE

I love it, too.... *(Reaching out his hand, but refrains from caressing it)* But if that's the price we have to pay in order to be bride and groom...

TAUBE

The price that I have to pay.

YOSSELE

Do you realize what that we are about to do? Today, we make a vow before God to be forever loyal to each other.

TAUBE

True.

YOSSELE

We're uniting our souls, Taube. From this day on, we are two with one soul.

TAUBE

Yes, love... Two with one soul

SCENE 6

A slow, haunting Hasidic tune plays. Accompanied by their guests, Taube, a velvet cap covering her short hair, and an elevated Yossele, dance a traditional dance in which the bride holds one end of a handkerchief and the groom, the other. They move gracefully, expressing physical and spiritual harmony.

SCENE 7

Stage right: At their newly rented apartment, Taube runs into an old Heinrich Heine book. She browses it and reads aloud one of the poems in it. Her reading is far from perfect, but it is clear that the words have magical effect on her.

TAUBE

Still ist die Nacht, es ruhen die Gassen, In diesem Hause wohnte mein Schatz;
Sie hat schon längst die Stadt verlassen, Doch steht noch das Haus auf demselben Platz...

HEARTBEAT SOUND. Stage left: Yossele and his father, Rafael, stand before the solemnly seated, black jacket-wearing SYNAGOGUE CHAIRMAN and VICE-CHAIRMAN of the Hamburg Orthodox Congregation. The Chairman reads aloud Yossele's contract.

SYNAGOGUE CHAIRMAN

“Clause 17: The Ubercantor should arrive at the synagogue no less than 20 minutes before the service.

YOSSELE

20 minutes? What for?

Rafael hushes him.

SYNAGOGUE CHAIRMAN

“Clause 18: *The Ubercantor* will adopt our prayer style, and will refrain from improvising and/or adding unnecessary notes to his prayers.”

YOSSELE

But I must improvise!

VICE-CHAIRMAN

At home. Not here.

Yossele is about to answer, but Rafael hushes him.

SYNAGOGUE CHAIRMAN

Finally ... Clause 19: “*The Ubercantor* will not perform in other synagogues, and will not conduct weddings, and/or *britot*, and/or funerals without board approval...”

VICE-CHAIRMAN

In writing.

YOSSELE

Understood.

SYNAGOGUE CHAIRMAN

Excellent. Welcome to Hamburg, *Ubercantor Rosenblatt*.

YOSSELE

Yossele.

SYNAGOGUE CHAIRMAN

I beg your pardon?

YOSSELE

If you don't mind, I would be pleased if you called me Yossele.

VICE-CHAIRMAN

Welcome to Hamburg, *Ubercantor Rosenblatt*.

Rafael approaches the Chairman and Vice-Chairman, shakes their hands and discuss some issues with them. Yossele steps out of the synagogue and walks around.

He spots a local BULLY pushing and shoving an Eastern-European Jewish IMMIGRANT who carries his belongings on his back.

BULLY

Come on, Jud, hurry up. The ship to America leaves soon.

The Immigrant falls down. The Bully laughs and walks away. Yossele helps the Immigrant to get up on his feet and pick up his belongings.

SCENE 8

Late at night, a building entrance in Hamburg. From a distance we hear Enrico Caruso and Geraldine Farrar singing O Quanti Occhi Fisi - the love duet from Puccini's Madame Butterfly. Rafael paces back and forth, nervously twirling his tuning fork between his fingers. Finally, Yossele shows up.

RAFAEL

Where were you?

YOSSELE

Well, first I went to the port.

RAFAEL

What were you doing there?

YOSSELE

I love to sit there every now and then, watch the ships leave the port, exchange a word or two with my brothers and sisters before they sail to America.

RAFAEL

I was told you were seen near the opera house.

YOSSELE

Ah, yes, afterwards I went there.

Rafael searches Yossele's pockets, pulls out a show program and checks it.

RAFAEL

Madam Butterfly?! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?

YOSSELE

I did nothing wrong, father.

RAFAEL

No? Shall I remind you what the Torah says about those who --

YOSSELE

Something so beautiful couldn't possibly be wrong.

RAFAEL

Really? Why don't you go to church as well? I've heard they also play "beautiful" music there.

YOSSELE

The one and only Enrico Caruso came to hear me sing at the synagogue. I couldn't refuse his invitation to hear him at the opera.

RAFAEL

I know only one 'One and Only' and He is not called Caruso.

YOSSELE

Good night. (*Extends his hand to the program*) Can I have it, please?

RAFAEL

No. You will not bring this profanity into our house.

Rafael is about to tear it in two.

YOSSELE

Don't do it, father.

RAFAEL

I must.

YOSSELE

Don't do it!

RAFAEL

I'm your father; I must teach you right from wrong.

YOSSELE

Come on, I'm already a father myself.

RAFAEL

And this is how you want to educate your children? Over my dead body.

He starts tearing the program apart.

YOSSELE

Don't do it!

A defeated Rafael yelps and throws the program. Yossele picks it up as Rafael sinks down on the steps. Yossele pockets the program, hesitates, then sits down next to his agitated father. A heavy silence.

RAFAEL

Was is it sold out?

YOSSELE

You couldn't fit a toothpick in there, and after the finale, the audience rose to their feet, shouting: Bravo! Bravo! Bravo! Bra—

RAFAEL

Enough! You may choose to abandon your calling in this world, but don't drag us all down with you.

YOSSELE

What exactly is my calling, father? To be the *Ubercantor* of these frozen *yekes* who forbid me to improvise, and don't show any emotion when they hear a nice prayer?

RAFAEL

They show their emotions quite nicely at the 10th of every month.

YOSSELE

What's the money worth if the hand that gives it is as cold as ice? Does it make any sense to you that I have to go to the port to hear a kind word from a fellow Jew?

RAFAEL

What is wrong with you? You have everything. A family, a child, a good wife who loves you dearly... All this is not enough for you?

SCENE 9

A MAN plays a hand-cranked music box. Another LOCAL is fishing. Yossele and an elegant, Italian-accented ENRICO CARUSO enjoy the pleasant sunny day, strolling along Hamburg's River Elbe.

CARUSO

Two tablespoons honey? Are you crazy? I put one tablespoon honey, half a lemon, and two eggs.

YOSSELE

No, no. Two tablespoons honey, one lemon, and one egg.

CARUSO

Molto interessante... If it gives me your coloratura, I go for it!

YOSSELE

Thank you, Signore Caruso.

CARUSO

Seriously, I have been to many synagogues...

YOSSELE

Really? I thought only I was honored with a visit.

CARUSO

No! I'm crazy about *musica ebraica*, and learn a lot from your colleagues. I've heard all the great cantors. You are numero uno. (*Yossele beams*) Along with Sirota, probably. (*Yossele beams no more*) You know Gershon Sirota? Bella voca! And the way he improvises!

A YOUNG WOMAN approaches Caruso, holding a phonograph record.

YOUNG WOMAN

Mr. Caruso? Would you please autograph your record?

CARUSO

With pleasure, you beautiful flower of the world!

He pulls up a pen and leans in to whispers something in her ear.

YOUNG WOMAN

Gertrude.

CARUSO

(To Yossele) Bellissima, ha? (Writing) To Gertrude... from your fan, Enrico Caruso. (Hands her the signed record and kisses her hand) Ciao.

Caruso and Yossele walk on.

YOSSELE

I didn't know you recorded music.

CARUSO

Are you living on the moon? I have already recorded 12 arias.

YOSSELE

I don't understand. Why would a serious artist like you waste his time on --

CARUSO

You are talking nonsense, Yossele! You sing once and reach thousands of ears all around the world. *È così magica!*"

YOSSELE

It's a fascinating technology, I know, but records will never capture the magic and excitement of live performance.

CARUSO

Live performances are as fleeting as a butterfly's shadow. Records take us to eternity, Yossele. Not just our voice, but also our soul.

Yossele stops, deep in thought. Caruso walks on as a young thug barges into Yossele, nearly knocking him over.

THUG

Jud...

SCENE 10

Yossele's record Hineni Haani Mimaas spins on a gramophone at the Hamburg synagogue. The Vice-President hands the record sleeve to the Chairman who scans it briefly then confronts Yossele.

SYNAGOGUE CHAIRMAN

How dare you do such a thing behind our backs? Aren't you ashamed? Taking the holy prayers out of the synagogue.

YOSSELE

Where is it written in the Torah that a cantor is forbidden from making records?

SYNAGOGUE CHAIRMAN

It is blasphemy! Do you know that a member of the congregation heard your voice coming out a window of a... disorderly house!

YOSSELE

No.

VICE-CHAIRMAN

And there's the financial aspect, of course. Your voice belongs to us. This drastically reduces its value. Why would anyone come here if they can hear you whenever they like?

YOSSELE

First, my voice belongs to me. Second --

HEAD OF SYNAGOGUE BOARD

Does this also belong to you? (*Reading aloud the text on the record sleeve*) "Yossele Rosenblatt - the most beloved and acclaimed cantor from Lwów to Hamburg."

VICE-CHAIRMAN

(*reciting from memory*)

"When pride comes, then comes dishonor, but with the humble is wisdom...."

SYNAGOGUE CHAIRMAN

What is this melody you chant here? Who composed it?

YOSSELE

I did. Like it?

SYNAGOGUE CHAIRMAN

You're a composer now? Who ever heard of a cantor who composes new melodies?

YOSSELE

Every old prayer was once a new melody.

SYNAGOGUE CHAIRMAN

Enough talking! No more recording! No more records!

The Vice-Chairman angrily yanks the record off the phonograph and snaps it in two.

SCENE 11

Home. Taube carries her baby and rocks him to sleep. Yossele shows her the contract draft he was just given.

YOSSELE

The First Hungarian Congregation *Ohab Zedek* of New York!

TAUBE

New York?!

YOSSELE

Yes! They crossed the ocean just to meet with me and make me this amazing offer. It's nearly seven times what I earn here.

TAUBE

But it's there, on the other side of the Atlantic.

YOSSELE

We have no future here, Taube. I feel suffocated. In America, I'll have new challenges, a new audience... So many Jews there haven't yet had a chance to hear my voice.

TAUBE

Oh, poor souls. They can listen to your records.

YOSSELE

Come on, it's not the same. What should I tell them? They're waiting for my answer.

TAUBE

I don't know, Yossele. It's too sudden for me. We can't leave home at such short notice.

YOSSELE

This place will never be our home. They hate us here, just like they did there.

TAUBE

No.

YOSSELE

Even more. You are home all day with the children and your Goethe books. You have no idea what is happening on the streets here.

TAUBE

It's Heine I'm crazy about, Yossele, not Goethe.

YOSSELE

Fine. Knowing his poems by heart won't make you accepted here. Not a week goes by without someone calling me a filthy Jew. Not a day goes by without seeing thugs harassing our refugee brothers and sisters on their way to the port. This is not our home, Taube. America could be our first true home.

She puts the sleeping baby in a cradle.

TAUBE

They won't let you leave. You signed a five-year contract with them.

YOSSELE

Ohab Zedek are willing to pay any price to release me from my contract.

TAUBE

Americans! They think the whole world can be bought with their dollars.

YOSSELE

Hungarian, Taube, Hungarian Jews..." (*Pauses, thinking*) What if I go by myself for, say, 40 days, spy out the land and see if it's good or bad? If it's bad, I'll be back before you know it. If it's good, you and the children can join me. What do you think?

TAUBE

That's a good idea, Yossele.

YOSSELE

It is, isn't it?!

TAUBE

But why now? We better think it over, plan it properly, and next year...

Yossele sighs, folds the contract with frustration and walks away.

TAUBE

Where are you going?

YOSSELE

The Palace Hotel. I'll tell them that the birds refuse to leave their cage.

Taube stands troubled for a moment, torn. Finally, she runs after her husband.

TAUBE

Yossele! Wait! (*Yossele stops. She catches up with him*) Wherever you go, love, I will go. (*They hug*) Two with one soul!

YOSSELE

Yes!

TAUBE

If America is as noisy and crowded and vulgar and money-obsessed as they say it is, you'll be back before I know it, won't you?

YOSSELE

Of course, love. (*Kisses her*) Of course...

SCENE 12

A ship horn blows at the Port of Hamburg. Yossele arrives there with a suitcase in his hand. GERSHON and MOSHE, two young, penniless Jewish immigrants from Galicia, spot the acclaimed cantor.

GERSHON

I'll be damned, Yossele Rosenblatt is also traveling to America!

MOSHE

We should tell him about the grocery store. If he agrees to come to the opening, it'll be great for business.

GERSHON

Shh, calm down. We haven't even left Hamburg yet, and you're already acting like Henry Ford. Let's get to America first and pass the Ellis Island inspection. After that... the sky is the limit!

Rafael shows up, pulls out his silver tuning fork and hands it to Yossele.

RAFAEL

My tuning fork. With your perfect pitch, you don't need it, but at least you'll have something to remember me by.

YOSSELE

Why do you say that, father? If everything goes as planned, you will join us next year.

Rafael shakes his head in negation.

RAFAEL

America is one big lunatic asylum. A very dangerous place. Take care of yourself, Yossele. Don't let them take your soul.

Yossele pockets the tuning fork and hugs his father warmly. Another ship horn. Yossele picks up his suitcase and heads towards the ship. Rafael looks at him for the last time and walks away.

The platform remains empty until a breathless Michael Samelsky comes running with a suitcase in his hand. Watching the ship leaving the port, he desperately throws it to the ground and curses.

MICH-AEL

Zag'bniak!

Michael Samelsky shows up and watches his younger self.

MICHAEL

I missed the ship. The next one leaves in a week. That's okay, every delay is a blessing in disguise.

MICHA-EL

Maybe the next ship is my lucky one. Maybe, had I boarded this one, they wouldn't have let me in. All is good. I'll brush up my English, get a haircut and better clothes, and look like a groom at his wedding! Worry not, America. You've been waiting for me for so long, what's another week?

ACT 2

SCENE 13

Video: Upbeat ragtime music plays over images of hustling and bustling New York City, 1912; Automobiles, busses, subway train, pushcart vendors, various faces...

Light on an excited OHAB ZEDEK (OZ) PRESIDENT, a cigar in hand, welcoming Yossele to his office.

OZ PRESIDENT

Some of the board members thought it was completely insane to pay you so much.

YOSSELE

They did?

OZ PRESIDENT

But I insisted that by paying you the highest annual salary ever paid by an American congregation, we not only express how highly we rate you as a cantor. We also do something far more important. Do you know what that is, Cantor Rosenblatt?

YOSSELE

Yossele.

OZ PRESIDENT

We raise the prestige of the American pulpit, Yossele, particularly in the eyes of the younger generation.

YOSSELE

Certainly!

OZ PRESIDENT

How's the apartment?

YOSSELE

Tiny, stuffy, unlit... but no complaints.

OZ PRESIDENT

Excellent! Patience, hard work, and sweat... and in a year or two you'll have an apartment twice as big.

YOSSELE

With God's help.

OZ PRESIDENT

Patience, hard work, and sweat. Now... (*Takes a puff*) Regarding your recordings...

YOSSELE

You have a problem with them?

OZ PRESIDENT

Problem? Thanks to them you're here! I heard a record of yours, and before the needle was up, I said, "I want this cantor!" Have you signed with anybody here? (*Yossele nods in negation*) Excellent! My brother-in-law works for the *Victor Talking Machine Company*. (*Handing Yossele a business card*) He's waiting to hear from you. Talk to him. You won't regret it. They're the best in the business!

SCENE 14

Lights up on Michael Samelsky.

MICHAEL

The moment I set foot in New York, I felt more alive than ever before. Others had a hard time getting used to it, though. They felt it was just too much and longed for the Old World they left behind with its "refined culture" and "high morals". Yet even those of us who felt homesick for Europe got over it quite quickly. The Great War that broke out across the pond in 1914 wiped out an entire generation and savagely destroyed the sick and decadent continent we came from. For one lucky bastard, however, the tragic disaster there, created a great opportunity here...

Video: A projection sound over a silent newsreel of horrific WW1 images: Bombardments, shell-shocked soldiers in trenches, gas warfare, wounded and dead soldiers, desperate refugees...

Yossele and Taube are seated in a movie theater, watching the newsreel, dumbfounded as the SPECTATORS around them.

TAUBE

What are they doing? What are they fighting for?

YOSSELE

I have no idea.

TAUBE

That's insane. They are killing each other for no apparent reason.

YOSSELE

What can I say, Europe has lost its mind.

*The newsreel is over. A caption on the screen reads:
INTERMISSION.*

TAUBE

I received a letter from my father this morning. It's a living hell what they go through over there. Living hell, Yossele.

YOSSELE

I know.

TAUBE

We can't sit still anymore. We must do something.

YOSSELE

Tomorrow I'll donate to the *Central Relief Committee*.

TAUBE

That's not enough.

YOSSELE

I'll release a charity record.

TAUBE

How much money will it raise? You have a huge gift. You need to do something huge with it to help those poor souls stuck there.

YOSSELE
Like what?

TAUBE
How about a concert?

YOSSELE
What?

TAUBE
A grand benefit concert at... Carnegie Hall!

YOSSELE
Are you crazy? I'm a cantor, not a concert artist.

TAUBE
This is not the time for nuances. You have a voice. You should let it be heard.

YOSSELE
But --

TAUBE
It will save lives, Yossele.

YOSSELE
Pikuach nefesh...

TAUBE
Exactly!

Video: Charlie Chaplin's The Rounders starts on the screen.

The Spectators laugh out loud at the sight gags.

YOSSELE
When the picture is over, I'll make a list of suitable songs for the concert. Tomorrow morning I'll call --

TAUBE
I don't want to stay, Let's go.

YOSSELE

What? I've been waiting to see this picture all week.

TAUBE

I can't watch Charlie Chaplin now; not after those images. Come, Yossele, let's go home.

They get up and leave the theater.

SCENE 15

*Dressing Room, backstage, Orchestra Hall, Chicago.
Yossele is on stage singing Tikanto Shabbos. Big round of
applause. Michael watches the scene as an outsider.*

MICHAEL

He performed everywhere! Carnegie Hall, Hippodrome, Orpheum Theatre, Philadelphia... And when America entered the war, to make the world safe for democracy, of course, the man went from one army base to another, stood on ammunition crates, and sang *The Star-Spangled Banner* for the troops. In Yiddish. A real American patriot, or, at least, that's what he wanted us to think. Either way, the one performance that changed everything took place at the Auditorium Theatre, Chicago...

CLEOFONTE CAMPANINI, a bald, mustached Italian-American, shows up and approaches Yossele as the cantor enters the dressing room.

CAMPANINI

Cleofonte Campanini - General Director of the Chicago Opera Association. I had the pleasure of hearing you tonight, Mr. Rosenblatt, and I was deeply impressed. I'm convinced you have the makings of a great opera singer and would, therefore, like to offer you the role of Ele'azar in *La Juive*. You must be familiar with this masterpiece, Mr. Rosenblatt...

YOSSELE

You want me to perform in the opera?

CAMPANINI

There is no reason for you to be embarrassed, and certainly none to be frightened. Joining this production won't interfere with your faith or religious principles. This particular role will enable you to remain the devout Jew you have always been and perform as you are, beard and all... And if you feel uncomfortable performing alongside women who are not of your people, it's certainly possible to cast Jewish singers like Rosa Raisa...

YOSSELE

Or Alma Gluck.

CAMPANINI

Absolutely. I'll also have it stipulated in your contract that you are not to perform on Saturdays and Jewish holidays, and reside, at our expense, at kosher hotels only. Anything you want, Mr. Rosenblatt. I'm prepared to draw up an agreement for 17 performances at... one thousand dollars per engagement.

YOSSELE

One thousand dollars???

CAMPANINI

Totaling 17 thousand dollars, not including travel expenses, food and lodging. (*He hands Yossele his business card*) I would appreciate your answer by Monday morning. Casting begins next week. As far as I'm concerned, you are Ele'azar!

SCENE 16

Yossele and Taube in their bedroom on a sleepless night.

TAUBE

What's troubling you, love?

YOSSELE

I don't know what to do.

TAUBE

Listen to your heart.

YOSSELE

I'm trying, but it talks to me in 20 different voices.

TAUBE

I hope that at least one of them tells you what an incredible artistic opportunity it could be for you, not to mention our children's future. They could go to Harvard or Yale.

YOSSELE

What's wrong with Yeshiva University?

TAUBE

What's stopping you, Yossele? Afraid to sing arias?

YOSSELE

No. I've always dreamed of doing it.

TAUBE

Afraid you won't be as good as Caruso?

YOSSELE

Not at all!

TAUBE

So, what's holding you back?

YOSSELE

Don't you see? Singing arias is one thing. Acting in the opera is a different thing altogether.

YOSSELE

It's the acting. Singing arias is one thing. But opera? Opera is... make-believe, it's pretending. What if people think my prayers in the synagogue are also just make-believe?

TAUBE

No one will think that, Yossele.

YOSSELE

I can't risk even one congregant doubting me.

TAUBE

So, it's a no?

YOSSELE

I suppose it is.

TAUBE

If that's your decision, okay.

YOSSELE

Then again, how could I say no to such an extraordinary offer?

TAUBE

So it's a yes...

YOSSELE

No!

TAUBE

That's enough, Yossele. Sleep on it. Decide in the morning.

YOSSELE

One thousand dollars a performance. My father was right—America really is one big lunatic asylum.

SCENE 17

HEARTBEAT SOUND. NYC street corner. Yossele turns to a pay phone, picks up the receiver, and dials zero. Jewish PEDESTRIANS hang out around him, waiting to hear what he's up to.

YOSSELE:

Hello? Operator? Chicago 4-16-22, please... Thank you... *(Beat)* Hello? Mr. Campanini? Yossele Rosenblatt... Yes... Yes... Absolutely, Mr. Campanini. Yes... Yes... Well, I'm afraid my answer is... No.

PEDESTRIANS

Yossele said 'no' to the opera... Yossele said 'no' to the opera...

Michael Samelsky pops up and hushes them.

MICHAEL

"No" - a short, one-syllable word, and what a splash it made. You should have seen the headlines! America buzzed with the news. Folks found it hard to believe that in our materialist age, someone would willingly give up money and fame for faith, tradition and values. How naive of them. They didn't get that Yossele's 'no' was a damn smart career move. Smart? It was pure genius! His concert fees doubled overnight, tickets were snapped up in no time, the dollars poured in, and soon enough, the kid from Galicia finds himself in a three-story castle, Uptown, with a chauffeur, a cook, flashy Chinese rugs, and a white grand piano that cost more than a one bedroom apartment on Delancey Street. White, you get it? Black is just not good enough for him. In short, the man broke his own records, took America by storm, and made it to the top, which is, my friends, the most dangerous place there is; The air is thin, you get dizzy as hell, and the birds of prey circle above your head, waiting for the right moment to swoop down and snatch everything you have.

SCENE 18

Upbeat music. The GMG company headquarters. The energetic CEO, Gershon, and his partner, Moshe, the once penniless Jewish immigrants who spotted Yossele at the Port of Hamburg, now have a business meeting with him.

GERSHON

Our survey shows that 92% of American Jews see Yossele Rosenblatt as a role model.

MOSHE

While 94% say Yossele Rosenblatt is the one Jew they are most proud of.

YOSSELE

What about the rest? Who are they proud of?

GERSHON

The picture is clear. “Yossele Rosenblatt” isn’t just a name anymore. It’s what we, the marketing experts, call a ‘brand’. Our plan will enable you to leverage this amazing brand into a multimillion-dollar business empire.

MOSHE

But it’s not just about your name, Yossele. You’ll be the president of the company.

YOSSELE

I’m not a businessman.

GERSHON

I beg to differ. You’ve got all it takes: Perfect timing, amazing marketing instincts, and most of all, divine luck. For heaven’s sake, you’re Yossele Rosenblatt! When I say no, my wife frowns. When you say no, all of America is talking about it—and boom! Your stock skyrockets.

YOSSELE

What kind of plan are we talking about?

GERSHON

A three-step modular plan that will make you a millionaire in less than 18 months (*Turns to his partner*) Moshe...

Moshe unveils a large diagram labeled "Yossele Rosenblatt Enterprises".

MOSHE

Yossele Rosenblatt Enterprises: a Jewish weekly... a cantor school... a Jewish radio station.,,

YOSSELE

A school for cantors? Now that's interesting

GERSHON

Right? First, we'll launch the weekly though. Our survey indicates that the market desperately wants a true Orthodox, God-fearing Jewish weekly, and they want you, Yossele, to establish it!

YOSSELE

What do I know about the newspaper business?

MOSHE

What did the Warner brothers or Louis B Mayer know about the moving picture business before they went to Hollywood and practically invented it? Nothing! *Gornisht mit gornisht!*

GERSHON

We'll handle the business side. You, as president, will lend your name, credibility, and wisdom... and, naturally, provide the financial backing.

YOSSELE

I see. And how much backing is --

GERSHON

We're not there yet. Still working on the numbers, but whatever it comes to, it's peanuts compared to the upside potential. Think of it, Yossele, you'll spearhead the Jewish rebirth in America!

Moshe pulls out a copy of "The Dearborn Independent".

MOSHE

The one Jew to stand up against Henry Ford's evil, anti-Semitic rag! (*Pointing at the headlines*) "*The Peril of Baseball - Too Much Jew*"... "*Jewish Jazz - Moron Music Becomes Our National Music*"... He should be ashamed!

YOSSELE

It all sounds very intriguing. I'll need to think it over, discuss it with my wife...

GERSHON

Yossele! This is big business.

MOSHE

What do women have to do with business?

GERSHON

Did you consult her when you considered the opera offer?

YOSSELE

Yes, of course.

GERSHON

And what did she say?

YOSSELE

She thought I should take it.

GERSHON

There you go. Case closed. Sleep on it. Consult yourself. Listen to that inner voice of yours. If you ask me, it's just as phenomenal as the one coming from your throat.

SCENE 19

The Light of Israel newspaper office. SHRAGA FEUER, a frantic, ultra orthodox Jew columnist, sits at his typewriter and types furiously.

Gershon and Yossele watch him replacing a finished page with a blank one, and resuming his feverish typing.

GERSHON

Just look at him. The man is phenomenal - typing one column after another for 7 hours straight.

Moshe snatches the sheet of paper off the desk and joins them.

MOSHE

Boy, he spares no one: Orthodox, Reform, the non-observant... *(Reading aloud)* "Wake Up! How can you stand idle while the Torah is trampled, and the Sabbath is desecrated? Where's your pride? Where's your spirit?" He's something else, isn't he?

YOSSELE

He sounds a bit, well, extreme.

GERSHON

Not more than the prophet Jeremiah... But this time they will listen. Mark my words, People will buy *The Light of Israel* just to read him. His columns will be discussed and debated everywhere: synagogues, subway cars, bank lines. Speaking of which... *(Takes Yossele aside)* I've been to the bank today. We'll need another ten.

YOSSELE

Ten thousand dollars? Only a week ago I gave you --

GERSHON

Not enough. As expected, there were unexpected expenses.

YOSSELE

But I don't... I've given you all I have. I depleted my savings, I took bank loans. I can't keep doing this.

GERSHON

You have friends, relatives, admirers. Talk to them. Let them have a piece of the pretzel. Believe me, when we go public and start making waves on Wall Street, they'll never forgive you for leaving them out of the action.

SCENE 20

Backstage. An agitated Taube, paces back and forth, holding a cashier's check. When Yossele finally shows up she approaches him.

TAUBE

Yossele, do you know what this is?

YOSSELE

It looks like a check.

TAUBE

A bounced check. Why are our checks bouncing?

YOSSELE

It's just a temporary shortage. There's nothing to worry about.

TAUBE

Where's our money?

YOSSELE

I... I can't tell you much right now, but everything is under control.

TAUBE

Where is our money?

YOSSELE

Well...

TAUBE

Yossele!!!

YOSSELE

I've started a new Jewish weekly. *The Light of Israel*.

TAUBE

You've started what?

YOSSELE

It'll be the biggest Jewish newspaper ever! I'll spearhead the Jewish rebirth in America!

TAUBE

How could you do this behind my back?

YOSSELE

I wanted to tell you, but --

TAUBE

Who pulled you into this mess?

YOSSELE

Nobody! I went into partnership with highly experienced and reliable businessmen.

TAUBE

Have they put any of their own money into it?

YOSSELE

They work tirelessly around the clock without pay.

TAUBE

You're the only one risking money, aren't you?

YOSSELE

Not at all. We have various strategic investors - Cantor Hershman, Saul Warsawsky of *Warsawsky Pickles*... Even Dr. Katz is in.

TAUBE

Your Urologist?

YOSSELE

He himself.

TAUBE

Don't tell me you borrowed money from them.

YOSSELE

No! They're investors! (*Silent pause*) I did borrow from others.

TAUBE

How much?

YOSSELE

Well, let me see. The widow of Cantor Feinstein, may he rest in peace, gave me four thousand, The widow of Rabbi Gvirtzman --

TAUBE

How much, Yossele? How much?

YOSSELE

It total? Together with the bank loans? About... fifty thousand dollars.

TAUBE

Fifty thousand? You're insane! That's suicide!

YOSSELE

No, it's not. It's big business, which you, with all due respect, know very little about. We're going to be millionaires, Taube.

TAUBE

What if it fails? What then?

YOSSELE

How could it fail? Hasn't everything I've done in my life been a smashing success?

TAUBE

Well...

YOSSELE

This will be my biggest success. More than 90% of the Jews in America are proud of me and see me as a role model. Get it? It's enough that 10% of them will buy our newspaper and our success is guaranteed.

TAUBE

Nothing is guaranteed.

YOSSELE

Our other planned projects are just as promising - school for cantors, Jewish radio station, Kosher restaurant chain. Just let me go with my vision and we'll swim in an ocean of money.

TAUBE

What vision? Risking our future and the future of our children? What's got into you? Please, Yossele. You must sell your interest in this --

YOSSELE

You see? You don't know the first thing about business. I'm the president! I can't sell my shares before we go public.

TAUBE

So don't sell, then. Get out, resign, forget the money you sank into it and move on. You've obviously lost your mind, but you still have your voice. Thanks to it you'll be able to gradually repay --

YOSSELE

That's it. I'm out of here. I won't listen to any more of this nonsense!

TAUBE

It's not nonsense, Yossele. Business is not your calling. You must quit before it's too late.

YOSSELE

No. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity and I won't let it slip away.

SCENE 21

Yossele and Taube meet with Attorney GOLD in his downtown office.

GOLD

The newspaper is fine, I agree; Interesting articles, top-notch interviews, and the weekly crossword puzzle is a gem, but, as your lawyer, Yossele, I'm obliged to tell you the truth; When there aren't enough readers, there aren't enough ads, and when there aren't enough ads, you feed a monster that devours money non-stop. You must shoot this monster in the head and start dealing with the personal liabilities you have incurred before it's too late.

YOSSELE

Shouldn't we give it another chance? We've just hired a brilliant marketing expert who --

GOLD

A bullet in the head! Now! See, your house is mortgaged up to the hilt. You have no other resources that can be turned into cash, and there's a huge, ever-growing pile of debts staring you in the face. You're sitting atop a volcano waiting to erupt at any moment.

TAUBE

If you ask me, it has already erupted. Some of the creditors love Yossele so much that they're willing to forget what he owes them altogether. Others agree to a postponement, but most of them want their money yesterday. They refuse to believe that the great Yossele Rosenblatt is broke. They think we're lying.

YOSSELE

How dare they think that?

GOLD

It's not about what they think, but what we do. I hate to break the news to you, Yossele, but there's nothing left for you to do but file for... voluntary bankruptcy.

YOSSELE

What?! Are you out of your mind? (*Rises and turns to Taube*) Let's go. The meeting is over.

TAUBE

No, it's not.

YOSSELE

Did you hear what he just said?

GOLD

It's the only way that will enable you to gain enough time to get back on your feet and return the money through an orderly and equitable settlement.

YOSSELE

There must be another way.

GOLD

There is no other way! It's either voluntary bankruptcy or complete chaos that will soon turn into a living hell.

YOSSELE

No. I'll never do it. It's just absurd. Yossele Rosenblatt cannot be bankrupt!

SCENE 22 - BANKRUPTCY COURT/SUBWAY STATION.

With Gold and Taube by his side, Yossele appears before a solemn-faced JUDGE.

JUDGE

This court hereby estimates the Debtor's assets at \$32,859 of which \$27,000 consists of real estate - the Debtor's house. The Debtor's liabilities due mostly to promissory notes endorsed on behalf of his business venture, a periodical entitled *The Light of Israel*, total... \$191,719... *(The shocked crowd buzzes)* The Court therefore, accepts the Debtor's petition and recognizes him, Mr. Josef Rosenblatt of 98 West 120th Street, as BANKRUPT.

BANG! The Judge slams his gavel down. Yossele turns to his wife, his face ashen.

YOSSELE

Taube... Will you ever --

TAUBE

I will stand by you and do anything possible to help you pay all your debts... but please don't ask me to forgive you because I never will.

She walks away.

Lost and desperate, Yossele heads to a steamy subway platform where Michael Samelsky pops up and approaches him, waving a Jewish paper.

MICHAEL

Yossele Rosenblatt! What a coincidence. I just read about your rise and fall. What a story! It moved me to tears. But, obviously, no *pisher* born here in Manhattan could ever accurately tell how things really were back in your glory days in the Old Country..

YOSSELE

Do we know each other?

MICHAEL

Michael Semelsky. Formerly Micha-el. Surely you remember me. You were ten years old. My father was 70...

YOSSELE

The cantor's son...

MICHAEL

Yeah. The son of the cantor who was deeply humiliated. Speaking of cantors. They say *Ohab Zedek* dumped you. They say you lost your pulpit.

YOSSELE

No, it's not true! We mutually agreed that as long as --

MICHAEL

Blah, blah, blah. I might be able to help you. I'm a theatrical manager now. Partners with William Morris. The William Morris. We're in the Vaudeville business.

YOSSELE

Vaudeville?

MICHAEL

You go to the pictures, don't you?

YOSSELE

Only if there's a new one by Charlie Chaplin.

MICHAEL

So you must have had the chance to enjoy the fine entertainment of --

YOSSELE

I prefer to wait at the lobby until the picture begins

MICHAEL

Luckily for us, the rest of America knows better. We're doing swell both here and in Philly. We've got the finest showgirls, entertainers, and acrobats in the business.

YOSSELE

Okay. What's all this got to do with me?

MICHAEL

(reading aloud from the newspaper)

"I give them my word. I will repay all my debts."

YOSSELE

Down to the last cent!

MICHAEL

How exactly? Who would hire a bankrupt cantor? Work for me and you'll be able to give a nice sum every week to all those wretched widows and orphans. What do you say? Want to enter vaudeville or is that beneath you, wunderkind?

YOSSELE

Are you out of your mind? You want me to perform alongside showgirls and acrobats?

MICHAEL

We've also got a dancing monkey. Beneath you? You think you're better than him? You're not. You know what's the only difference between you two? Dancing Jimmy doesn't owe a dime to anyone!

SCENE 23

Video: Vaudeville montage: acrobats, clowns, show girls, a monkey tap dancing and playing the violin.

Center stage: Michael is in the spotlight.

MICHAEL

And now, ladies and gentlemen, we have a huge surprise for you; His voice climbs higher than Mount Everest and sinks lower than the Dead Sea. It has pleased innumerable ears in houses of worship and concert halls, and now it will reverberate here at the Fox Theater in Philadelphia, so please give a big round of applause to our newest member in his first ever performance on the vaudeville stage... America's finest singer and the world's greatest cantor - JOSEF ROSENBLATT!

Yossele steps up to the stage and starts singing the Irish ballad *Tis the Last Rose of Summer*.

YOSSELE

'TIS THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER, LEFT BLOOMING ALONE,
ALL HER LOVELY COMPANIONS ARE FADED AND GONE
NO FLOWER OF HER KINDRED, NO ROSEBUD IS NIGH
TO REFLECT BACK HER BLUSHES OR GIVE SIGH FOR SIGH...

SCENE 24

Backstage office, Fox Theater - Philadelphia, two weeks later. Yossele is on stage, receiving a thunderous round of applause. Michael and his vivacious partner, WILLIAM MORRIS, hold a copy of Variety and proudly check an ad in it. When Yossele enters, they show it to him and take turns reading it aloud.

MICHAEL

“Jammed the house from pit to dome every day last week - The gross tells the story...”

WILLIAM

“Smashed every existing box office record at the Fox Theater - Philadelphia... \$24,633”

MICHAEL

“The internationally famous Josef Rosenblatt...”

MICHAEL/WILLIAM

“They heard. They cheered. They acclaimed...”

MICHAEL

Have you ever dreamed of getting a half-page ad in *Variety*?

YOSSELE

I actually haven't, thank you.

WILLIAM

No, pal, thank you. I've been in this business for nearly 30 years and I've never seen anything like it. Block-long double-lines, people waiting all night in the cold.

MICHAEL

I told you. Bankrupt or not, the man is in a league of his own. (*To Yossele*) Just keep the momentum going, Yossele, and all those wretched widows and orphans will smile again sooner than you think.

YOSSELE

I'm doing my best.

WILLIAM

I'm sure you are. Now go get 'em, Josef... And don't worry about this. We'll get it framed for you first thing tomorrow morning.

YOSSELE

That's okay, don't bother. (*Crosses to the door*) See you tomorrow.

MICHAEL

What? You have another show this evening, remember?

YOSSELE

No. I told you last week that tonight I'd do the matinee only.

MICHAEL

What the hell are you talking about? You didn't tell me anything!

YOSSELE

Of course I did. Don't you remember?

WILLIAM

What is it, Josef? What's going on?

YOSSELE

There's this big benefit concert for needy children tonight in the Bronx. I promised to sing in it. I must take the nine o'clock train to New York.

MICHAEL

Forget about it. You climb on stage at exactly quarter to nine.

YOSSELE

I gave them my word. I cannot break my promise. I must go now.

MICHAEL

And what would we tell the audience? That you went to New York for some crappy benefit gig? They bought tickets to hear you live. We have a sacred pact with them, and we won't violate it!

YOSSELE

But I let you know in advance. I must make it to the nine --

MICHAEL

No! This is not your pathetic weekly. This is the finest vaudeville show in America. Show some showmanship and forget about it.

WILLIAM

Wait a second! (*To Yossele*) Why don't you talk to the snake charmer? If he agrees to switch.

MICHAEL

Over my dead body.

WILLIAM

You can open the show, sing a couple of songs, and still make it to the nine o'clock train.

YOSSELE

That's a wonderful idea, Mr. Morris. Thank you.

WILLIAM

Good luck.

William taps on Yossele's shoulder before the latter rushes to the door.

MICHAEL

Zag'bniak! (*Screams*) That's the last time you do it, got it? The last time! (*Mutters to himself*) What a clown.

SCENE 25

Video: A night drive through the streets of mid-1920s Philadelphia.

On center stage, Yossele is seated in the back of a Taxi, driven by a Russian-accented TAXI DRIVER.

TAXI DRIVER

When I bought this cab, the salesman talked me into subscribing to Mr. Ford's magazine. At first, I thought I got suckered into buying something I didn't need. Boy, was I wrong. It's so very interesting. Especially the articles by Mr. Ford himself. If you ask me, he is the smartest man in America.

YOSSELE

Well...

TAXI DRIVER

And the bravest too. Says what everybody's thinking but too scared to say. Like how the Great War was the work of three German Jewish bankers, or how Jewish jazz musicians are only out to corrupt our youth.

YOSSELE

Can you please concentrate on your driving? I'm in a terrible hurry. I must catch the nine o'clock train to New York.

TAXI DRIVER

(checks his clock)

What's the rush, Rabbi? You still got seven minutes. Plenty of time.

The Taxi Driver turns the steering wheel left.

YOSSELE

What are you doing? Why did you turn here? You should have kept straight ahead!

TAXI DRIVER

Straight ahead.

YOSSELE

Yes! You took an unnecessary detour.

TAXI DRIVER

Oh, yeah? Who's the driver here, you or me? Who spent months memorizing every goddamn street in Philadelphia, you or me?

YOSSELE

Pull over! I want to get off.

TAXI DRIVER

No, you can't change the destination during the ride. Sit back and let me do my job.

SCENE 26

Philadelphia train station office. The SUPERINTENDENT pushes papers at his desk. An engineer named JEFF stands with his back to us, filling in the arrival hour of his train. Yossele bursts in, breathless.

SUPERINTENDENT

Cantor Rosenblatt!

YOSSELE

Good evening, sir.

SUPERINTENDENT

Are you all right? Would you like some water?

YOSSELE

I just missed the nine o'clock train to New York. It left the moment I reached the platform.

SUPERINTENDENT

We've got another one at 11:05.

YOSSELE

That's too late. I'm performing at a benefit concert in the Bronx. It's for needy children. I must leave immediately.

SUPERINTENDENT

I'm sorry, Cantor. As I said, the next train to New York leaves at --

YOSSELE

I gave them my word. I can't miss this concert.

SUPERINTENDENT

Call them or send a cable. I'm sure they'll understand.

YOSSELE

No, they're expecting me. I can't let them down... *(making up his mind)* I'll hire a train.

Jeff, the train engineer, turns his head, intrigued.

SUPERINTENDENT

I beg your pardon?

YOSSELE

I want to hire a train. It's possible, isn't it?

SUPERINTENDENT

Only if you're willing to pay for the entire 124 individual fares totaling... four hundred thirty four dollars. From what I've heard about your financial situation, I don't suppose you --

Yossele pulls out a wad of bills from one pocket, adds more from another, and lays the money on the table.

YOSSELE

Four hundred and twenty dollars.

The superintendent hesitates, then accepts the small discount and takes the money.

YOSSELE

How long to prepare *The Rosenblatt Express*?

SUPERINTENDENT

The Cantor Rosenblatt Special will be ready in thirty minutes!

YOSSELE

Excellent. E6 Atlantic, right? My favorite locomotive.

JEFF

(turns to Yossele and shakes his hand)

Mine too, Mr. Rosenblatt.

SUPERINTENDENT

Jeff will be your engineer. He will be accompanied by our most vigorous fireman.

JEFF

We'll do our best to get you to New York as soon as possible.

YOSSELE

We need to make it in... *(Checks his watch)* Ninety minutes, not a minute longer.

JEFF

I'm afraid that's impossible, sir. The Philadelphia-New York speed record is --

YOSSELE

90 minutes, Jeff. You can make it.

SCENE 27

Video: Fast-paced music plays over a passenger's POV during a high-speed train ride from Philadelphia to New York.

Lights up on Yossele, seated alone in his empty train. On the opposite side of the stage we see the silhouette of the FIREMAN, vigorously shoveling coal into the firebox.

SCENE 28

Penn Station, NYC. Yossele steps off his train only to find the exhilarated STATION MANAGER and a PHOTOGRAPHER waiting for him.

STATION MANAGER

(shakes Yossele's hand)

On behalf of Penn Station management, staff, and the people of New York, I'm delighted and proud to announce—

YOSSELE

Thank you so much, but I'm sorry. I have to go.

He runs away. The Station Manager tries to chase him, but Yossele is already gone. The Manager turns to Jeff.

STATION MANAGER

...That your train, *The Cantor Rosenblatt Special*, has just set a new Philadelphia-New York speed record, of exactly... 90 minutes!

Cheers and applause. The Station Manager shakes hands with Jeff. The camera flashes.

SCENE 29

Lights up on Michael Samelsky.

MICHAEL

The vaudeville business was such a goldmine that, for the first time, I felt America had really let me in. The motion-picture business was booming and we were there at the finest movie theaters in seven cities across the country. Some folks, however, could hardly keep their heads above water, and were desperate for a change. (Pulls out a telegram and reads it aloud) “To: Josef Rosenblatt. From: Sam Warner - Warner Brothers Lab - Brooklyn, New York. Re: Urgent meeting..”

Lights up on the Warner Brothers Brooklyn Lab. SAM WARNER (40), dressed in a striped suit and tie, sleeps on a folding bed next to a movie projector. A SECRETARY ushers Yossele in.

SECRETARY

Mr. Warner will wake up in a minute or two. He takes fifteen-minute naps every three hours. (*Yossele seems puzzled*) It allows him to work around the clock. Literally.

YOSSELE

And I thought I worked hard. Do you know why he asked to see me?

SECRETARY

Mr. Warner will explain everything. Please, sit here and try to keep quiet.

Yossele sits down on a creaking chair. The Secretary leaves. He looks around. Sam wakes up abruptly, fixes his tie and sips some lukewarm coffee.

SAM

Thank you for coming, Rosenblatt. I've heard about your troubles, and you've probably heard about ours. It's been a terrible year—absolutely terrible. We've lost a lot of dough, and the big studios are doing everything to kill us. It's Jew eat Jew in this business, but Warner Brothers don't give up so easily. We still have this one last card up our sleeve. We're putting all our eggs in one basket with this.

YOSSELE

Whatever it is, I would strongly advise you not to.

SAM

It's not just another motion picture. It's a Vitaphone Picture! We're making the first synchronized-sound film. It'll revolutionize cinema and jolt the industry. My brothers are somewhat skeptical, but I convinced them to go for it. We're bringing sound to the silver screen, Rosenblatt! Actors will talk, sing, pray if needed.

He turns the projection on.

Video: Vitaphone demo reel - a young STARLET talks in near perfect sync.

STARLET

One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi... Four Mississippi...

YOSSELE

Wow!

STARLET

Five Mississippi. Six Mississippi. Seven Mississippi...

YOSSELE

Amazing! Simply amazing!

SAM

You ain't heard nothing yet.

He pulls out a screenplay and hands it to Yossele.

SAM

The Jazz Singer. The first talking picture. Fantastic drama. It has everything: A conflict between a cantor father and his son who dreams of becoming a Broadway star. Tradition vs. modern life, The eternal light in the synagogue vs. the limelights. My brothers are afraid it's too Jewish. Let's prove them wrong.

Yossele is bewildered. Sam points at the second name on the character list.

YOSSELE

You want me to play Cantor Rabinowitz?

SAM

It's gotta be you! Anyone else would be a painful compromise.

YOSSELE

I'm not an actor, Mr. Warner.

SAM

Call me Sam.

YOSSELE

You've likely heard my opinion on why cantors shouldn't act.

SAM

It's gotta be you. Anyone else would be... Listen, I've got this horrible headache so please, let's just cut the fluff and get to the bottom line. We're making history here and we want you in. We're willing to pay you \$100,000 for this part.

YOSSELE

What?!

SAM

20% of the film's budget. We want you that much.

YOSSELE

That's very generous of you, but --

SAM

It's 1927, man. 'No' is passé. The in-word these days is 'YES'.

YOSSELE

No! I won't put make up on my face and portray another cantor. It's pretending. Make-believe.

SAM

\$120,000.

YOSSELE

Please don't waste your time on me, Sam. You've got an important mission to accomplish. This wonderful invention will bring joy to millions of people around the globe. You should be proud and --

SAM

Wait a second here! Who said you had to act and pretend you're someone else?

YOSSELE

You?

SAM

Forget it! You will appear as yourself—Cantor Rosenblatt!

YOSSELE

I beg your pardon?

SAM

Years after his cantor father threw him out of the house, Jack walks down the street and sees a placard: A sacred-music concert by Cantor Rosenblatt. He steps into the concert hall and... something happens to him. Your voice touches him deeply and stirs his heart. It brings back suppressed memories. You get it? Thanks to your performance, Jack returns to his father's house on Yom Kippur Eve only to find that his old man is on his deathbed, and only he can chant the *Kol Nidre* prayer in his place.

YOSSELE

It sounds great. Who would play Cantor Rabinowitz?

SAM

Don't you worry about it! Actors are a dime a dozen, but there's only one Cantor Rosenblatt.

SCENE 30

Video: Hollywood at the golden age of the silent movies; chase-scene shooting, excerpts from Chaplin's The Gold Rush, the famous sign, then reading Hollywoodland, "The Jazz Singer" shooting.

On stage right, Yossele is having tea with CHARLIE CHAPLIN in the comic genius's backyard.

CHAPLIN

(impeccable British accent)

Thank you for accepting my invitation, Mr. Rosenblatt.

YOSSELE

It's a great honor, Mr. Chaplin.

CHAPLIN

What brings you to Hollywood, if I may ask?

YOSSELE

Well, I participate in a new Warner Brothers motion picture. It's a secret project. I can't say much about it, but --

Chaplin jumps off his seat.

CHAPLIN

Thank you for coming. My chauffeur will take you back to your hotel.

YOSSELE

What happened, Mr. Chaplin? I've just arrived.

CHAPLIN

I never thought that you, of all people, would collaborate with the enemy.

YOSSELE

The enemy?

Chaplin takes a deep breath and returns to his seat.

CHAPLIN

I'm sorry if I hurt you, Mr. Rosenblatt. I just find it hard to keep my temper in check when I'm reminded of Sam Warner's ludicrous efforts to add chitchat to films.

YOSSELE

Why? Don't you think it would make cinema much more --

CHAPLIN

It will ruin the great beauty of silence.

Awkward silence.

YOSSELE

I'm quite certain that you will change your mind once you watch the --

CHAPLIN

Please, I'd rather not hear another word about Sam Warner and his nefarious plot. It sickens me. I don't know how he has the nerve to destroy our sublime art form. "Talking Picture", ah, imagine telling the great Renaissance masters: 'Not good enough. We want your paintings to also talk'.

YOSSELE

A talking painting could be a nice innov -- (*Chaplin's gaze silences him*) You know, Mr. Chaplin, I've always wanted to meet you. Especially after I watched *The Gold Rush*. This picture moved me so deeply.

CHAPLIN

How kind of you to say so.

YOSSELE

How in the world did you shoot that scene with the cabin teetering on the edge of the cliff? It felt so real!

CHAPLIN

I'm afraid that's a secret. A dreadfully boring one. More tea? (Yossele nods. Chaplin pours him some) I wonder, Cantor, if you would care to listen to a rather obscure vocal artist I'm quite fond of, and let me know your professional opinion of him.

YOSSELE

Of course. Who is he?

Chaplin wheels in a gramophone cabinet and puts the needle on the record. Yossele closes his eyes and listens intently, but soon laughs out loud, realizing that it's Rachemnu, one of his earlier recordings.

Chaplin opens the cabinet door and shows the surprised cantor his record collection.

CHAPLIN

I have all your records. I cherish them among my most treasured possessions. Whenever I feel blue, I take them out and listen to them. Your voice does something to me. Something that words will never be able to express.

SCENE 31

Hollywood bus station. A BEGGAR is slumped on the floor. A suitcase by his side, Yossele parts with Sam Warner.

SAM

We've made it, brother!

YOSSELE
(*unenthusiastically*)

Yes.

SAM
What's bothering you, Rosenblatt?

YOSSELE
I... I met Charlie Chaplin yesterday afternoon. I've always dreamed of meeting him, but...

SAM
My head's killing me. What is it, man?

YOSSELE
He thinks talking pictures are a terrible mistake. As far as he's concerned, we're ruining the beauty of silence.

SAM
Bullshit! Once *The Jazz Singer* is out he'll eat his hat—and his cane. Have a safe ride. See you at the world premiere in New York.

YOSSELE
Do we have a set date yet?

SAM
Early October, but nothing's set yet.

YOSSELE
How about the 10th of *Tishrei*?

SAM
Huh?

YOSSELE
October 6. The night after Yom Kippur.

SAM
Perfect timing. I love it. Consider it done.

YOSSELE
Excellent. Ah... There's something I must say, Sam.

SAM
Shoot.

YOSSELE

You can't go on like this. You must slow down, sleep normally, eat properly.

SAM

I will, my friend, I will. After the premiere...

They hug. Yossele grabs his suitcase and runs to the bus.

Sam checks his watch. Realizing it's just about time, he turns to the Beggar on the floor and gives him a 5 dollar bill.

SAM

Do me a favor. If I'm not up in 15 minutes, hit me on the head.

Sam lays down on the nearby bench and falls asleep. The Beggar studies the bill carefully and walks away.

SCENE 32

Stage left: WORSHIPERS gather outside a small NYC synagogue on the eve of Yom Kippur. Yossele stands stage right, all by himself.

WORSHIPER #1

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.

WORSHIPER #2

May you be sealed for a good year.

WORSHIPER #3

How's RCA doing today?

WORSHIPER #2

Up 2.2%.

WORSHIPER #3

Yes! Up more than 9% this week alone.

WORSHIPER #1

Shhh... No business talk on Yom Kippur Eve.

WORSHIPER #1

Right, may it just keep climbing.

WORSHIPER #2

With the help of Hashem.

WORSHIPER #3

(pointing at Yossele)

Have you seen him? Our cantor for this evening.

WORSHIPER #2

Yossele Rosenblatt...

WORSHIPER #1

What is he doing here? Isn't he in *Ohab Zedek*?

WORSHIPER #3

Nah. OZ are done with him. He's embarrassed them enough already.

A distressed Taube shows up and turns to Yossele.

YOSSELE

Taube! What are you doing here? I didn't think you were coming.

TAUBE

I've got bad news, Yossele.

YOSSELE

What happened?

TAUBE

Sam Warner.

YOSSELE

What about him?

TAUBE

He passed away.

YOSSELE

(holds his head in disbelief)

What??? No... It cannot be.

TAUBE

He was in the hospital with sinusitis, caught pneumonia, and then... a cerebral hemorrhage..

YOSSELE

What a loss. He worked like a dog on this picture for 18 months, and the day before the premiere, he..

TAUBE

Just like Moses: "This is the land... I will give it to your descendants..."

YOSSELE

"I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over there."

Taube turns around and walks away.

SCENE 33 - SYNAGOGUE / BANKRUPTCY COURT

Yossele stands at the pulpit and chants Kol Nidre, moving the Worshipers in the synagogue to tears. His voice overlaps with:

Video: The Jazz Singer - Jack (Al Jolson) takes the place of his dying father, chanting Kol Nidre.

YOSSELE / AL JOLSON

KOL NIDREI: VE'ESAREI, USH'VUEI, VACHARAMEI, VEKONAMEI, VEKINUSEI, VECHINUYEI. D'INDARNA, UD'ISHTABANA, UD'ACHARIMNA, UD'ASSARNA AL NAFSHATANA MIYOM KIPPURIM ZEH, AD YOM KIPPURIM HABA ALEINU LETOVAH...

Bankruptcy court - A beaming Yossele stands before the Judge with Attorney Gold and Taube by his side.

JUDGE

The petitioner has proven payments to his creditors and met all liabilities, due mostly to promissory notes endorsed on behalf of *The Light of Israel*. The court, therefore, grants the petitioner, Mr. Josef Rosenblatt of 98 West 120th St., a full discharge from bankruptcy and orders the case closed.

The Judge slams his gavel down. Gold shakes hands with Yossele and Taube. The Judge turns to the COURT CLERK.

JUDGE

What's with GE?

COURT CLERK

Up 1.8%.

JUDGE

IBM?

COURT CLERK

Up 3.6%.

JUDGE

Yes! Yes! Yes!

Yossele turns to Taube.

YOSSELE

We did it!

TAUBE

Yes.

YOSSELE

Everything is behind us now... (*Waves the court decision*) Look, written in black and white: Doesn't owe a cent to anyone...

TAUBE

No.

YOSSELE

He put me to the test, and I passed with flying colors!

TAUBE

Well...

YOSSELE

What?

TAUBE

You made the biggest blunder of your life, worked like crazy, and managed to repay all your debts.

YOSSELE

Down to the last cent.

TAUBE

I don't know anything more than that, and neither do you.

YOSSELE

You still don't get what it was all about? The newspaper, vaudeville, the train... All that happened to Sam.

TAUBE

"All that happened to Sam..." Do you really believe that Sam Warner died so you would --

YOSSELE

I didn't say that!

TAUBE

But that's what you meant, isn't it?

YOSSELE

Why do you have to complicate something so simple? He put me to the test, I passed it, learned my lesson, and from this day on, everything is going to be just like it used to be... Only seven times better!

Charleston music starts. An ecstatic Yossele grabs Taube's hand and dances with her before she lets go of his hand, enabling the entire cast to follow them in a euphoric, mini dance number.

ACT 3

SCENE 34 - HOME/ NYC STREET

Home. Yossele and Taube sit in shock, frozen as the radio blares bad news.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

The scene on the trading floor was chaotic. Sell orders flooded in from across the country. All shares on the ticker presented fearful slumps. By the end of this catastrophic day, the stock market had crumbled, leaving investors and stockbrokers stunned and devastated...

TAUBE

(turns off the radio)

You're shaking, Yossele.

YOSSELE

No.

TAUBE

Tell me you didn't put our money in the stock market.

YOSSELE

I didn't.

TAUBE

Then why are you shaking?

YOSSELE

I almost did.

TAUBE

Oh.

YOSSELE

Everyone was making a fortune in stocks, and I wanted in. But I held back. Our money is safe

TAUBE

Good, but what if --

YOSSELE

First Union Trust is one of the oldest banks in New York. Our money is secure.

Lights up on a group of stunned CUSTOMERS gathered outside a closed bank branch. A sign on the door reads: Out of Business.

CUSTOMER #1

How did they let it fail like this? It's a bank, not a grocery store!

CUSTOMER #2

It was a bank. Just like dozens of other banks that went kaput.

YOSSELE

No! This is America, not the jungle! They wouldn't let honest, hardworking people lose everything. It's only a matter of days before they give us our money back, down to the last cent.

CUSTOMER #3

Open your eyes, morons! It's the end of days out there. No one will give us back anything. Nobody cares.

YOSSELE

(to Taube)

It's not true. They'll give us our money back. You'll see.

TAUBE

Right.

YOSSELE

Anyway, we won't sit still and wait for it to happen. We'll do something.

TAUBE

What can we do?

YOSSELE

We'll find a way to come out of this disaster. We're in America. In America there's always a way, there's always hope!

Video: The early 1930s. Gloomy scenes from Depression-era New York unfold as Yossele's voice echoes, chanting the Al Chet prayer ("For the sin which we have committed before You"): unemployed workers, soup lines, homeless people, hobos, and hungry children on the streets...

SCENE 35

Yossele sits with a worn-out OZ President in the latter's drab office.

OZ PRESIDENT

It wasn't easy. All board members were firmly against it, but I told them about your situation and convinced them it was a mitzvah. Welcome back to OZ, Cantor.

YOSSELE

Thank you. Thank you so much. When do I start?

OZ PRESIDENT

Once you sign this.

He hands Yossele a contract. Yossele checks it briefly and pales.

YOSSELE

What? It's a misprint, isn't it?

OZ PRESIDENT

No, it's not. When we have money, we'll be glad to pay you. Even retroactively.

YOSSELE

But it's... virtually nothing.

OZ PRESIDENT

The party's over, Yossele. The old-timers are either too sick or too broke or too dead to pay for their membership.

YOSSELE

And the younger generation?

OZ PRESIDENT

Ah, half gentiles. They come once a year, or never at all. What can I say, we barely survive.

YOSSELE

I understand, but, it's... I have a family to support. I can't accept such --

OZ PRESIDENT

I don't blame you. It's all our fault. The hype, the insane salaries, the imagined prosperity. It was nothing but one big bubble.

YOSSELE

Pardon?

OZ PRESIDENT

The cantors' bubble. You should be glad that it exploded. It wasn't humble. It wasn't real. It was all make-believe.

SCENE 36

Yossele meets with Michael Samelsky in his tiny and stuffy office.

MICHAEL

Vaude-What?

YOSSELE

Vaudeville. I want to go back to vaudeville.

MICHAEL

What the hell are you talking about? Vaudeville is gone. Dead. Finished.

YOSSELE

I heard there were still some --

MICHAEL

In southern Kentucky maybe. Everywhere else it's gone. Dead. Finished. The damn talkies killed us. You killed us.

YOSSELE

Me?

MICHAEL

What was wrong with the silent flicks? What was... Forget about it. I'm not going to sit here and go on about the good old days. I don't have time for that. I've got four mouths to feed. Five, actually. I took the monkey with me. I didn't have the heart to leave him behind.

YOSSELE

Dancing Jimmy lives with you now?

MICHAEL

What dancing? He barely moves. The doctors say it's depression.

YOSSELE

How do you make a living these days?

MICHAEL

Believe me, you don't want to know.

YOSSELE

I see. Well, thank you for your time, anyway.

Yossele turns and heads for the door.

MICHAEL

Yossele... (*Yossele stops, glancing back*) If I hear of something, I'll let you know.

SCENE 37

Yossele and Taube are seated quietly in their dingy rented apartment. EDDIE, a desperate, down-on-his luck Jewish man, knocks hard on their front door.

EDDIE

Open up, Yossele. I know you're there! You said you'd pay me back on Monday. It's Thursday for God's sake! I need the money. My wife's diabetes has gotten out of control. I have to buy her medicine. Open up, please!

Yossele lowers his eyes, unable to meet Taube's gaze.

Later. Yossele is on the phone with attorney Gold.

YOSSELE

Her diabetes has gotten out of control.

GOLD

I'm sorry. I can't lend you any more money.

YOSSELE

Only ten dollars.

GOLD

Not even ten cents, Yossele. The well's dry. Period. End of story.

SCENE 38

The tiny rented room of Shraga - the zealous Orthodox columnist whose typewriter gathers dust under his bed. He hands Yossele an envelope.

YOSSELE

I'll pay you back next week.

SHRAGA

With God's help.

YOSSELE

Tuesday. Wednesday at the latest. (*Pockets the envelope.*)

SHRAGA

I have to pay the rent on Thursday.

YOSSELE

That's okay. You'll get the money before that.

SHRAGA

You're one day late, and he throws your belongings out the window. Scum of the earth. Tried to poison me once.

YOSSELE

What?

SHRAGA

The landlord. He put furniture polish in my coffee.

YOSSELE

Why would he do that?

SHRAGA

Meshuggenehs... Who knows what's going on in their heads?

SCENE 39

Back from Shraga's place, Yossele walks down the street. To his dismay, he runs into KUPERMAN, one of his less-patient creditors.

KUPERMAN

What about my money, Rosenblatt?

YOSSELE

I'll pay you back next week.

KUPERMAN

You kiddin' me?

YOSSELE

I'm sorry. I don't have it now. I give you my word. Next week.

KUPERMAN

Your word? I've been hearing this "next week" crap for two months now.

YOSSELE

I'm sorry. Give me a week. You'll get all your money back.

Kuperman grabs Yossele by the collar and brutally shakes him. Yossele's kippah falls off. When he kneels down to pick it up, Kuperman kicks him to the ground and kneels down to talk to him eye to eye.

KUPERMAN

I'm sick and tired of your excuses and lies. I want my money. If I don't get it by tomorrow morning, you're gone. Understood?

He stands up and walks away. Arnie BLOOME, a young and energetic bohemian guy, spots the trembling cantor as he gets back on his feet.

BLOOME

Cantor Rosenblatt! I'm so excited! I've been looking for you everywhere for months. Nobody knows where you are. Allow me to introduce myself. Arnold Bloome, filmmaker. You can call me Arnie.

YOSSELE

I'm sorry. I have to go.

BLOOME

But we need to talk. I've got something extremely important to -- Cantor Rosenblatt!

Yossele is gone.

SCENE 40

Yossele arrives at Eddie's place.

YOSSELE

I have your money.

EDDIE

Oh.

Yossele pulls out the envelope he got from Shraga and hands it to Eddie.

YOSSELE

How is your wife?

EDDIE

Not good. They had to amputate her left foot.

YOSSELE

What?

EDDIE

The doctor said there was no other option. Gangrene. Dead flesh.

YOSSELE

Oh my God! I'm so sorry.

EDDIE

Not your fault. I borrowed the money from my brother-in-law and bought her the medicine. It didn't help at all. They had to amputate anyway. Dead meat. Get it? My beautiful wife has no left foot!

YOSSELE

That's awful. What hospital is she in? I want to visit her.

EDDIE

You better not. She's furious. I keep telling her that it's not your fault, but she wouldn't listen.

SCENE 41

A dark New York alley. Yossele, lost and weary, is surrounded by the haunting shadows and voices of his acquaintances.

GOLD

Not even ten cents, Yossele. The well's dry. Period. End of story.

MICHAEL

Vaudeville is gone. Dead. Finished.

SHRAGA

You're one day late and he throws your belongings out the window.

KUPERMAN

I'm sick and tired of your excuses and lies!

EDDIE

The doctor said there was no other option. Gangrene. Dead flesh.

Yossele drops to his knees, crying out in anguish.

YOSSELE

Why? Why have you forsaken me?

*He begins chanting in despair, reciting from Psalm 22:
My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*

YOSSELE

ELI ELI LAMA AZAVTANI?

ELI ELI LAMA AZAVTANI?

SCENE 42

Night. Yossele silently watches as Taube gently drapes a blanket over a sleeping Shraga, slumped in an armchair, clutching his dusty typewriter in his arms.

TAUBE

How could you take his rent money, Yossele?

YOSSELE

I thought I would be able to pay him back within a week. I was wrong.

TAUBE

And now what? He'll stay here until Roosevelt gets America out of this mess?

YOSSELE

It'll only take a few days. We'll find a solution for him.

TAUBE

I can't believe you took his rent money.

YOSSELE

I do worse things every day. I lie, I cheat, I go through hell to provide for our children and keep our heads above water, and you have the nerve to criticize me?

TAUBE

I'm not criticizing you. I just thought you shouldn't have --

YOSSELE

I can't take it anymore.

TAUBE

Yossele...

YOSSELE

I just can't take it anymore.

TAUBE

It's going to be alright, you'll see. I mean, things are so bad now that... they just have to get better.

YOSSELE

For others, maybe. Not for me.

TAUBE

Don't say that. That doesn't sound like you.

YOSSELE

Don't you see? He loved me dearly, but now... now it's just the opposite.

TAUBE

Don't say that.

YOSSELE

He hates me. He hates me with a passion, and all He wants is for me to suffer every day and every hour!

TAUBE

Do you hear yourself?

YOSSELE

I was smug, complacent, talked too much, and now He—

TAUBE

You still talk too much. You keep score with Him, you think you know what He wants and what He thinks, and worst of all, you're convinced that He's some sort of a kindergarten teacher who's solely preoccupied with little Yossele and his mischiefs.

YOSSELE

So what are you saying, Taube? That my father, may he rest in peace, lied to me when he taught me that even a bird in the wild isn't hunted unless it's our Heavenly Father's will.

TAUBE

I don't know anything about birds, Yossele, but I do know this: if there's a way out of this pit, you'll find it within yourself, not anywhere else.

SCENE 43

A weary Yossele walks down the street, carrying a bag of potatoes. Bloome, the young filmmaker, follows him.

BLOOME

So it suddenly struck me. I need to make films with substance, films that matter.

YOSSELE

What are you talking about? What do you want from me?

BLOOME

I'm talking about my movie. *Our* movie. Tell me it's not a killer premise: a musical travelogue across the Old Country, starring the King of Cantors!

YOSSELE

Huh?

BLOOME

Yossele Rosenblatt returns to all the synagogues of his childhood—chants, prays...

YOSSELE

You want to make a picture with me in Galicia?

BLOOME

We'll shoot the closing scene in Hamburg. If that mustached creep Hitler comes into power next month, our project will be the definitive answer!

YOSSELE

Ah, nonsense. The Germans aren't stupid enough to appoint that mad dog as their leader.

An irregular HEARTBEAT SOUND is heard as Yossele spots Kuperman, his ruthless creditor, suddenly appearing around the corner.

KUPERMAN

There you are.

Yossele hurriedly turns to Bloome.

YOSSELE

I've got to go...

BLOOME

Wait! *(Tries to stop him)* Where are you going?

Yossele runs away then freezes. The SOUND of screeching tires, BAM! Windshield SMASHING... BLACK.

SCENE 44

Yossele is lying in a hospital bed. Taube stands by his side, adjusting his pillow.

TAUBE

You were lucky. Your X-ray results are good. They do want you to see a cardiologist, though.

YOSSELE

What for?

TAUBE

They detected something.

YOSSELE

What?

TAUBE

Possible arrhythmia.

YOSSELE

What's that?

TAUBE

Irregular heartbeat.

YOSSELE

My heart can't keep a rhythm? No way.

TAUBE

It's probably stress-related. We'll see what the cardiologist has to say. I bet it's: "rest, rest, and more rest."

Enter Bloome.

BLOOME

The papers are ready, Mrs. Rosenblatt. You just need to sign them.

Taube exits with him. Left alone, Yossele places his hand on his chest, feeling his heartbeat.

Suddenly, Michael Samelsky enters with a pot of steaming soup.

MICHAEL

Hello, Yossele. How are you?

YOSSELE

Michael! What are you doing here?

MICHAEL

(placing the pot on a chair)

My wife's chicken soup.

YOSSELE

Thank you. It smells delicious.

MICHAEL

I just heard what happened. Tsch, taxi drivers. Murderers, that's what they are!

YOSSELE

It wasn't his fault. I ran across the road without --

MICHAEL

Thank God you're here to hear the good news. I got you a gig, Yossele. A nice hotel in Miami. They'll pay us 60 bucks a night. 50 for me, 10 for you. Just kidding—50 for you, 10 for me. Not too bad, huh?

YOSSELE

Thank you. I truly appreciate it, but --

MICHAEL

“But”? Did I just hear the word “but”?

YOSSELE

There's this young fellow, Arnie Bloome. He's a filmmaker. He was with me when it happened. Hasn't left me since. He's helping my wife with all the red tape now.

MICHAEL

That's very nice of him. How is it related to --

YOSSELE

He had this crazy idea that I should make a musical travelogue of Jewish Eastern Europe.

MICHAEL

Hmm, interesting idea.

YOSSELE

I thought so too, but when I woke up this morning, the first thing I told him was: Forget it. We're not going there. We'll make this picture in... the Land of Israel.

MICHAEL

Come again.

YOSSELE

My prayers don't make it past the ceiling. Maybe there, in His land, they will be heard.

MICHAEL

In the Land of Israel.

YOSSELE

I'm finished here, Michael. I've got nowhere to run anymore, nowhere to hide.

MICHAEL

Yossele Rosenblatt traveling across the Holy Land, chanting at the Wailing Wall, the Jordan River... What other sites are there?

YOSSELE

The Sea of Galilee, Rachel's Tomb, the Dead Sea.

MICHAEL

Listen, it could be a huge hit! When do you go?

YOSSELE

Once we raise the money. We need to buy a movie camera.

Michael takes off his gold pocket watch and hands it to Yossele.

MICHAEL

Here's your camera, Yossele.

YOSSELE

No.

MICHAEL

To the Promised Land!

SCENE 45

The Dead Sea. Bloome, Michael, and their CAMERAMAN gather behind the camera. A CLAPPER LOADER and Taube are also present on the set. All eyes are on Yossele, standing before the camera, waiting for his cue. Taube steps forward and quickly adjusts his collar.

MICHAEL

Shh... Quiet on set! We're rolling!

BLOOME

Song of Ascents, take 3...

CAMERAMAN

Rolling..

CLAPPER LOADER

Take 3... (*snaps the clapperboard.*)

BLOOME

Action!

Yossele starts chanting.

YOSSELE

SHIR HAMA'ALOT, B'SHUV ADONAI ET SHIVAT TZIYON...

A YIDDISH MAN suddenly jumps into the frame and turns to Yossele.

YIDDISH MAN

Yossele! Yossele Rosenblatt!

CAMERAMAN

Cut! Cut!

The Man holds Yossele's hand and hugs him.

BLOOME

What are you doing? Don't you see that we're shooting a movie here?

YIDDISH MAN

Thank you, Yossele. Thank you for everything you have given us. (*To Michael*) He was a child cantor in Galicia.

Michael gently pushes him out of the frame.

BLOOME

We can't go on like this. These old-timers from Galicia keep jumping into the frame.

MICHAEL

Let them jump. Do you have any idea what it means for them to suddenly see Yossele Rosenblatt here? It's their childhood, their father's home, their mother's cooking.

BLOOME

So they better stuff a *kugel* down their throats and leave us alone. We've got a movie to finish. Come on, it's the very last shot. Let's nail it. *Song of Ascents...* Take 4

CAMERAMAN

Rolling..

CLAPPER LOADER

Take 4... (*snaps the clapperboard.*)

BLOOME

Action!

Yossele sings with all his heart...

YOSSELE

SHIR HAMA'ALOT, B'SHUV ADONAI ET SHIVAT TZIYON
HAYINU K'CHOL'MIM.

AZ Y'MALE S'CHOK PEENU ULSHONEINU RINA.

AZ YOM'RU VAGOYIM HIGDIL ADONAI LA'ASOT IM ELEH;

HIGDIL ADONAI LA'ASOT IMANU HAYINU S'MEICHEIM...

His singing is cut off abruptly as Yossele loses consciousness and collapses to the ground.

BLOOME/MICHAEL

Yossele!

The shocked crew members rush to him while Taube is too stunned to move.

SCENE 46

Almost midnight. A candle-lit hotel room in eastern Jerusalem. The voice of a MUEZZIN calling the Muslim faithful to prayer reverberates in the night air. Yossele's motionless body lies in bed, fully covered with a blanket. A petrified Taube holds his cold hand.

TAUBE

Hold on, Yossele. Please.

A ghostly man in black suddenly comes from among the shadows. It's Yossele. In a way.

THE VOICE OF YOUNG YOSSELE
 NA NA NA NAAAH... NA NA NA NAAAH... NA NA NAAH...

*Yossele pulls out his father's silver tuning fork and puts it
 in the palm of her hand.*

YOSSELE
 I'm so sorry, Taube. Please forgive me.

TAUBE
 I already have, long ago. Will you ever forgive me?

YOSSELE
 We are two with one soul, Taube...

TAUBE
 Yes, two with one soul...

Yossele disappears in between the shadows.

SCENE 47

*The cast members stand in a half circle around Michael
 and Taube.*

MICHAEL
 Yossele was buried in the Mount of Olives in the biggest funeral Jerusalem has ever seen since King David checked out and moved on. We held the official memorial ceremony a week later in Carnegie Hall. With 2,804 seats, you couldn't find an empty one, not to mention the thousands who gathered outside. Up to the very last moment we didn't know how to open. A speaker? A cantor? A choir? Nothing felt right to us. Finally, we decided to open the ceremony with... Yossele Rosenblatt.

*A gramophone is wheeled in. Michael puts the needle
 down. All lights fade to black except for the spotlight on
 the gramophone horn as Yossele's divine voice emanates
 from it, chanting Hineni Haani Mimaas in his first ever
 recording, reverberating in the hall and into eternity.*

BLACKOUT.