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Maqom: A School for Adult Talmud Study Presents

A Talmud Tale

(A Musical)

Book by David Schechter and Ned Paul Ginsburg

Lyrics by David Schechter

Music and Additional Lyrics by Ned Paul Ginsburg

Literary Dramaturgy by Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D.

A Project of Maqom, Inc.

LONG FORM SCRIPT

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A Talmud Tale is a project of Maqom, supported by grants from The Covenant Foundation, The Houston Jewish Community Foundation of the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston and many other generous donors and foundations whose names can be found at Maqom's website: www.maqom.com and <http://www.maqom.com/musical.html>. Please contact Maqom (maqom@compassnet.com.) (713) 723-2918) for more information about the musical or any of Maqom's numerous on-going projects.

Producer's Preface by Judith Z. Abrams

"Shivkuha! Sheli, v'shelachem—shela hu!"

Said Rabbi Akiba to his followers: Leave Rakhel alone, for my Torah learning and your Torah learning are due to her.

(B. Ketubot 63a)

Who can learn Torah with joy? Anyone can! Especially when they have the support of their spouse. The quote, above, is said by Rabbi Akiba to his wife, Rakhel, telling all the world that it was she alone who saw that he could become a great sage and sent him off so that he could learn Torah.

This musical is meant to be a continuation of Rakhel and Rabbi Akiba's commitment to a joyful and engaging way of learning Talmud so that everyone feels comfortable. After all, Rabbi Akiba did not know the aleph-bet when he began his studies. So truly, anyone, no matter what their background, can learn Talmud with joy.

A musical seemed to be just the right vehicle for teaching these texts: requiring practice and repetition to achieve memorization and then bringing words on a page to life. Those engaged in Torah and Talmud study are privileged enough to do this every time they open a holy book. Rabbinic literature, of which Talmud is the major work, is full of enough magic, love stories, perilous journeys, wars, tears, miracles, sacrifices and triumphs to keep any theater in scripts for decades. So this is just a beginning in what I hope will be a mission of musicals based on Jewish texts. (As Rabbi Tarfon says: You are not called upon to complete the work but you are not free to abandon the work. (M. Pirkei Avot 2:21.)

This musical touches on modern themes (e.g., parent-child conflict, ridiculously overdone celebrations when children reach maturity, rigid standards of "success" that reveal parents who see their children as extensions of themselves rather than as independent

individuals^{*}). Then it shows how these issues existed thousands of years ago and how our ancient texts can help us navigate our own life's trials. In this musical, we meet them: our eternal support group. These ancient friends show us how to live honestly and faithfully, love romantically and passionately and listen to that still small voice inside us rather than to the loud chorus of voices that tells each of us, 'You can't!' Instead, our ancient friends sing out, "Anyone Can!"

This musical was designed to be an entertaining and educational way to introduce learners to the Talmud. From the start, I envisioned it being used by synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, Hillels, Jewish camps, youth groups, Jewish day schools and community performing groups. The script and score are accompanied with educational materials about the characters and stories referred to in the musical. These passages of rabbinic literature can be found at Maqom's web page <http://www.maqom.com/previous.html>. These passages, accompanied with explanations and discussion questions, can be used as a curriculum and then the show could be performed as a summary project of the course. These educational materials could also be used by performers who want to know more of the background of their character's life.

Two versions of the show (long and short) have been developed. Both versions need only keyboard accompaniment although woodwind parts and guitar chords are included as well and greatly enrich the music. The show can be staged with very few performers or as many as you'd like. Adaptations to accommodate performers whose voices have not yet changed are also available in the score. (See the Composer's Preface for more detailed information.)

* These problems are rife in our community and deserve examination within the context of Torah study. When a parent can write the following words, you can see we are in trouble. One father writes, "My children notched terrific [SAT] scores, but I would love them even if they hadn't. The question is: would I love them as much? The answer, sadly, is no. Though it pains me to admit it as a parent, having children who got high SAT scores makes ordinary social interaction easier. You don't have to rationalize, tergiversate, dissemble or sneak out of the room when the subject is broached. (Joe Queenan p. 242, Town & Country Magazine, November 2004.)

The musical's book is by David Schechter and Ned Paul Ginsburg, lyrics by David Schechter, with music and additional lyrics by Ned Paul Ginsburg. I know you will enjoy their brilliant work. I want to thank them and all the performers and audience members who helped us shape the show into the script you presently hold. I want to thank my own family for their support and patience and to express my thanks to God for all that has been given to me.

This project is supported by grants from The Covenant Foundation, The Houston Jewish Community Foundation of the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston and many other generous donors and foundations who are listed at this website:

<http://www.maqom.com/musical.html>. Without their support, this project could not have been achieved. I am grateful for their generosity, not only of money but of faith, as well, in as far-reaching (and, as it must have seemed, far-fetched) a project as this one. Jeff Dine and others worked long hours to bring this show to you. I am deeply grateful for their generosity and devotion. For more information about this project, contact Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D., Founder and Director of Maqom at maqom@compassnet.com or (713) 723-2918.

BH

AUTHOR'S PREFACE by David Schechter

A musical is like a page of Talmud. It can be interpreted many different ways. One can pick out a variety of themes to emphasize. What is told can be taken as literal or metaphorical or both. Characters may be perceived as symbols or as actual living, breathing beings.

Like a page of Talmud, our musical, A TALMUD TALE, exists in several different historical periods simultaneously. First there is the modern layer, peopled by the bat mitzvah girl, Rachel, her rabbi, her family and friends. Their cultural perspective would be closest to ours, as present day students of Jewish tradition. Rachel's opening song, "So Many Questions," strives to give comic voice to the ambivalent struggle between the sacred and the secular in our modern Jewish world.

The next layer is ushered in by Rashi and Shlomo, both visitors from the Middle Ages. They serve as guides and bridges between the modern and the ancient worlds, much as the commentaries of Rashi (which hail from the twelfth century) do on an actual page of Talmud. This historic figure and his companions woo Rachel into the past with a song comparing "An Open Book" to a door into other realms of learning.

Finally, the show leads us back to the First Century, C.E., the period of Jewish study and religious debate that existed right after the destruction of the Second Temple, a time of profound Jewish scholarship that gave rise to the Talmud in the first place. There we meet the fabled Rabbi Akiba, a shepherd until the age of forty, his beloved Rakhel, the legendary Rabbi Eliezer and many others.

The historical multi layeredness of A TALMUD TALE is intended to reflect the patchwork quilt of perspectives one finds in the Talmud itself, where opinions of rabbis from different centuries sit side by side on any given page.

Just as the stories and directives on a page of Talmud may be followed to the literal letter or interpreted metaphorically, so the production style of A TALMUD TALE may be historically specific and literal or as expressionistically abstract as the director and designers choose. Akiba's flock of sheep, for example, may be represented as anything

from a group of small kids (merrily bleating) to projected film or slides of an actual flock, to the pantomimed apparitions of a skilled actor playing Akiba, accompanied by recorded or live sounds. I personally tend to be of the "less is more" school of theatrical design. Since the show shifts frequently from present to past and from place to place, I am inclined to suggest that a few simple props or pieces of furniture aided, if possible, by an inventive lighting design, can accomplish a lot with a little. But if the resources and desire are there, one could create a more elaborately designed representation of Akiba and Rakhel's ancient world and of Rachel's abundantly materialistic present day reality.

THE TALMUD TALE can even work quite effectively as a sort of staged cantata, with all of the performers onstage and visible at all times, seated until they are called upon to enact a scene. This approach emphasizes the ritual nature of the event, connecting it in yet another way to the religious traditions it speaks about.

The show is written to be performed either by a cast of actors whose ages are appropriate to those of the characters or by a cast of imaginative younger performers in an educational environment. It is our hope that whoever performs it will feel their humanness enriched and their Jewishness deepened by putting on the robes, figuratively and literally, of this passionate and colorful array of characters, soaking up their history from the inside out, meeting them, as they themselves sing, "Halfway" between the present and the past.

I would be remiss to end this author's preface without offering my heartfelt thanks to my co-librettist, the composer of THE TALMUD TALE, Ned Paul Ginsburg, whose discipline and creative gifts are of the highest order. And to Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams for inviting me to dive into the deep world of Talmud in the first place, where she enthusiastically and tirelessly guided me and Ned toward the wealth of theatrical characters who live there. It was Rabbi Abrams who first had the wild and wise notion that we might find a way to express the voices of this soulful and ancient Jewish crew in song.

(David Schechter may be contacted via email: DLS54321@aol.com)

Composer's Preface by Ned Paul Ginsburg

The score of "A Talmud Tale" is an amalgam of styles representing multiple influences in my life: American musical theater, jazz, Ashkenazi (Yiddish) folk music, and Sephardic music heard while I was a teenager living in Israel. Some musical choices came completely intuitively, others were made with a conscious effort to be inclusive of the wide sphere of music that the Jewish people have taken part in over the centuries.

This piano/vocal score is provided with a woodwind line and chords for guitarists. Some words of explanation may be helpful here:

Vocal lines/tempi:

The vocal lines have been notated in different clefs, depending on the range of the singer and the number of singers in a given song. This is SATB writing, for the most part. Occasionally I have provided lower, "optional" notes in melodies which are rangey. Transpositions of solos and duets are certainly possible. I have chosen to use tempo descriptions instead of specific metronome markings, trusting that musical directors will find tempi that work for the ensembles they are leading. Swing rhythms, such as in "The Perfect Mother," have been notated in simple eighth notes, with the understanding that the first eighth note gets two-thirds of the beat and the second eighth one-third. Dynamics are indicated, where necessary, above the staff.

The piano part:

The piano music is intended to be playable on its own, meaning, without woodwinds or guitar. There is a fair amount of melody doubling, and also, doubling of the woodwind lines. However, it was not possible to double every woodwind line in the piano part. Obviously if a woodwind artist is available (see below) the music becomes richer and more satisfying. I have chosen to leave out pedal markings since in my experience pianists tend to have an innate sense of where and when to use the sustain pedal.

The woodwind part:

In staged readings that were part of our developmental process, a woodwind doubler was employed who played flute, clarinet and alto sax. There is roughly an equal amount of flute and clarinet music. If local communities cannot find a suitable doubler it is certainly possible to use separate flute and clarinet players. I would not recommend having a flutist play clarinet music or a clarinetist play flute music. The alto sax is used in only two or three of the loudest songs, and it is possible (though not preferable) to replace the sax part with clarinet.

The guitar chords:

The guitar chords provided are intended for solo guitarists who are providing accompaniment for piano-less productions. There is a frequent use of extensions: 9ths, 11ths, 13ths, and suspended chords. A chord with a slash followed by a letter of the alphabet means “play that chord over a particular bass note.” To the extent that any guitarist can capture these harmonic features and subtleties, he/she should do so. Some harmonies may be simplified; a capo may be helpful on some songs.

Underscores:

There are a number of underscores in addition to the sung songs of the score. These are provided in some cases with repeats or safety vamps to cover unknown amounts of transition time between scenes.

Your feedback:

If you have performed any part of the score, and certainly if you are mounting or have already mounted a full production, I welcome your feedback. I can be reached through my e-mail address: ned@nyct.net

Ned Paul Ginsburg, composer

New York City, 2004

Cast of Characters
(in order of appearance)

From the present:

RACHEL COHEN, 13 years old
RABBI LIPPMAN, her rabbi
ELAINE COHEN, Rachel's mother
STUART COHEN, Rachel's younger brother
SARAH, Rachel's school friend

From the past:

RASHI, a medieval Jewish scholar
SHLOMO, his scribe
AKIBA, a shepherd, 40 years old
RAKHEL, a wellborn Jewish woman in her early 20's
A ROMAN SOLDIER
BEN KALBA SAVUA, Rakhel's father
RABBI ELIEZER, famous head of a study house (Beit Midrash)
MEIR, a Jewish student
MARTA, a wealthy Jewish woman
BEN DAVID, Ben Kalba Savua's "lieutenant"
ANCIENT ENSEMBLE (playing assorted roles)

TIME:

Now and approximately 60-130 C.E.

PLACE:

13-year-old Rachel's modern world and ancient Jerusalem

List of Musical Numbers (long form script):

ACT ONE:

1. "Overture"Orchestra
2. "So Many Questions"Rachel, Mother, Friend,
Brother
3. "An Open Book"Rashi, Shlomo
4. "Welcome To The Talmud"Ancient Ensemble
5. "I Am Not Myself Today"Rakhel
6. "Up To You"Akiba, Ensemble
7. "Who Are You?"Rakhel, Akiba
8. "Not Another Man"Rakhel
9. "A Crown Of Straw"Akiba, Rakhel
10. "Both Sides Of An Issue"Rabbi Eliezer, Akiba
11. "Am I Right?"Mother, Ben Kalba
Savua, Rachel, Rashi, Shlomo
12. "What Does It Mean?"Rabbi Eliezer, Akiba,
Rachel, Rashi
13. "So Many Questions (Reprise)"Rachel
14. "Welcome To The Talmud (Reprise)" Ancient Ensemble

ACT TWO:

15. "Entr'acte"Orchestra
16. "The Perfect Mother"Rachel, Mother,
Brother, Friend
17. "An Open Book (Reprise)"Rashi
18. "Anyone Can"Akiba, Meir
19. "Not Another Man (Reprise)"Rakhel
20. "Old As Time"Rashi, Ancient
Ensemble
21. "Both Sides Of An Issue (Reprise)"Rabbi Eliezer,
Akiba
22. "Up To You (Reprise)"Rabbi Akiba

23. "A Simple Shawl" Rabbi Akiba, Meir,
Others
24. "Anyone Can (Reprise)" Rabbi Akiba,
Ensemble
25. "Halfway" Ben Kalba Savua,
Rakhel, Rachel, Mother
26. "Welcome To The Talmud (Finale)" Rachel, Ensemble
27. "Curtain Call /Anyone Can (Reprise)" The Company

ACT ONE

(Spotlight on RACHEL, a 13-year-old girl. SHE is agitatedly fiddling with the buttons on a small tape recorder, trying to locate a particular spot on the tape.)

RACHEL

Okay. Let's try this again.

(SHE hits the play button and we hear the RABBI begin to chant the Torah portion "Vayeitsei (Genesis 28:10-16)." RACHEL haltingly sings along, going over a section again and again. SHE finally stops the tape and screams in frustration.)

Aargh!

(Lights up on RABBI, a middle-aged man or woman. HE/SHE is warm and genuine, but also overloaded with details and somewhat distracted.)

RABBI

Go easy!

RACHEL

I'll never get it.

RABBI

Of course you will.

RACHEL

I won't.

RABBI

There's still plenty of time.

RACHEL

49 days?!

RABBI
(figuring, checking)

Hmm. November 10th?

RACHEL

Yes, November 10th. That's exactly 49 days from today!

RABBI

And God made the world in seven!

RACHEL

Well, let Him try a bat mitzvah! (catching herself) ... Sorry.

RABBI

Look, everyone goes through this. Why don't we take a break?

(The RABBI gestures towards RACHEL. SHE hands over the tape recorder.)

Now, how's your speech coming along?

(RACHEL looks up in distress, then shows the RABBI an empty pad of paper.)

RACHEL

Nada! Blank! Nowhere!

RABBI

Rachel! You're making it harder than it is. Just ask yourself : "What does this Torah portion mean to me?"

RACHEL

But Rabbi, I don't even know where to start!

RABBI

With the text! Right there in plain English.

RACHEL

It's Hebrew.

RABBI

Oh!

(hands her a book of translations, opening it to the right spot)

Here. Translation.

RACHEL

(despairing)

It's like trying to explain poetry!

RABBI

Exactly! Just read between the lines. I'll be back.

(Exits. RACHEL heaves a sigh and begins to read aloud.)

RACHEL

"With a stone for a pillow, Jacob lay on the ground. And he had a dream. (MUSIC under.)

He dreamed of a ladder reaching all the way up to heaven, with a stream of angels climbing up one side and down the other. And a heavenly voice promised to stand by Jacob always. When he awoke he sat up and said: 'Surely God was in this place and I, I did not know!'

(SHE slowly rereads the last statement.)

'Surely God was in this place....and I....I did not know.' 'I did not know' 'I did not know'...."

I don't know either!! People have been studying these words for centuries and I'm supposed to come up with something new?

RABBI

(poking head in)

Rachel, don't sweat it so much! Relax. Let your mind go! Let yourself dream...just like Jacob!

RACHEL

OK, fine. I'll let myself dream. Here I am ... I'm dreaming....I'm dreaming....

(RABBI disappears again. RACHEL sings.)

[Song: " SO MANY QUESTIONS"]

I'M DREAMING OF THE DAY WHEN IT'S OVER
I'M DREAMING OF A WAY TO SURVIVE
I'M DREAMING, LIKE JACOB, A LADDER WILL APPEAR
TO GET ME OUT OF HERE ALIVE

I'M DREAMING OF A MONTH IN ARUBA
BUT I'M SENTENCED TO A YEAR IN JAIL
THE RABBI SAYS TO READ BETWEEN THE LINES I SEE
BUT IT MIGHT AS WELL BE IN BRAILLE

AND THERE ARE SO MANY QUESTIONS
I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO BEGIN
WHO'S THERE ABOUT
WHO CAN HELP ME OUT
OF THIS BIBLICAL MAZE I'M IN?

SO MANY QUESTIONS
AND ALL I CAN DO IS CRY
MAYBE I'LL GET LUCKY
AND DIE

(MOTHER appears, in "to do" mode)

MOTHER

Rachel, are you sure you don't like that Laura Ashley dress? You don't really want to wear pants, do you?

RACHEL

I like pants. There are dress pants.

MOTHER

You're a Bat, Sweetheart, not a Bar.

RACHEL

Well, Duh!

MOTHER

You know how darling you look in pink!

(Coaxingly)

And you would match the invitations!

(SHE reaches into a box and enticingly pulls out a pile of elaborate pink invites.)

RACHEL

I don't want to match the invitations.

MOTHER

Color coordination can be very impactful!

RACHEL

Mom, why are you stressing so much about what I'm gonna wear?

MOTHER

I just want everything to be perfect. This whole thing means a lot to me. And time is running!

RACHEL

Tell me about it!

MOTHER

We have a lot of choices to make...

(takes out a list, ticking off items)
 We still have to choose the band, the centerpiece, the yarmulkes...

RACHEL
 THERE'S SO MANY THINGS TO BE "CHOSEN"
 IS THAT HOW THE JEWS GOT THAT NAME?
 WILL FRIENDS SAY: "HOW CLEVER,
 HOW CHARMING AND HOW CHIC!"
 OR WILL THEY WISH THEY NEVER CAME?!

MOTHER
 I'VE NARROWED IT TO SUSHI OR PRIMERIB
 BUT I'M STUCK ON CHOCOLATE MOUSSE OR FLAN
 THE CATERER IS COMING AT ELEVEN TEN
 AND THE FLORIST IS DUE AT ONE

AND THERE ARE SO MANY QUESTIONS

RACHEL
 (overlapping)
 SUCH POINTLESS QUESTIONS

MOTHER
 SO MANY THINGS TO DECIDE!

RACHEL
 I NEED A TACK
 TO GET OFF TRACK
 OF THIS ROLLER COASTER RIDE!

(Her younger brother STUART and her school friend SARAH appear)

STUART
 Yo, Sis! You pick the theme?

RACHEL
 The theme?

STUART and SARAH
 For the party!

SARAH
 How about MTV?

STUART

Or "Survivor!?"

SARAH
Or...."Barbie's Dream Bat Mitzvah!"

RACHEL
Why does a bat mitzvah need a theme?

STUART and SARAH
SO MANY QUESTIONS!

MOTHER
FROM MENUS TO...

(RACHEL joins in mockingly)

"...WHAT TO WEAR."

MOTHER
PLEASE, AT LEAST, PRETEND
THAT YOU CARE!

RACHEL
I CARE....

MOTHER
(to herself)
YOU'D NEVER KNOW IT
FROM THE WAY YOU BEHAVE

RACHEL
I DO....

MOTHER
(to herself)
CARE TO SHOW IT?
I'M YOUR MOM, NOT YOUR SLAVE

RACHEL
I'M TRYING MY BEST LIKE YOU!

MOTHER
(overlapping, to herself)
"TRYING'S" A GOOD WORD FOR YOU!

I WISH... RACHEL

Where's your list of invites? MOTHER

YOU KNEW... RACHEL

We don't want anyone to miss your special day! MOTHER

THAT I'VE GOT QUESTIONS TOO! RACHEL

MOTHER
You know, when I was your age, most girls didn't even *have* bat mitzvahs. I certainly didn't. My father didn't think it was important. Oh, *bar* mitzvahs, sure! *Both* my brothers had them. But, not me. Why should his daughter be honored?! So, don't go taking all this for granted!

(The following all overlap.)

I know this awesome DJ! Want me to call him? STUART

I heard this girl actually had 'N Sync at her party! SARAH

Now, when the florist comes, he's going to want a decision. Roses or freesia? MOTHER

Do you think maybe Jacob didn't know it was a dream at all? RACHEL

Are you even listening to me?! MOTHER

SO MANY QUESTIONS! RACHEL

SO MANY QUESTIONS
ALL except RACHEL
(singing in counterpoint)

RACHEL
 WITH NO ONE TO SHOW ME THE WAY
 I'M ON MY KNEES
 WON'T SOMEBODY, PLEASE,
 CLUE ME IN ON WHAT I SHOULD SAY?

ALL except RACHEL
 SO MANY QUESTIONS!

STUART and SARAH
 THE MUSIC

MOTHER
 THE FOOD

MOTHER, STUART and SARAH
 THE HALL

RACHEL
 BUT IF THOSE ARE ALL THE QUESTIONS
 THEN IT LEAVES ME WITH ONE QUESTION:
 SHOULD I EVEN GET BAT MITZVAH'D...

(RABBI reappears, carrying a big box of books)

RABBI
 Rachel, have you made any headway?

RACHEL
 AT ALL?!

(RACHEL scribbles a big sad face on her pad, holds it up and lets
 out a despairing scream.)

AHHHHH!!!!

[End of song.]

(MOTHER, STUART and SARAH vanish.
 RABBI starts unpacking the box of books.)

RABBI
 Rachel, calm down.

RACHEL
 (almost in tears)

I feel like Kate Winslet on the Titanic and all the life boats have left!

RABBI

Here. This may save you. We just got this spanking new set for our library...

(HE hands her one of the books he is unpacking)

...and you will be the first beneficiary!

RACHEL

(reading the title)

“THE TALMUD, WITH COMMENTARY BY RAY-SHEE”?

RABBI

(correcting her pronunciation)

“Rashi.” It’s kind of a nickname. For a great rabbi. From the eleventh century! He wrote to help people like you and me.

(RACHEL looks at the book suspiciously.)

I’ll check back.

(HE takes off again.)

RACHEL

(calling after him)

And what’s “The Talmud?”

(feels the weight)

Another book! Why even open it?

(SHE opens the book reluctantly. A magical musical chord strikes.)

RASHI

(offstage, a cappella)

SO MANY QUESTIONS!

(RASHI, an energetic man, enters busily, trailed by SHLOMO, his assistant, who is fastidiously scribbling on a note pad. The following dialogue is delivered in rapid-fire pace:)

RACHEL

Wha—?

RASHI

--Oh, a shayna maidle!

(to SHLOMO)

Don't write that. But so long in the face! Okay, down to business!

(RASHI and SHLOMO approach RACHEL.)

Who--?

RASHI

--Questions later! First, the preliminaries!

SHLOMO

(reading from a checklist as HE writes RASHI's answers)

Hair?

RASHI

Brown.*

SHLOMO

Eyes?

RASHI

Blue.

RACHEL

Blue-gray!

SHLOMO

Height?

RASHI

Same as my own daughter on her thirteenth birthday.

RACHEL

Don't ask my weight.

SHLOMO

Demeanor?

RASHI

(gleefully)

Ooh! The demeanor question!

(stares RACHEL down, then drums a bit.)

Despondent, Category Four!

* These can be changed to suit the actress.

RACHEL
 Now wait--

SHLOMO
 --We're almost done.

RASHI
 Yes my dear, in a minute you'll come to understand the meaning of life!

SHLOMO
 He exaggerates.

RASHI
 Oh, phooey!

SHLOMO
 Page you're reading?

RACHEL
 Page?

RASHI
 The book, the page you're on...?

RACHEL
 Oh, I've barely opened it.

SHLOMO
 The first page.
 (Done with his checklist.)

RASHI
 A beginner!

RACHEL
 I'm not a beginner! I've been at this sort of thing for months!

RASHI
 Oh, but my dear, there are few books as unique, not to mention, as revealing, as thought-provoking as, "The Talmud, with Commentary by Rashi!"

RACHEL
 You must be Rashi.

RASHI
 She's smart.

SHLOMO
Intuitive.

RASHI
Shlomo, my scribe.

SHLOMO
I put down what I hear. No more, no less.

RACHEL
So, like, can I ask questions now?

RASHI
Fire away.

RACHEL
Okay, may I show you the door?

RASHI
Oh no, no, no. We're here to help you. You said you needed help.

RACHEL
Yes but--

RASHI
--Five minutes ago you were practically in tears.

RACHEL
(finally losing her defenses)
Yes, but, how do you know that?

[Song: "AN OPEN BOOK"]

RASHI
LET'S JUST SAY I'M GOOD AT READING THINGS
THERE ISN'T VERY MUCH THAT ESCAPES MY EYE
FROM A MILE AWAY, YOU WERE CLEARLY NEEDING THINGS
AND I CAN GIVE YOU WHAT YOU NEED, IF YOU'LL LET ME TRY

RACHEL
Try if you want. But it's hopeless.

RASHI
EVEN THE HOPELESS CAN KEEP HOPIN'

AS LONG AS THEY STAY OPEN

(HE opens the Talmud in RACHEL's hands to an inside page.)

Don't judge it by its cover.

AN OPEN BOOK
IS LIKE A DOOR
TO TAKE YOU PLACES THAT YOU'VE NEVER BEEN BEFORE
IT'S LIKE A RECIPE FOR EV'RY DISH YOU'D LOVE TO COOK
THAT'S WHAT IT IS--
AN OPEN BOOK

YOU MAY FEEL STUCK
OR OUT OF PLACE
FEEL THAT A FROWN'S THE SOLE EXPRESSION ON YOUR FACE
STILL THERE'S A REMEDY TO ABSOLUTELY CHANGE THAT LOOK
AND HERE IT IS:
AN OPEN BOOK

(referring to the Talmud in RACHEL's hands:)

TALES OF ADVENTURE SO INVOLVING
YOU'LL LEAVE YOUR WORRIES FAR BEHIND
SECRETS TOLD, MYST'RIES FOR SOLVING,
KICK YOUR FEET UP, UNWIND!

AN OPEN MIND
AN OPEN HEART
THERE CAN'T BE ANY BETTER WAY FOR YOU TO START
AND WE ARE HERE TO PERSEVERE UNTIL YOU
FINISH OFF THE TASK YOU UNDERTOOK
BY HOOK OR CROOK
THERE'S HELP IN THE LAND
AND IT'S IN YOUR HAND:
AN OPEN BOOK!

(MUSIC continues under.)

RACHEL

That's very sweet, Mr. Rashi, but, how can I "finish" what I can't seem to begin?

RASHI

Oh, but you have begun.

RACHEL

(showing her pad)

It's blank.

RASHI

You have pen, paper, and you have thoughts.

RACHEL

Yes, I'm thinking about crawling into a hole!

(RASHI looks at SHLOMO for a brief moment. The ruse is "on".)

RASHI

She's slipping into Category Five!

SHLOMO

A tragedy!

(HE pretends to pack up.)

RACHEL

Wait! What's Category Five?

RASHI

(rapid-fire now, as earlier)

Pessimists!

SHLOMO

Victims of Self-Pity,

RASHI

Miscellaneous--

RASHI & SHLOMO

--Lost Causes.

RASHI

We haven't had a Lost Cause since?

SHLOMO

1608.

RASHI

Yes, she was a stubborn one. Lost her mind.

SHLOMO

(making a "guillotine" motion)

Lost her head.

RASHI

The loss was staggering.

SHLOMO

It left us--

RASHI

--not to mention her--

RASHI & SHLOMO

--speechless!

(MUSIC out.)

RACHEL

I-I-I can change.

(Pause.)

RASHI

Oh?

SHLOMO

Oh?

(MUSIC.)

RASHI

OHHH...OPEN YOUR EYES TO WHAT'S INSIDE YOU
YOU'LL BE SURPRISED BY ALL YOU SEE
THOUGH YOU LONG FOR SOMEONE TO HIDE YOU
YOU GOT SOMEONE LIKE ME!

YOUR TIME IS NOW
NO TURNING BACK
AND ALL THE SIGNS WOULD INDICATE YOU'VE GOT THE KNACK
BUT IF YOU LOSE YOUR WAY, I'M HERE TO STAY
AND PESTER YOU UNTIL YOU'RE OFF THE HOOK
CALL ME A SHNOOK!
THERE'S MAGIC AROUND
ALL BECAUSE YOU'VE FOUND
AN OPEN BOOK

SHLOMO

AN OPEN BOOK

RASHI

AN OPEN BOOK
SHLOMO

AN OPEN BOOK
RASHI

AN OPEN BOOK
SHLOMO

AN OPEN BOOK
RASHI

AN OPEN BOOK
SHLOMO

AN OPEN BOOK!
BOTH

[End of song.]

RASHI
Well? Still want to show us the door?

RACHEL
You can stay.

RASHI
Good.

RACHEL
But not too long, I have a--

RACHEL, RASHI & SHLOMO
--speech to write.

RASHI
Yes, the proverbial speech! Lucky you, not so long ago, girls never even gave speeches!

SHLOMO
(initiating a competition)
Or had bat mitzvahs.

RASHI
Or voted for president.

Or wore jeans!
SHLOMO

Or--
RASHI

RACHEL
--Stop! I get the point. You're trying to make me feel guilty.

RASHI
Yes, so that you might lighten up!

SHLOMO
Live a little.

RACHEL
It's hard to "lighten up" when your mother is--

RASHI
(pulling her aside)
--Rachel, we'll get to your mother, later. Now, let's focus on the speech. To express yourself -in speech- means you've arrived at certain conclusions.

RACHEL
Yes, yes, but I only have questions!

RASHI
Exactly.
(pointing to the book in her hand)

The Talmud is a place where all your questions are welcome. It's like a beautiful land--
of words
and stories.

SHLOMO
Of arguments,

RASHI
And solutions. A whole community of contrasting voices.

SHLOMO
Some harmonious. Some dissonant.

RASHI
But all singing, "Welcome!"

(A gong is sounded. OTHER ANCIENTS appear.)

OTHER ANCIENTS

Welcome!

RASHI

Welcome, Rachel. To the Talmud!

RACHEL

(an uncomfortable realization)

Is this the party?

[Song: "WELCOME TO THE TALMUD!"]

(During the song, the ANCIENTS are shepherded around by RASHI, as they come forward to present different "books".)

SOLO MALE ANCIENT

THE MISHNAH IS THE BASE
A VERY HOLY PLACE
IT LOOKS YOU IN THE FACE
AND TELLS YOU THIS IS SO

IT'S THE ROCK ON WHICH TO STAND
A PLACE ON WHICH TO LAND
IT HELPS YOU UNDERSTAND
THE LAWS YOU NEED TO KNOW

ALL ANCIENTS

BUT CHORUSES ARE NOT ALL BASS
THERE'S OTHER VOICES, TOO
THAT JOIN IN THE CHORALE
OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A JEW...

RASHI

(referring to the Mishnah in her hands)
It makes glorious music, as you can hear.

RACHEL

My grandma says I have a nice voice.

RASHI

Every voice is special.

ANCIENTS

SO, WELCOME TO THE TALMUD
WELCOME TO OUR CHOIR
WE COME TO ENLIGHTEN,
INFORM AND INSPIRE

WELCOME TO THE TALMUD
IT'S A MAGICAL TOME
OH WELCOME, AND PLEASE
CONSIDER IT HOME

RASHI

Just like you, the Mishnah has companions.

(HE hands RACHEL another volume.)

FEMALE ANCIENTS

EMBELLISHING A THEME,
GEMARA JOINS THE TEAM,
CONNECTING ALMOST SEAMLESSLY
TO MISHNAH'S SONG

MALE ANCIENTS

WHILE MISHNAH SETS THE TONE
GEMARA GRINDS THE STONE
PUTS MEAT UPON THE BONE
TO LEAVE YOU FULL AND STRONG

ALL ANCIENTS

THE TWO TOGETHER BECOME ONE
AND TALMUD IS ITS NAME
EMBRACE IT WITH YOUR HEART
AND YOU WON'T EVER FEEL THE SAME

RACHEL

(referring to the volumes in her hand)

So, this is powerful stuff, huh?

RASHI

Not many books like it.

SHLOMO

And he's read 'em all.

ANCIENTS

WELCOME TO THE TALMUD

WELCOME TO OUR CHOIR
 WE COME TO ENLIGHTEN,
 INFORM AND INSPIRE

WELCOME TO THE TALMUD
 IT'S A MAGICAL TOME
 OH WELCOME, AND PLEASE
 CONSIDER IT HOME

RACHEL

(looking in one of the volumes)

These pages look so strange. I can't make heads or tails...

MALE ANCIENTS

IT ISN'T LEFT TO RIGHT
 IT ISN'T UP AND DOWN
 READ THE TALMUD IN CIRCLES
 AROUND AND AROUND

FEMALE ANCIENTS

(in counterpoint with MALE ANCIENTS)

IT ISN'T LEFT TO RIGHT
 IT ISN'T UP AND DOWN
 READ THE TALMUD IN CIRCLES
 AROUND AND AROUND

ALL including RASHI

SO MANY VOICES
 SO MANY POINTS OF VIEW
 SO MUCH RHYME AND REASON
 SO MUCH STUDY TO DO

SOLO FEMALE ANCIENT

SO WON'T YOU JOIN THE SONG?

SOLO MALE ANCIENT

AND WON'T YOU JOIN THE DANCE?

ALL

WE HAVE SO MUCH TO OFFER YOU
 SO TAKE THE CHANCE

OH, WELCOME TO THE TALMUD
 WELCOME TO OUR CHOIR
 WE COME TO ENLIGHTEN,
 INFORM AND INSPIRE

WELCOME TO THE TALMUD
IT'S A MAGICAL TOME
OH WELCOME, AND PLEASE
CONSIDER IT HOME.

[End of song.]

RACHEL

That was really awesome. Thanks.

ALL ANCIENTS

You're welcome.

(RASHI gestures to ALL ANCIENTS to be seated. THEY sit.)

RACHEL

But, how does this Talmud thing relate to me?

RASHI

Ah, good question. Shlomo!

(SHLOMO takes note.)

We have parent/child drama, a struggle for independence, the search for meaning...

SHLOMO

You could go with the story of Rachel.

RASHI

Perfect!

(RASHI gestures to the ANCIENTS to move to their "next position".)

RACHEL

Wait! I'm in there?!

RASHI

No, dear. Another Rachel. From long ago. Let's use her Hebrew name, "Rakhel."
(*Pronunciation: rah KHEL*) Come, gather your things.

RACHEL

Where are we going?

RASHI

Only to Jerusalem.

(He exits.)

RACHEL

Wait, I'm not even dressed!

(SHLOMO shuffles Rachel off.)

(Magical time-travel MUSIC. The year is 63 C.E. AKIBA, a shepherd, appears over a hill outside Jerusalem. A man in his forties, he is rough and weathered, but attractive. SOUND EFFECT: the bleating of a flock of sheep. The sheep are mimed. In some productions, directors may choose to have small children play sheep.)

AKIBA

Complain all you want, it won't make the grass grow. Come on! Trust me, we'll find a better spot.

(Using his crook, HE ushers his flock across the stage. Before disappearing, HE notices one stray lamb.)

Don't daydream, little one, or you'll be left behind!

(HE ushers the little one off and exits. Enter Downstage RASHI followed by RACHEL and SHLOMO. RASHI is surveying the surroundings. RACHEL has put on a lovely robe from ancient times.)

RACHEL

I can't believe how well this fits!

SHLOMO

My father was a tailor.

RASHI

Okay, let's seat ourselves here. Remember, you can't talk to anyone. Not yet.

(To SHLOMO)

Details!

(SHLOMO writes.)

Outskirts of the city, 5 p.m. Things look a bit deserted. Rachel, at this point in time, around

60 C.E., the Romans controlled the land that in your day you call Israel.

(RAKHEL, the well-dressed daughter from one of the wealthiest Jewish families in Jerusalem, runs on. SHE is in an agitated state.)

[Song: "I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY!"]

RACHEL

Is she a Roman?

RASHI

No! She is a Jew. Let's listen.

RAKHEL

AH---

AH---

HOW COULD I HAVE TALKED BACK TO MY FATHER?
 HOW COULD I HAVE THOUGHT HE'D UNDERSTAND?
 HOW COULD I EXPECT HE'D LET HIS DAUGHTER
 GET COMPLETELY OUT OF HAND?
 USUALLY I'M DAUGHTERLY AND DOCILE,
 LEARNING TO ACCEPT MY FATHER'S WAY
 HOW COULD I HAVE STAMPED MY FOOT AND SHOUTED:
 "I WILL NOT DO WHAT YOU SAY!"?
 I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY! AH---

FIRST THERE WAS A RABBI'S SON NAMED ELI
 FOLLOWED BY THE TALL ONE, NAME OF ZVI
 ALWAYS FROM A FAMILY OF IMPORTANCE
 YET THAT MATTERS NOT TO ME!
 DID MY FATHER THINK IT WOULD BE EASY,
 TRYING TO ARRANGE A "PERFECT MATCH"?
 STILL, I REALLY OUGHTN'T TO HAVE CRIED OUT:
 "I'M A WOMAN, NOT A CATCH!"
 I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY! AH---

TODAY, I AM RECKLESS AND WILD
 BEGUILED BY THE POWER I HOLD
 TODAY, I'M NO LONGER A CHILD
 AND I WON'T BE BOUGHT AND SOLD
 OH-----
 AH-----

PROBABLY HE'S WOND'RING WHERE I'VE RUN TO
 PROBABLY THEY'RE SEARCHING FOR ME NOW
 PROBABLY I OUGHT TO SAY, "I'M SORRY"
 BUT I'M NOT AT ALL, SOMEHOW
 AND IF THEY SHOULD FIND ME ON THIS HILLSIDE,
 TELLING ME I'VE GOT SOME NERVE TO STRAY
 WHEN THEY ASK ME WHY MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER
 THINKS THAT SHE CAN ACT THIS WAY
 I'LL SAY:
 "I FORGOT MYSELF
 BUT I AM NOT MYSELF!"
 NO, I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY!

AH-----

[End of song.]

(RAKHEL remains transfixed in thought. RACHEL gets up and takes a step towards her.)

RASHI
Where are you going?

RACHEL
I want to meet her.

RASHI
You can't.

RACHEL
Why not?

RASHI
You can't freely interact with anyone you choose! Please, come sit.

RACHEL
(absorbed in RAKHEL's aura)
I know how she feels. You know, if *my* father tried to fix *me* up with some stupid guy, I swear, I'd stand up to him.

(A ROMAN SOLDIER, impressive and intimidating, appears suddenly.)

Oh-my-God-I-think-I'll-sit.

(SHE sits back down.)

SHLOMO
Good move.

RACHEL
Did her father send him after her?

RASHI
No, no! This one works for Caesar.

(HE motions Rachel to keep quiet. The SOLDIER eyes RAKHEL and approaches her.)

ROMAN SOLDIER

Woman, you know it's dangerous to go walking unescorted.

RAKHEL

Oh, I know these hills well, Soldier. This is my father's land.

ROMAN SOLDIER

And who might he be?

RAKHEL

Ben Kalba Savua.

ROMAN SOLDIER

A Jew?

(pause)

RAKHEL

Yes.

ROMAN SOLDIER

I see Jews are as careless with their daughters as they are careful with their money.

(AKIBA, the shepherd, reappears over the hill. HE stops a little ways away to observe the scene.)

RAKHEL

My father is not careless. It is I who choose to find solitude outside the city walls.

(The ROMAN SOLDIER comes closer to RAKHEL)

ROMAN SOLDIER

(suggestively)

Maybe you've found something better than solitude.

RAKHEL

(backing away)

I don't know what you mean.

(The SOLDIER advances and takes her by the arm.)

ROMAN SOLDIER

Oh, I think you do.

(AKIBA rapidly moves in.)

[Song: "UP TO YOU!"]

AKIBA

LET HER BE!
 I COULD BEST YOU
 I'M A STRONG MAN
 AND I KNOW YOU'VE GOT AN ARMY
 YOU COULD BECKON TO A HUNDRED MEN TO FIGHT
 BUT A HUNDRED THOUSAND SOLDIERS
 ARE A PUNY WAY TO CHALLENGE WHAT IS RIGHT

ROMAN SOLDIER

No lowly shepherd tells *me* what to do! I am a Roman soldier!

AKIBA

YES, AND EVERY MOVE YOU MAKE
 EVERY ACTION THAT YOU TAKE
 MAKES A RIPPLE IN THE WATERS OF CREATION
 AND THAT RIPPLE STARTS A WAVE
 THOUGH YOU HIDE OUT IN A CAVE
 YOU'LL BE FLOODED WITH DIVINE RETALIATION

UP TO YOU
 IT IS ALWAYS UP TO YOU
 WHAT YOU SAY
 AND WHAT YOU DO
 IS UP TO YOU

WISELY CHOOSE
 WILL YOU GAIN
 OR WILL YOU LOSE?
 CAN YOU PUT YOURSELF
 IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES?
 IT'S UP TO YOU!

(THE SOLDIER releases RAKHEL and moves toward AKIBA, drawing his sword. CHORAL VOICES continue the song, under.)

ROMAN SOLDIER

You take your life in your hands, Shepherd, when you talk to me like that.

AKIBA

My life is always in my hands. As is your life in yours. What we each choose to do with it is what makes us who we are.

ROMAN SOLDIER

That makes you a dead fool any minute.

AKIBA

And you a blind one.

(HE sings, joining the CHORUS behind him.)

BECAUSE EVERY MOVE YOU MAKE
 EVERY ACTION THAT YOU TAKE
 MAKES A RIPPLE IN THE WATERS OF CREATION
 AND THAT RIPPLE STARTS A WAVE
 THOUGH YOU HIDE OUT IN A CAVE
 YOU'LL BE FLOODED WITH DIVINE RETALIATION

If you do not treat her as you would want your own sister treated, then you do not understand what it means to be a man!

WISELY CHOOSE!
 WILL YOU GAIN
 OR WILL YOU LOSE?
 CAN YOU PUT YOURSELF
 IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES?
 IT'S UP TO YOU!

[End of song.]

(THE SOLDIER is still for a moment. Then, HE puts his sword away.)

ROMAN SOLDIER

I'll let you go this time. But only because a shepherd and a Jewess are hardly worth my sweat.

(He turns to RAKHEL)

I'd advise you to guard your modesty more carefully.

(HE leaves. RAKHEL turns to AKIBA, awed by what HE has just pulled off. Modern RACHEL turns to RASHI. The ANCIENTS do not hear them.)

RACHEL

That was incredible!

RASHI

Indeed!

AKIBA

(mischievously)

It seems sometimes being "lowly" is an advantage! Goodbye, Miss. (HE starts to leave.)

RAKHEL

Wait!

(HE does.)

[Song: "WHO ARE YOU?"]

WHO ARE YOU
THAT CAN WRESTLE A MAN DOWN
WITHOUT TOUCHING HIM?

WHO ARE YOU
THAT CAN WEAVE A WEB OF WORDS,
CATCH THE TRUTH AND THEN PRESENT IT
LIKE A SABBATH MEAL?

WHO ARE YOU
WANDERING ALONE?

AKIBA
I HAVE NEVER BEEN ALONE
WITH THE MOUNTAINS AND THE SKY
AND MY FLOCK ALL STANDING BY

RAKHEL
WHO ARE YOU?

AKIBA
I AM NO ONE,
NO ONE SPECIAL,
JUST A SHEPHERD
NAMED AKIBA.

RAKHEL
JUST AN ANGEL

AKIBA
JUST A MAN

BOTH
JUST A MAN

AKIBA
And now that you are safe and sound, I hope you'll forgive me, but I must return to my flock. They too need my attention.

RAKHEL
(trying to keep him longer)

The sheep are yours?

AKIBA

Oh no. They belong to a wealthy man in Jerusalem. Ben Kalba Savua.

RAKHEL

My father!

AKIBA

Really! All the more reason for me to get back to work! I hope you'll not tell him that I left them unattended.

RAKHEL

What I'll tell him is how you saved his daughter. I'm sure he'll want to reward you.

AKIBA

Your kind attention has been reward enough. I only did what any man would do. And now,
I wish you well, Miss.

RAKHEL

Rakhel.

(SHE offers her hand. HE hesitates. Then takes it.)

AKIBA

Rakhel.

(HE smiles.)

Goodbye, Rakhel.

RAKHEL

Goodbye...

(HE turns and goes.)

...Akiba.

WHO ARE YOU?
WERE YOU HEAVEN-SENT TO ME
TO ENABLE ME TO FIN'LLY FIND MY DESTINY?
OR WAS I, PERHAPS,
SENT TO HELP FIND YOURS?
WHO ARE YOU?
WHO ARE WE?

(MUSIC continues under. RAKHEL wanders off, deeply stirred.)

RACHEL

Oh, I get what's going on here!

RASHI

No doubt you do.

RACHEL

But isn't she like, way younger than him?

SHLOMO

By twenty years.

RACHEL

My mom says relationships like that never last.

(SHLOMO scribbles.)

RASHI

And you agree?

RACHEL

(Pause.)

I think it depends.

RASHI

On?

RACHEL

If they love each other--

RASHI

--Love?!

(HE chuckles. SHLOMO scribbles passionately.)

And how do you recognize True Love?

RACHEL

I dunno. You just do.

RASHI

And what of Akiba and Rakhel? Are they-- in love?

RACHEL

(as if in denial)

No! They just met!

(SHLOMO smiles and shakes his head as he continues to write. AKIBA and

RAKHEL reappear together. There is a clear flirtation between them.
RASHI and RACHEL can see them during this next passage:)

RASHI

And if I told you that since that day, Akiba and Rakhel have been meeting secretly every day for thirty days, maybe just for an hour, sometimes two, talking, discussing, trading intimate thoughts, even arguing?

RACHEL

I'd say, if they're arguing, anything's possible.

RASHI

(with sudden urgency)

Oh! I think Rakhel has something important to say to Akiba. Let's-- shh!

(MUSIC out.)

RAKHEL

I have decided to stop resisting my father, and agree to be wed.

(AKIBA is stopped in his tracks, surprised by his own emotion.)

AKIBA

(collecting himself)

And who is the lucky groom to be? I'm sure a woman of your class has the pick of the crop.

RAKHEL

Yes, I do. And I have chosen the most precious fruit.

AKIBA

Are you sure he's the right one?

(MUSIC in)

RAKHEL

Oh yes. Quite sure. There is no one else remotely like him.

AKIBA

No one?

[Song: "NOT ANOTHER MAN"]

RAKHEL

NOT ANOTHER MAN
AS FAIR AND HUMBLE AS HE

NOT ANOTHER MAN
AS STRONG, BUT GENTLE WITH ME

NOT ANOTHER SOUL HAVE I ENCOUNTERED HALF AS KIND
HE'S THE SORT WHO'D STOP TO HOLD A NEEDY HAND
WHEN MOST PASS BLINDLY

NOT ANOTHER MAN
WHO'S VISION CUTS LIKE A KNIFE
HE'S THE ONLY MAN
WHOM I WOULD TRUST WITH MY LIFE

TELL ME I'M ROMANTIC
AS I TELL YOU TRUE
NOT ANOTHER MAN WILL DO
NOT ANOTHER MAN BUT--

AKIBA
(interrupting)

--You must feel relieved to have chosen someone! To find a man worthy of you, Rakhel, is no mean feat. He must be a wealthy man for your father to approve.

RAKHEL
Did I say my father approved?

NOT ANOTHER MAN
WHO WEARS A SACK LIKE A ROBE
NOT ANOTHER MAN
WHO HAS THE PATIENCE OF JOB

NEVER HAVE I SEEN A GENEROSITY SO RARE
IF THIS MAN WERE DOWN TO BUT A MORSEL
HE WOULD SHARE IT, GLADLY

MANY OTHER MEN
HAVE SOLD MY FATHER THEIR WORTH
PROMISING A LIFE
WITH EVERY COMFORT ON EARTH

BUT ASK MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER
WHICH OF THEM WILL DO
IS IT ANY WONDER WHO
NOT ANOTHER MAN BUT--

AKIBA
(interrupting again)

--You can't be serious, Rakhel! How will you live, with a man who wears a sack? And sometimes is down to but a crumb of food?

RAKHEL

I will live like a queen. Because a crumb, shared with a good man, is more filling than a banquet shared with fools.

TELL ME I'M ROMANTIC
AS I TELL YOU TRUE

NOT ANOTHER MAN WILL DO
NOT ANOTHER MAN BUT YOU

(AKIBA basks for a moment in what she has said. Then a cloud crosses his face.)

AKIBA

Rakhel...your father will never allow--

RAKHEL

(hushing him)

--NOT ANOTHER MAN BUT YOU!

[End of song.]

(RAKHEL and AKIBA exit, eyes transfixed on each other. RASHI and SHLOMO stare RACHEL down.)

RACHEL

Why are you looking at me like that?...Okay, she loves him!

RASHI

But does he love her?

(Pause.)

RACHEL

He hasn't said very much.

RASHI

We usually don't.

SHLOMO

Speak for yourself.

(Pause. RASHI starts to go.)

RACHEL

Uh, I think Akiba's in shock. Hey, where are you going?

RASHI

Come. If we don't move quickly we'll miss the fun.

(HE exits. RACHEL follows SHLOMO.)

RACHEL

(with anticipation)

Another love scene?

SHLOMO

Not exactly. Rakhel has something she must tell another man whom she also loves.

(HE exits.)

RACHEL

Another man?!

(SHE exits.)

(RAKHEL'S father, BEN KALBA SAVUA, enters, followed by RAKHEL. HE is wearing glorious robes and dripping in gold jewelry.)

KALBA SAVUA

Well, you have my attention.

RAKHEL

Thank you, Father.

KALBA SAVUA

Well? (SHE hesitates.) What is it, Rakhel? Speak up.

RAKHEL

It's a subject dear to your heart. And one I know I've been very uncooperative about.

KALBA SAVUA

You mean marriage!

RAKHEL

Yes Father, I know I've seemed stubborn...but I have changed my mind.

KALBA SAVUA

Well, this is a blessed day. And none too soon, considering your age. I must say, it hasn't been pleasant feeling fearing I'd have to force you to wed.

RAKHEL

Well, it was never marriage itself I objected to, Father. I knew once I met the right man--

KALBA SAVUA

So, Abuya's son Elisha pleased you after all!

RAKHEL

No Father, not him.

KALBA SAVUA

Then it must be Nakdimon ben Gurion's son. He too is a wise choice. And one I would be proud to--

RAKHEL

--His name is Akiba.

KALBA SAVUA

What do you mean?

RAKHEL

The man I will marry.

KALBA SAVUA

Akiba?

RAKHEL

Yes. He is in your employ, Father.

KALBA SAVUA

I know of no such man. What does he do, this Akiba?

RAKHEL

He tends your sheep.

KALBA SAVUA

This is a joke.

RAKHEL

No, Father.

KALBA SAVUA
(confused)

A shepherd...?

RAKHEL

I'm certain you'd like him. Just last month, he saved me from a soldier in the road. You should have seen how he cut the Roman right down to size. And he never even touched him!

KALBA SAVUA

You want to marry an ignorant shepherd? And one who makes trouble with the Romans, no less?! Have you completely lost your senses?

RAKHEL

You have to meet him!

KALBA SAVUA

I don't want to hear another word *about* him. The son-in-law I pick will have the resources to provide a fine home for my grandchildren. And their mother.

RAKHEL

But he has a great soul.

KALBA SAVUA

Don't talk to me about souls! I forbid you to see this shepherd again. And I assure you I'll have him banned from my lands, as well.

RAKHEL

You don't even know him. If you'd just take the time to--

KALBA SAVUA

ENOUGH! The subject is closed.

(There is a tense silence.)

RAKHEL

Father, I am going to marry him... with or without your blessing. But I'd much rather it be with.

KALBA SAVUA

You marry him, and as God is my witness, I will no longer have a daughter.

(HE turns and leaves. RAKHEL is shaken, but resolved. After a moment, RAKHEL exits as well. RACHEL, RASHI and SHLOMO appear from upstage; THEY have been listening surreptitiously. THEY move downstage.)

RACHEL

So this is your idea of fun?

RASHI

You need to look at all sides of a story, Rachel.

RACHEL

I can't believe he would threaten her like that!

RASHI

Young men and women didn't have as much freedom to choose their partners back then. Those who broke with societal customs faced severe consequences.

RACHEL

But she's doing what she thinks is right!

RASHI

And what about you? Does being "right" ever get you into trouble?

(Pause. RACHEL is stumped.)

SHLOMO

(writing)

Her face says "yes".

RACHEL

Enough about me!

(Pointing)

Is this the way to Akiba's place?

(SHE starts to move in that direction.)

RASHI

Why?

RACHEL

I have a feeling Rakhel's headed to see Akiba now, and...

(doing her best imitation of RASHI)

..."if we don't move quickly, we'll miss the fun."

(SHE exits. Pause.)

SHLOMO

She's got you down!

RASHI
(with confidence)

It's working.

(HE nods his head in the direction of RACHEL. HE and SHLOMO exit together, quickly. The scene shifts back to the hills outside Jerusalem. RAKHEL is in tears. AKIBA is comforting her.)

AKIBA
Rest your head, darling.

RAKHEL
It's not fair.

AKIBA
I know.

RAKHEL
Why couldn't he just say "yes"? Why, just one time, once in my entire life, could he not accept me for who I am?

AKIBA
You know you cannot live for his blessing. Not if we are to marry.

(Pause. RAKHEL's eyes well up with more tears. She cries out loud a little more.)

Your pain will only be lessened if you love your father for who he is.

RAKHEL
He is a bully! And all he cares about is money. He would have me marry the sort of man who gives his betrothed a Jerusalem of gold.

AKIBA
(laughing, in spite of himself)
A Jerusalem of gold!? You mean, those, silly tiaras shaped like rooftops of the city?

RAKHEL
Aren't they ridiculous?

AKIBA
I saw a new bride wearing one. Very rich. She looked like--

RAKHEL

(mixed signals)
--a queen!

(Pause.)

AKIBA
You want one.

RAKHEL
I do not.

AKIBA
You do.

RAKHEL
I do not!

AKIBA
(after a moment)
Well, if that's what's required.

(HE picks up some straw.)

RAKHEL
What are you doing?

AKIBA
(weaving the straw together)
Following the fashion, as best I can.

RAKHEL
(uncomprehending)
What?

[Song: "A CROWN OF STRAW"]

AKIBA
(freely and teasingly)
EVERY WOMAN OF YOUR RANK
OR SO I'M TOLD
SHOULD EXPECT HER LOVE TO GIVE HER
A JERUSALEM OF GOLD
SO I WON'T COMPLAIN IF YOU SHOULD FIND IT
REASON TO WITHDRAW
WHEN YOU LEARN THE GIFT I'VE MADE FOR YOU
IS JUST A CROWN OF STRAW

I'd understand if you don't want it.

(At last, a smile breaks across her face. SHE tenderly takes his "gift".)

RACHEL

A CROWN OF STRAW,
 A CROWN OF STRAW
 MORE PRECIOUS THAN THE FINEST CROWN OF GOLD
 YOU EVER SAW
 MORE PERFECT THAN A DIAMOND
 THAT SHINES WITHOUT A FLAW
 DARLING, I SWEAR, I WOULD RATHER WEAR
 A CROWN OF STRAW

(SHE puts it on. The music continues softly. RAKHEL and AKIBA begin a playful "wedding" dance. RACHEL, RASHI and SHLOMO appear downstage.)

RASHI

So?

RACHEL

Yes, now he loves her.

RASHI

It took time.

(HE nods at SHLOMO.)

RACHEL

I still find it amazing that she would sacrifice herself like that for him. Not that he isn't cute.

RASHI

Rachel, her greatest sacrifice is yet to come.

RACHEL

What do you mean? She's not going to die, is she?

RASHI

(shakes his head "no")

Watch!

(RAKHEL and AKIBA stop dancing. MUSIC continues under.)

RAKHEL

You're a dancer, too!

AKIBA

With sheep, it helps to be nimble on one's feet.

RAKHEL

(cautiously broaching a new subject)

And what if, say, you were no longer a shepherd?

AKIBA

Me? I'm bound to my sheep till the day I die.

RAKHEL

What if you were not, bound?

AKIBA

What are you saying?

RAKHEL

You may wear the clothes of a shepherd, but beneath them, behind the shepherd's crook, there is someone else. Someone like no other. You have the seeds of greatness in you.. But seedlings don't bear fruit unless they're cultivated. A man of the fields must know that...I have a proposal.

AKIBA

One proposal today is not enough?

RAKHEL

We *will* marry. And afterwards, you will leave these fields, and go study Torah.

AKIBA

Study Torah?!

RAKHEL

At a Beit Midrash. Go and cultivate those seeds.

AKIBA

Go to the study house and leave you here? All alone? Because, you know if we go through with this, your father's going to cut you off. He won't give you the time of day, let alone a penny.

RAKHEL

Strangely, I'm looking forward to that part of it. It's time I stood on my own two feet.

AKIBA

You are serious.

RAKHEL

But you will return to Jerusalem a learned man! A greater scholar than any man! And I will still be here, waiting for you.

AKIBA

If it's a scholar that you want, perhaps you *should* marry one of those well brought up men--

RAKHEL

--What they know, you can learn. What *you* have, only God can give.

AKIBA

I see in your eyes that you will not have this any other way.

RAKHEL

You see well. Oh! There's only one thing more you'll need.

EVERY STUDENT OF THE TORAH
SO THEY SAY
MIGHT EXPECT A FANCY TALIT
TO ENFOLD HIM ON HIS WAY
BUT THE ONLY SHAWL I HAVE TO GIVE'S
THE ONE UPON MY BACK
AND MY LOVE MUST SOMEHOW ANSWER FOR
WHATEVER IT MAY LACK

(SHE offers him her shawl.)

(teasingly) "And *I'd* understand if *you* don't want--"

(Smiling, HE stops her with his hand and lovingly takes the shawl. HE drapes it on his shoulders.

AKIBA

A SIMPLE SHAWL,
A SIMPLE SHAWL
MORE GORGEOUS THAN THE ROYAL ROBES
OF SOLOMON AND SAUL
THOUGH WEALTHY MEN WEAR LINEN
WHILE WAILING AT THE WALL
WHEN CALLED TO PRAYER, I WOULD RATHER WEAR
A SIMPLE SHAWL

(The music swells up into a louder, faster version of the song.

AKIBA

and RAKHEL dance a second time, a passionate dance of "acceptance.")

RAKHEL
 A CROWN OF STRAW,
 A CROWN OF STRAW
 MORE PRECIOUS THAN THE FINEST
 ROYAL
 CROWN OF GOLD YOU EVER SAW
 MORE PERFECT THAN A DIAMOND
 LINEN
 THAT SHINES WITHOUT A FLAW

AKIBA
 A SIMPLE SHAWL,
 A SIMPLE SHAWL
 MORE GORGEOUS THAN THE
 ROBES OF SOLOMON AND SAUL
 THOUGH WEALTHY MEN WEAR
 AT THE WALL

RAKHEL
 Akiba...My husband!

AKIBA
 Rakhel...My wife!

(The music swells to a loud conclusion. RAKHEL and AKIBA walk off upstage, holding hands.)

[End of song.]

(RACHEL trails the couple to the horizon, and stares until she can see them no more. RASHI and SHLOMO observe RACHEL's fascination with the events.)

RAKHEL
 So?

RASHI
 So?

RAKHEL
 So he left her?

RASHI
 The next day. Traveled--

SHLOMO
 --eighty-five miles. On foot.

RAKHEL
 (suddenly emotional)
 I don't believe you. I don't believe any of this!

RASHI

Rachel, it happened. It's right there in the Talmud.

RACHEL

How do you know? I thought you didn't even live until the 11th century!

(RASHI is flustered. HE turns to SHLOMO.)

SHLOMO

I think our Rachel was expecting a different outcome to the story.

RASHI

(to Rachel)

Would it help you to know that to be married to a scholar, back then, was regarded as the highest honor?

RACHEL

And what did "honor" get Akiba's Rakhel? Tell me! Loneliness? Poverty? What's the "honor" in that?

RASHI

Stick around, you'll find out.

RACHEL

No! I'm leaving.

RASHI

Hold on.

RACHEL

I'm going to help Rakhel!

RASHI

Not possible!

RACHEL

(taking off her robe)

She could probably use this robe.

(SHLOMO moves to block her exit.)

RASHI

Rachel, stop! Listen! You can't change history. You can only learn from it.

(Pause.)

RACHEL

Okay, I'm sorry.

(SHLOMO helps her put her robe back on.)

RASHI

Don't be sorry. Be elated.

SHLOMO

(clarifying for her)

Happy.

RASHI

You not only understand the Talmud, you're moved by it. Come, we must follow Akiba.

RACHEL

But what about Rakhel?

RASHI

We'll see her again, and she'll be fine. Trust me.

RACHEL

I trust you, Rashi. But you *are* a shnook!

(BLACKOUT. Time travel music. Scene shifts to the Beit Midrash, some time later.)

It is late at night. RABBI ELIEZER, a regal older man, is in the midst of fending off one of his students, MEIR. RABBI ELIEZER is cranky, but lovable.)

RABBI ELIEZER

Meir, so many questions!

MEIR

Just one more, Rabbi. Do you really think that an oven cannot be purified after the sun goes down?

RABBI ELIEZER

What are you, baking cookies? Tomorrow's another day!

MEIR

Yes, Rabbi.

(HE leaves, reluctantly.)

RABBI ELIEZER

Ach, these boys never stop.

(There is a knock at the door. ELIEZER shouts to be heard.)

What now?!

AKIBA
(from outside)

I'm here to see the Rabbi.

RABBI ELIEZER
Who is it? It's late!

AKIBA
(through the door)
My name's Akiba. Please!

RABBI ELIEZER
(mumbling as he crosses to the door)
Akiba? This should mean something to me? Does a Rabbi's day never end?

(HE opens the door.)

AKIBA
Thank you for opening the door.

RABBI ELIEZER
What is it?

AKIBA
Are you... Rabbi Eliezer?

RABBI ELIEZER
Who else should I be?

AKIBA
I'm honored.

RABBI ELIEZER
And I, Stranger, am exhausted. So please tell me why you've come. You don't seem like our usual sort of visitor.

AKIBA
I'm sure I'm not. I've come to study Torah, unlikely as it seems.

RABBI ELIEZER
(to heaven)

God, is this one a hungry mind, or just another hungry mouth?

AKIBA

I'm not looking for a meal, Rabbi. Please, hear me out. I've been walking for days. I've already been turned away from three other study houses!

RABBI ELIEZER

Why did the others turn you away?

AKIBA

At the first, they said I was too old. The second, too dirty. The last one was simply too crowded. And always the same advice: "Go back to your flock!"

RABBI ELIEZER

(To heaven again, distraught)

He's a shepherd!

AKIBA

All my forty years.

RABBI ELIEZER

So why come to study, at this late date?

AKIBA

Because I've made a vow. To my bride. To learn Torah. How can I break my vow and be worthy of calling myself her husband?

RABBI ELIEZER

A vow to one's beloved is not something to be taken lightly. You are a wise fellow for knowing that at least.

AKIBA

I would not take any vow lightly. And Rakhel, my wife, is sacrificing much to make my study possible.

RABBI ELIEZER

Your Rakhel must be a righteous woman.

AKIBA

That she is. And I will not let her down.

RABBI ELIEZER

You know the study of Torah is a life long commitment. A road that only begins here at the Beit Midrash.

AKIBA

I'm a shepherd. Patience comes with the territory.

RABBI ELIEZER

You're an unusual man, Akiba.

(HE considers him a moment.)

I presume you can read and write?

(AKIBA doesn't answer.)

Or, at least....read?

AKIBA

I can read the tracks of a sheep who has strayed from my flock. Or the movement of the stars in the night sky. I've slept out enough nights to be expert at that.

RABBI ELIEZER

I begin to see why the others suggested you go back to your sheep. To begin from scratch at this late date...

AKIBA

I've never been afraid of hard work!

RABBI ELIEZER

I believe you Akiba. Still, there is yet another problem. Here at Beit Midrash, everyone must have a study partner. And, considering you can't even read, with whom, in good conscience, could I pair you up?

[Song: " BOTH SIDES OF AN ISSUE"]

RABBI ELIEZER

IN THE FIRST PLACE, YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING
SO WHAT KIND OF PARTNER WOULD YOU BE?
ON THE OTHER HAND, THAT COULD MAKE YOU CURIOUS
DYING TO LOOK AND SEE

SO ON THE ONE HAND, YOU MIGHT BE A BURDEN
A TRULY UNNECESSARY JOB
ON THE OTHER HAND, THIS COULD BE A BIT OF A MITZVAH
EVEN A GIFT FROM GOD

SEEING BOTH SIDES OF AN ISSUE
IS WHAT STUDYING'S ABOUT

YOU CAN NEVER KNOW THE ANSWER
TILL YOU'VE TURNED IT INSIDE OUT
LOOK AT BOTH SIDES OF AN ISSUE
AND BEFORE THE DAY IS THROUGH
YOU'LL SEE SIDES, AND SIDES OF SIDES,
YOU NEVER KNEW

(HE dances a little dance as HE sings a niggun)

LAI- LAI- LAI- LAI LAI LAI
LAI- LAI- LAI- LAI LAI
LAI- LAI- LAI- LAI LAI LAI

(RABBI ELIEZER looks for an example to use.)

Take this bottle of wine, Akiba. Would you say it was half empty or half full?

AKIBA

Well....on the one hand....if one had a lot of guests to serve, and only this one bottle, then I would call it half empty. On the other hand, if just you and I were to have the pleasure of polishing it off alone, then it is definitely half full--since it leaves us plenty to share!

RABBI ELIEZER

A not unimpressive bit of reasoning, Akiba! Perhaps you are already starting to--.
(catches himself).
--still...

ON THE ONE HAND, YOU'RE OVER FORTY
AND YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW YOUR ALEF-BEIT

AKIBA

ON THE OTHER HAND, I HAVE REAL EXPERIENCE
COULD BE, THAT CARRIES WEIGHT

BOTH

SO ON THE ONE HAND

RABBI ELIEZER

YOU ARE LIKE A BLANK SLATE

AKIBA

NO WRITING RECORDED THERE TO READ

RABBI ELIEZER

ON THE OTHER HAND
YOU ARE LIKE A SAMPLE OF TRUTH

AKIBA
WITH EV'RY LIFE EXAMPLE YOU NEED

SEEING BOTH SIDES OF AN ISSUE
IS WHAT STUDYING'S ABOUT
WELL, THE CONCEPT IS NO STRANGER THAN,
SAY, BREATHING IN AND OUT
START ON ONE SIDE OF AN ISSUE
BUT BEFORE YOU MAKE IT THROUGH
YOU'LL FIND SOMEONE ELSE'S SIDE
BELONGS TO YOU!

LAI- LAI- LAI- LAI LAI LAI
LAI- LAI- LAI- LAI LAI
LAI- LAI- LAI- LAI LAI LAI!

I know how a shepherd learns his trade, Rabbi. But tell me, how does a Jew grow wise?

RABBI ELIEZER
A wise Jew is one who learns from absolutely everyone!

SO, SAY I TAKE A CHANCE
ATTEMPT A DIFF'RENT WAY
PRESUME THAT SINCE YOU'VE LIVED A LOT
YOU'VE GOT A LOT TO SAY

YES, IF I TAKE A LEAP
INTO THE GREAT UNKNOWN
AKIBA
SINCE YOU'VE GOT ME WITH YOU
YOU'RE NOT DOING IT ALONE!

Rabbi, tell me please, what makes a Jew strong?

RABBI ELIEZER
A strong Jew is one who subdues his evil impulses.

AKIBA
And when is a Jew considered rich?

RABBI ELIEZER
A rich Jew is one who is content with his lot. Now, let me ask YOU one...What Jew will be honored?

AKIBA

(after a moments thought)
The one who honors others!

RABBI ELIEZER
And say I tried you out as a partner.... for myself!

(MUSIC out.)

AKIBA
Then there'd be no man more honored than I!

(MUSIC.)

BOTH
SEEING BOTH SIDES OF AN ISSUE
IS WHAT STUDYING'S ABOUT
YOU CAN NEVER KNOW THE ANSWER
TILL YOU'VE TURNED IT INSIDE OUT

START ON ONE SIDE OF AN ISSUE
AND BEFORE YOU'VE REACHED THE END
YOU MIGHT FIND THAT YOU HAVE FOUND
YOURSELF A FRIEND!

LAI- LAI- LAI- LAI LAI LAI
LAI- LAI- LAI- LAI LAI
LAI- LAI- LAI- LAI LAI LAI!

AKIBA
May I stay then, Rabbi?

RABBI ELIEZER
Akiba, it is I who would be honored!

(THEY shake on it.)

[end of song]

(AKIBA and RABBI ELIEZER recede into silhouette as RASHI and SHLOMO take focus. THEY are engaged in a heated argument.)

SHLOMO
Why, you overbearing, sanctimonious, second-rate Philistine!

RASHI
Oh, well that makes you a sniveling, disobedient, pencil-snatching little bookworm!

(RASHI and SHLOMO look over their shoulders to see if they have caught RACHEL's attention. RASHI signals SHLOMO to continue.)

SHLOMO

Furthermore, next time you want to engage in fact-fiddling, better bring your own eraser!

(RACHEL tears herself away from observing AKIBA and ELIEZER and moves to RASHI and SHLOMO.)

RACHEL

What is going on?

SHLOMO

He tried to manipulate the record!

RASHI
(to her)

I am protecting you.
(to SHLOMO, referring to RACHEL)
She is not ready!

SHLOMO

She is ripe and ready!

(Rapid-fire, as previously:)

RASHI
Not ready.

RACHEL
(simultaneously)
Excuse me.

SHLOMO
Ripe and ready!

RACHEL
Excuse me!

RASHI
Not.

RACHEL
May I say something?

SHLOMO
Ready or not, she is--

RASHI
--neither ripe, nor ready.

RACHEL
Would you please stop!

SHLOMO
She is ready, ripe and rarin' to go!

RACHEL
I said, stop!

(On the word “stop” RACHEL busts apart RASHI and SHLOMO who have nearly come to “blows”.)

RACHEL
(to RASHI)

Maybe you could explain what it is that I am not ready for?

RASHI

Every student of the Talmud reaches a point when he or she might engage in debate. Rachel, I feel you have a ways to go.

RACHEL

I can debate.

RASHI

Debate requires not only a mastery of the facts but an ability to make arguments based on logic. There’s little room for hot-blooded emotion.

SHLOMO
(to HER)

Or so he says.

RACHEL

Try me.

RASHI

Huh?

RACHEL

Try me! You say I'm not ready, I say, try me!

RASHI
(false reluctance)

Well okay, we will.

(HE winks at SHLOMO. MUSIC under: "AM I RIGHT?")

What portion of the scriptures were you reading?

RACHEL

Jacob and the ladder.

RASHI

Good. Sit. We'll ask some questions.

SHLOMO

You'll give some answers.

RASHI

Ready?

RACHEL

Hit me with your best bat mitzvah quiz! Just, please, no questions about sushi or prime rib.

(LIGHTS shift to another part of the stage where RACHEL'S MOTHER is talking on a cell phone.)

MOTHER

You're telling me it's maddening! I mean, my own daughter acting all high and mighty! (Listens) I have told her that! Making it elegant doesn't negate the spiritual significance (Listens.) No, like a brick wall. (Listens, and agrees) Well put! "A family event." And it reflects on all of us!

(MOTHER sings.)

[Song: "AM I RIGHT?"]

SO, SHE SHOULD LISTEN JUST A LITTLE BIT AT LEAST, AM I RIGHT?

(Lights come back up on RACHEL, RASHI and SHLOMO, while remaining on MOTHER.)

RASHI:

Who was Jacob's father?

RACHEL

Isaac! That's easy.

(MOTHER, in her world, continues to sing into phone.)

MOTHER

IT'S NOT LIKE I'M CAMPAIGNING FOR A PRIEST, AM I RIGHT?

SHLOMO

Esau and Rebecca?

RACHEL

Brother and mother!

MOTHER

I'LL END THE DAY IN DEMENTED OR DECEASED, AM I RIGHT?

I AM ASKING, AM I WRONG OR AM I RIGHT?

(Lights dim on HER.)

RASHI

And how did Jacob get his father's blessing?

RACHEL

(thinking)

His father's blessing...his father's blessing...hmmm

(LIGHTS shift to another part of the stage where a troubled BEN KALBA SAVUA stands beside his lieutenant, BEN DAVID, pronounced, "DaVEED".)

BEN KALBA SAVUA

Ben David, you're a sensible young man...

BEN DAVID

I try to be.

BEN KALBA SAVUA

(not really asking)

You don't think I've overreacted, do you?

BEN DAVID

(unsure how to respond)

Well...

BEN KALBA SAVUA

(Sings)

RAKHEL IS FASTING WHEN SHE SHOULD HAVE HAD A FEAST,
AM I RIGHT?

MY BEAUTY IS CAVORTING WITH A BEAST, AM I RIGHT?

HE'S A SHEPHARD BUT IT'S I WHO HAS BEEN FLEECECED, AM I RIGHT?

I AM ASKING, AM I WRONG OR AM I RIGHT?

(LIGHTS add on RACHEL's MOTHER again. Both parents sing,
each in their own world.)

BOTH PARENTS

WHY DO CHILDREN ALWAYS THINK THAT THEY KNOW BETTER

THEY'RE A BLESSING THAT'S MORE LIKE A BLIGHT

BREAKING EV'RY LAST LAW TO THE LETTER

MOTHER
(into cell phone)

AM I WRONG?

BEN KALBA SAVUA

AM I RIGHT?

(Lights dim on THEM. Back up on RACHEL, RASHI, SHLOMO.)

RASHI

Where did Jacob flee to avoid Esau's revenge?

RACHEL
(getting more excited)

Charan!

SHLOMO

What did he use as a pillow when he stopped to rest?

RACHEL

A stone!

RASHI

And what did he dream about?

RACHEL
(triumphant)

A ladder full of angels!!

(LIGHTS shift, back up on BEN KALBA SAVUA and RACHEL's MOTHER.
THEY sing, each in their own world.)

BEN KALBA SAVUA:
SHE'S UNMOVING, THOUGH I'VE PRODDED, PUSHED AND PLEADED

MOTHER:
(into phone)
SHE'S CONTRARY BUT NEVER CONTRITE!

BOTH:
LEAVING "HONOR THY FATHER/MOTHER" UNHEEDED

MOTHER
AM I WRONG?

BOTH
AM I RIGHT?

(Lights back up on RACHEL, RASHI, SHLOMO.)

RACHEL
I GUESS THIS MEANS I'M READY TO DEBATE, AM I RIGHT?

RASHI
I CAN'T SEE ANY REASON SHE SHOULD WAIT, AM I RIGHT?

SHLOMO
(to RASHI)
SHE MAY EVEN PUT SOME MIDRASH IN THE BEIT, AM I RIGHT?

RACHEL, RASHI, SHLOMO, MOTHER, KALBA SAVUA
(still in their separate worlds)
I AM ASKING,
AM I WRONG OR AM I RIGHT?

MOTHER, KALBA SAVUA
(separate worlds)
ONLY ASKING,
AM I WRONG OR AM I....

RASHI
Congratulations, Rachel. You are ready!

RACHEL
I told ya so!

MOTHER, KALBA SAVUA
(separate worlds)
....RIGHT.....?

(MOTHER mimes saying goodbye to the friend, shuts her cell phone,
exits; KALBA SAVUA pats BEN DAVID on the shoulder and escorts
him off; RASHI, SHLOMO and RACHEL move a bit closer to the
entrance to the study house.)

[End of song.]

RASHI
Now, when we enter the study house--

RACHEL

--enter?

RASHI

You said you're ready for a debate. When we enter the study house to begin the debate, you'll find Akiba seated next to Rabbi Eliezer. You'll take your place next to--

RACHEL

--my place?

RASHI

You'll take your temporary spiritual place next to Rabbi Eliezer.

RACHEL
(nervously)

Okay.

(AKIBA and RABBI ELIEZER reappear at the Beit Midrash. In mime, they are engaged in heated debate. The theme of "BOTH SIDES OF AN ISSUE" plays.)

RASHI

It's several months later. Akiba has learned to read and write, and he and Rabbi Eliezer are discussing the Jacob story. Relax, Rachel. And remember, the Talmud is a place where all your questions are welcome. Ready?

RACHEL
(taking a deep breath)

Ready.

(RACHEL enters the study house and scurries over to a seat next to RABBI ELIEZER and AKIBA. THEY don't seem aware of her yet. MUSIC out.)

AKIBA
(exasperated)

No, no, no, no. You still don't see my point!

RABBI ELIEZER

I'm listening!

AKIBA

It's simple. Jacob wakes up. He's confused. He's frightened. He's shaken by the power of his own dream! So he says, "God really must have been right here in this place, and I, I did not know."

RABBI ELIEZER

But why the two "I"s, Akiba? "And I" ? that's number one-- , "i", --that's number two-- "did not know."

AKIBA

I...don't know.

RABBI ELIEZER

(HE chuckles.)

You don't know? Try this: maybe Jacob thinks too much about Jacob! So he is saying, "God was here all along, and the reason I didn't notice, is I was too busy paying attention to myself!"

AKIBA

(impressed)

Very good, Rabbi!

RABBI ELIEZER

(HE laughs harder.)

Your reading and writing have improved, my friend, but there is so much more yet to learn!

[Song: "WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"]

(HE dances a bit as he sings):

LAI-LAI-LAI-LAI-LAI

LAI-LAI-LAI-LAI-LA

(RACHEL, wanting to keep track of their discussion, looks around for some "scratch paper" to take notes on. Finally, SHE grabs some of the pink invitations for her bat mitzvah to use.)

AKIBA

I confess, the Holy Book still feels to me like... an unsolvable mystery!

ELIEZER

No, no! A *wonderful* mystery! (AKIBA shakes his head, at a loss.) And there is a way in -
with one simple question: (HE sings)

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

AKIBA

“What does it mean?”

RABBI ELIEZER

WHAT THE TEXT SAYS, IT SAYS IN WORDS
BUT WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

AKIBA

WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

RABBI ELIEZER

IS THERE A REASON THAT A STONE SERVES FOR A PILLOW?
IS JACOB DREAMING OR ARE ALL THESE VISIONS REAL?

AKIBA

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF A LADDER FULL OF ANGELS?

RABBI ELIEZER

HOW DID HEARING GOD ADDRESS HIM

BOTH

MAKE JACOB FEEL?

RABBI ELIEZER

WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN, DO YOU SUPPOSE?
THE CLOSER YOU LOOK, THE MORE YOUR INTEREST GROWS
READ THE LINES, BUT ALSO IN-BETWEEN
TO FIND AN ANSWER TO: "WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

(MUSIC continues under.)

AKIBA

You're right, Rabbi. I need to look deeper.

RABBI ELIEZER

Don't be so hard on yourself. It takes years to unlock the meaning of Torah. Look at me, sixty years old, and still unlocking!

AKIBA

At least you have a key.

RABBI ELIEZER

When it comes to opening the gates of Heaven, there is no shortage of keys. Not now, not before, and not in the future!

(With these words, RACHEL feels moved, puts her notes away, and is poised to contribute to the discussion. Similarly, RASHI, feeling compelled to be involved, moves closer to the others.)

RACHEL

Speaking of the future, may I?

(RABBI ELIEZER and AKIBA turn and see her)

AKIBA

There are girls here at Beit Midrash!

RABBI ELIEZER

So it would seem!! Who are you, Child?

RACHEL

I'm Rachel...uh.... "Rakhel."

RABBI ELIEZER

(To AKIBA)

Your Rakhel?!

RACHEL and AKIBA

No!

RACHEL

Rakhel *Cohen*.

RABBI ELIEZER

Oh, a "bat Kohein!" (*"Daughter of the priestly class."*) Where are you from?

RACHEL

Lower Manhattan.

RABBI ELIEZER and AKIBA

Where?!

RASHI

(stepping into the fray)

Maybe you should ask her " *When* she's from!"

RABBI ELIEZER

You again!

RASHI

Miss Cohen is a new friend of mine.

RABBI ELIEZER

And this is Akiba, a new friend of mine, since you last came.

RASHI

A pleasure to meet you, Akiba. The name's Rashi.

RABBI ELIEZER

One of our very active colleagues from...which century will it be again?

RASHI

From the year, 4850.

(turns to RACHEL)

Eleventh Century, C.E., as you call it.

(To the OTHERS)

And Rachel here comes some nine hundred years later.

AKIBA

What's happening, Rabbi?!

RABBI ELIEZER

Don't look so stupefied, my friend. Torah study is quite unbound by time or space.

RACHEL

So then...may I sit at the table with you?

(RABBI ELIEZER hesitates...SHE is a girl.)

RASHI

(THEY have had this conversation! Warningly)

Rabbi Eliezer?!

AKIBA

(chiming in)

Here, why don't you look on with me?

(HE shares his book with RACHEL.)

RASHI

(verbally nudging RABBI ELIEZER to continue)

Well, Rabbi?

(THEY sing again.)

RABBI ELIEZER
(to RACHEL)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

RACHEL
(considering)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

RABBI ELIEZER
ALL THESE STORIES, SO FULL OF LIFE
BUT WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

RACHEL
WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

AKIBA
Could we go back to the beginning, Rabbi? I know I must have overlooked something in Isaac's upbringing.

RABBI ELIEZER
Always blaming it on the parents!

(MUSIC continues under; RABBI ELIEZER and AKIBA continue their
"argument"/ discussion in mime.)

RACHEL
Psst! Rashi! I just realized. I'm not as lost as I think I am!

RASHI
Good, Rachel!

RACHEL
I mean, Akiba's just trying to figure it out like me.

RASHI
Exactly! And every soul that's born has something special to add!

RACHEL
(with confidence, now)
Well, do you know why I think Jacob used the word "I" twice?

RASHI

No, why? Tell me! Tell them!

(To the OTHERS)

Gentleman, listen: another take on your oft-quoted line!

(RABBI ELIEZER and AKIBA cease their arguing, having reached no mutual conclusion. THEY stop to hear RACHEL)

RACHEL

Okay, here's what I think: The first "I" stands for "individual", that is, "I", or Jacob alone, "did not know." The second "i" stands for "infinite".

RABBI ELIEZER

"Infinite?"

RACHEL

Yes, infinite--

(MUSIC out. RACHEL proceeds, very rapidly and excitedly:)

--as in the infinite number of people who think they know everything when in fact they know not much more than I do, which is to say *very little* other than what we *think* we know or in other words, Jacob is expressing the frustration *and* happiness that we *all* would naturally feel if we woke up to suddenly face the eternal presence of an all-knowing, all-powerful, and almighty God!

(RACHEL emits a self-satisfied grin. RASHI, AKIBA, and RABBI ELIEZER are dumbstruck.)

RASHI

Well, that's a new one.

(Pause.)

RABBI ELIEZER

I love it!

(During the final chorus, RABBI ELIEZER remains mesmerized by RACHEL'S interpretation.)

RASHI, AKIBA, RACHEL

WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN, DO YOU SUPPOSE?

RACHEL

THE CLOSER I LOOK, THE MORE MY INTEREST GROWS

RASHI, AKIBA, RACHEL
 READ THE LINES, BUT ALSO IN-BETWEEN

RACHEL
 TO FIND AN ANSWER TO:

RASHI, AKIBA
 MORE THAN ONE ANSWER TO:

RACHEL
 A DIFFERENT ANSWER TO:

ALL
 "WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

(MUSIC continues under.)

RASHI
 Well, it's been a pleasure as always. Rachel, come.

RACHEL
 (to RABBI ELIEZER and AKIBA)
 Thank you!

RASHI
 (to RABBI ELIEZER and AKIBA)
 Shalom Aleichem.

RABBI ELIEZER
 Aleichem Shalom.

(RASHI and RACHEL exit the Beit Midrash and offstage. SHLOMO follows.
 AKIBA stands as if to exit to.)

AKIBA
 I'm turning in, Rabbi...Uh, do you know what our weather will be like tomorrow?

RABBI ELIEZER
 Not a clue, Akiba. Not a clue.

[End of song.]

(BLACKOUT. RACHEL reappears alone in a spot of light SHE sings.)

[Song: "SO MANY QUESTIONS (Reprise)"]

RACHEL

SO MANY QUESTIONS
HOW CAN WE EVER AGREE?
STILL, WHAT A SURPRISE
THAT THESE ANCIENT GUYS
THINK THAT THEY MIGHT LEARN FROM ME!

SO MANY QUESTIONS
ARE SUDDENLY SORT OF FUN
MAYBE I CAN ANSWER JUST ONE...

[End of song.]

(Her MOTHER enters excitedly with a shopping bag from Bloomingdales.)

MOTHER

Rachel! I have it! I have the answer! Right here in this bag. I am so relieved!

RACHEL

Me too, Mom. It's finally starting to make sense! About Jacob and the ladder. Rashi says that every soul is born with something special to add to what's already been said--

(MOTHER reaches into the bag and pulls out a pair of bright pink silk pants.)

MOTHER

--Tada! Are these heaven, or what?

RACHEL

(stopped in her tracks)

What are they?

MOTHER

What do you mean, what are they? They're pants! *And* they're pink! Talk about the perfect solution.

RACHEL

Mom, you didn't--

MOTHER

--I know you don't like me to shop for you, but just as I was leaving the store, there they were, staring at me on the clearance rack and, well, I couldn't pass them up. I mean, just look! They're perfect!

RACHEL

For what?

MOTHER

Rachel, I am doing my best to meet you half way. Hand me those invitations.

(RACHEL hands her the pile of pink invitations.)

See? It's the exact same pink! I mean, I almost flipped--

(SHE stops dead.)

Oh, my God. Oh, my God! Tell me you didn't use these for scratch paper!

RACHEL

(hadn't really realized)

Oh, well...just a few of them, I guess. I mean, Rabbi Eliezer was interpreting my Torah portion and you know, he's one of the greatest rabbis of all time--

MOTHER

--You think this is all a big joke. Do you have any idea how much one of these costs?

RACHEL

No.

MOTHER

These aren't "Post-its!"

(SHE demonstrates by putting one against her forehead, it doesn't stick, of course.)

RACHEL

I'm sorry.

MOTHER

I cannot believe that you would take engraved invitations and just scribble on them.

RACHEL

I wasn't scribbling. I was taking notes.

MOTHER

I have tried...and tried and tried to compromise. But no matter how hard I try, you just want to make a mockery of me!

RACHEL

(really hurt)

I said I was sorry....But, you know, I'm not the one making a mockery! I thought my bat mitzvah was supposed to mean something. But you keep trying to turn it into-- I don't know what--a fashion show or something.

MOTHER

(stung)

That is truly demeaning! Did it ever occur to you that maybe I take this all so seriously because I care so much! This is not just *your* day, you know. This is very much a family affair.

RACHEL

Maybe you should just have your own bat mitzvah.

MOTHER

When I was your age, young lady, I was not given that option!

(SHE storms out. RACHEL looks down at the Talmud book she has been holding and lets out a gasp of frustration.)

RACHEL

Aargh!..Rashi, where are you?

(RASHI and SHLOMO have entered.)

RASHI

Over here.

RACHEL

Here. I don't need this.

(SHE hands him the book.)

RASHI

You don't need the Talmud?

RACHEL

No. And I don't think I can go through with it. The bat mitzvah.

RASHI

You're not one for adversity, are you?

RACHEL

Adversity?

RASHI

Discomfort.

SHLOMO

Misfortune.

RASHI

Hardship!

RACHEL

Why are you blaming me? Didn't you hear what my mother just said? She hates me!

(SHE is in tears. Pause. RASHI looks at SHLOMO. Pause. RASHI gestures to SHLOMO as if to say "help her." SHLOMO walks over to RACHEL and slowly extends his arms towards her as if inviting her to hug him. RACHEL collapses into SHLOMO's arms in a manner that surprises him.)

SHLOMO

There, there.

RASHI

Rachel, your mother doesn't hate you. But I do believe she's frustrated.

RACHEL

And I'm not?!

(SHLOMO gently tries to extricate himself from RACHEL's grip but she is clinging hard to him.)

RASHI

(seeing an opening)

Well, can you imagine how frustrated Rakhel must feel right now?

(RACHEL throws SHLOMO off suddenly and is back to her "old self".)

RACHEL

Rakhel at least has Akiba's love, even if they're apart!

RASHI

I agree. But look what else is happening to Rakhel:

(HE points to another part of the stage where RAKHEL is speaking with a PEASANT WOMAN.)

PEASANT WOMAN

If only your father didn't employ my husband, you know I'd let you stay.

RAKHEL

It's all right, I understand. Thank you, anyway.

RASHI

(points to another part of the stage)

And listen there.

(BEN KALBA SAVUA appears beside BEN DAVID, his “lieutenant.”)

BEN DAVID

Did you know your daughter is sleeping in Nahum Ish Gamzu’s shack?

KALBA SAVUA

She is learning the price of defiance!

[Song: "WELCOME TO THE TALMUD" (Reprise)]

(During the musical intro, AKIBA and ENSEMBLE enter and direct themselves presentationally to RACHEL.)

RASHI

(sighing)

So you see, Rachel: parents and children -- it’s as old as time!

SOLO FEMALE ANCIENT

(placing a comforting hand on RAKHEL’s shoulder)

A FATHER OH SO STERN

SOLO MALE ANCIENT

(referring to AKIBA, who is poring over an open Torah scroll)

A MAN WITH MUCH TO LEARN

ENSEMBLE

THEIR STORIES MAKE YOU YEARN
TO FIND OUT WHAT’S IN STORE

ALL MALE ANCIENTS

THROUGH SACRIFICE AND STRAIN

ALL FEMALE ANCIENTS

RAKHEL MAY SOMEDAY GAIN

ENSEMBLE

BUT TIME WON’T EASE THE PAIN
SHE FEELS AND CAN’T IGNORE
(softly, as the ENSEMBLE slowly moves to surround RACHEL.)

OOH, AH

OOH, AH

(and continuing under:)

RACHEL

All of this happened two thousand years ago! Why should I care about any of it?

RASHI

You do care. And they care about you. Look how you impressed Rabbi Eliezer and Akiba!

(RABBI ELIEZER and AKIBA smile at RACHEL.)

RACHEL
(sarcastic)

I'm great with ancient people.

RASHI

And they might just help you find the answer to your dilemma.

RACHEL

I don't need your help!

ENSEMBLE

WELCOME TO THE TALMUD
WELCOME TO OUR CHOIR
WE COME TO ENLIGHTEN
INFORM AND INSPIRE!

RACHEL
(hands over ears)

Please go! All of you!

RASHI

Give up now, and who knows if you'll ever find out what happened to Rakhel and Akiba.

ENSEMBLE

OH WELCOME, AND PLEASE
CONSIDER IT--

RACHEL

Goodbye!

(With a wave of RACHEL's hand, the MUSIC comes to an abrupt halt.)

I'm sorry.

(The MUSIC resumes softly. All ANCIENTS slowly disappear except RASHI, who faces RACHEL silently for a moment. He places RACHEL's Talmud book down beside her, then turns and leaves. RACHEL watches him go, then looks back towards the book. SHE closes it*. LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.)

[END OF ACT ONE]

* As a holy book it cannot be placed on the floor. It could be placed on a chair or table, for example.

ACT TWO

(LIGHTS UP on RACHEL seated in RABBI's office, writing feverishly on her note pad. RABBI, seated across his desk from RACHEL, is reading something and appears distracted. A few beats of mad scribbling pass before RACHEL speaks:)

RACHEL

I can't believe how easy this is!

RABBI

Good. Keep going.

(RACHEL loudly flips a "finished" page over and begins writing at the top of a new page.)

RACHEL

This pad is definitely not blank!

RABBI

I'm very glad the ideas are so free-flowing for you, Rachel.

RACHEL

Its like, I'm not blocked!

RABBI

And whenever you're ready to share it, I'd love to--

RACHEL

--one more thing.

(Finishing a sentence emphatically, SHE stops writing and looks up, self-satisfied.)

There!

RABBI

Okay! Now read it to me. Just the way you'd want it heard.

RACHEL

May I stand?

RABBI

Of course!

(Summoning courage, RACHEL stands, faces forward, finds the first page,

and begins reading slowly and loudly:)

RACHEL

"Dear Mom,

[Song: "THE PERFECT MOTHER" MUSIC under.]

I know that lately we've been fighting a lot. I think the pressure of the bat mitzvah was getting to both of us, for different reasons. But if we both want to go through with it, and I believe we do, I think we can reach an understanding, and that would please our whole family.

RABBI

Excellent!

RACHEL

So look, I promise to stop locking myself in my room every night. All I ask is that you read this short list- - (SHE flips the page over excitedly) - - this short list of changes I'd like you to make."

(During the song, her brother, STUART and her friend, SARAH, appear to sing backup [see score], as if in her imagination. THEY disappear when the song ends.)

RABBI

Uh, Rachel--

RACHEL

--Wait, this is the good part!

(SHE sings:)

DON'T SAY YOU KNOW
WHAT I SHOULD WEAR
DON'T EVEN TRY TO SUGGEST
WHAT YOU THINK IS BEST FOR MY HAIR

DON'T SAY I'LL NEED
A PADDED BRA
OR TONS OF CREAMS
JUST TO COVER UP THE TINIEST FLAW.

DON'T SAY I CAN'T

HAVE CERTAIN FRIENDS
 WHEN ALL I'VE GOT ARE MY FRIENDS
 AND I WOULDN'T WANT ANY OTHER
 BUT IF YOU'D CHANGE
 THESE FEW SMALL THINGS
 THEN, YOU'D BE
 ON YOUR WAY TO BECOMING
 THE PERFECT MOTHER

RABBI

Well, Rachel, that's, that's--

RACHEL

--Do you think it's too strong?

RABBI

Well, I told you to be honest.

(As the scene continues, MOTHER, dressed in a terry-cloth bathrobe, enters the kitchen of the Cohen house, where an envelope awaits her on the table. It's before her bedtime, and the envelope surprises her. SHE opens it and begins to silently read the letter that RACHEL is in the process of writing. SHE is caught off guard and is alarmed by the tone of the letter. SHE makes various faces as she reads through the equivalent of the first section of the song from above.)

RACHEL

It's very honest!

RABBI

Maybe you could tone it down a bit? Keep it positive?

RACHEL

Good idea.

RABBI

Talk about what's important to you. Why you want to do the ceremony your way. What the party should be like, and why.

RACHEL

Yes, yes! Say no more!

(SHE begins to write again.)

MOTHER

(reading aloud)

"And as far as my party goes,"

RACHEL
 (singing as she continues to "write")
 DON'T STOP THE BAND
 AT FOUR O'CLOCK
 WHEN FOUR O'CLOCK'S THE HOUR
 THAT THE BAND
 REALLY STARTS TO ROCK

DON'T SAY WE CAN'T
 MAKE TOO MUCH NOISE
 IF ALL THAT MEANS IS
 YOU HAVEN'T CONQUERED
 YOUR FEAR OF BOYS

THERE'S ONE BOY BOB
 -YOU KNOW WHICH ONE-
 WELL THAT BOY BOB'S GOTTA COME
 'CAUSE I CONSIDER HIM LIKE A BROTHER

IF YOU'D AGREE
 TO EVERYTHING
 THEN YOU'D BE
 ON YOUR WAY
 TO BECOMING
 THE PERFECT MOTHER

MOTHER
 (wearily)
 DON'T STOP THE BAND
 AT FOUR O'CLOCK
 When we're picking up the trash?

DON'T SAY YOU CAN'T
 MAKE TOO MUCH NOISE

So now you're a shrink?

Oh please, not Bob!
 He set a fire in our house!

Over my dead body!

IF I'D AGREE
 Not to Bob!
 I WOULD BE
 ON MY WAY
 TO BECOMING
 THE PERFECT MOTHER

(During this next passage, MOTHER searches the kitchen for her own paper and pen, finds both, and will begin drafting her own answer to RACHEL's letter.)

RABBI
 Rachel, I don't know that you're taking the right approach.

RACHEL
 Should I just tell it to her face-to-face?

RABBI
 No! What I mean is--

RACHEL
 --keep it positive?

RABBI

Yes, and before you give it to her, you really ought to soften it. Things go down easier with honey. I have to go.

RACHEL

All right, I'll change it. I promise!

RABBI

Let me know what happens. (HE leaves.)

RACHEL

Let's see.

(RACHEL rereads what she has written, flips over to a new, blank page, and clicks her pen as she thinks for a moment. In the meantime, MOTHER has pen in hand and is ready.)

MOTHER
(writing)

Dear Rachel,

RACHEL (writing)

I KNOW
NOBODY'S REALLY PERFECT
'CAUSE PERFECT
IS REALLY HARD TO BE.
STILL, I KNOW
WE CAN ALL DO BETTER
THAT'S WHY THIS LETTER
MIGHT
HELP YOU SEE ANOTHER WAY

put next)

OR TWO, OR THREE, IF THAT'S OKAY
OH MOM, WHAT I'M TRYING TO SAY IS,
I COULD BE PERFECTLY HAPPY
off JUST BEING ME

MOTHER

I received your note,
and,
to tell the truth,
it's hard for me to understand
how you can think
that you're better off
without me!

(pausing to consider what to

I would be perfectly happy to back

EXCEPT THAT I'M YOUR
MOTHER, DEAR
SO TRUST ME, PLEASE.
ESPECIALLY HERE.
I SEE WHAT'S BEST FOR YOU
AS CLEAR AS A BELL!

RACHEL
SO SCRATCH THE CAKE
WITH GOBS OF FROSTING

MOTHER
TAKE A DEEP BREATH!
I'M YOUR FRIEND!

DON'T SPELL MY NAME IN PINK
AND BY THE WAY,
WHAT'S ALL OF THIS COSTING?

ONE DAY, YOU'LL SEE

I HATE BALLOONS
I WANNA POP 'EM
AND IF THEY TRY TO HANG A PINATA,
I SWEAR I'LL STOP 'EM!

THAT MOMMY KNOWS,
MOMMY CARES,

AND I ALWAYS WILL!

I COULD GO ON
I'LL KEEP IT SHORT
I'LL LOOK TO
COUNT ON YOUR SUPPORT
AND OUR LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

I COULD GO ON
I'LL KEEP THIS SHORT.
YOU CAN
COUNT ON MY SUPPORT
AND MY LOVE.
By the way, you misspelled "pinata".

IF YOU'D JUST LET
MY LIFE TAKE WING
THEN, YOU'D BE
ON YOUR WAY,
BET YOU ARE
ON YOUR WAY
TO BECOMING
THE PERFECT
MOTHER!
THE PERFECT MOTHER!
THE PERFECT
MOTHER!

IF YOU'D JUST LET ME
TAKE CARE OF EVERYTHING
YOU WOULD BE
ON YOUR WAY,
HOPE YOU ARE
ON YOUR WAY
TO BECOMING
THE PERFECT
DAUGHTER!
DAUGHTER!
THE PERFECT
DAUGHTER!

[End of song.]

(Over the final notes, RACHEL and MOTHER fold their letters, place them inside respective envelopes, seal each envelope, write each other's names on the respective envelopes, and throw them down with finality on their respective tables. SONG ends. MOTHER disappears.)

RACHEL

(calling out and looking around)

Rashi! Shlomo! Hello?! I think you'd want to know what's going on here! The letter? The one the rabbi had me write?

(In one swift motion, SHE makes a "gun" with her hand, points it at her head, and makes a single exploding sound.)

Backfired! I've never seen my mom so steamed! I mean, I thought I could get her to see my point-of-view, but instead, its like she's pretending I don't exist. Come on, guys!

Give a girl a break! (trying to lure them out) Say, how are Akiba and Rakhel doing? (A realization.)

The book! (SHE looks around frantically for her Talmud book.) Where did I put it? (SHE spots the book.) There! (SHE opens the book. A magical musical chord strikes.) The book is open!

RASHI

(appearing suddenly, arms folded)

Yes, but is the case closed?

(RACHEL turns to see RASHI and SHLOMO, as before. SHLOMO is working intensely on a crossword puzzle and appears to be engrossed.)

RACHEL

Hey! Boy, am I glad to see-- (Pause.) Okay, okay. You were right, I was wrong.

RASHI

And?

RACHEL

And, what you were saying...when I last saw you...something about my "dilemma"?

RASHI

Oh, that you "just might find the answer to your dilemma" in looking at the Talmud.

RACHEL

Yes! That! How does that work?

SHLOMO

(as if "stumped")

Rash, four letters, starting with a "p", map?

RASHI

Plan.

(SHLOMO enters the word "plan" into his crossword puzzle.)

Rachel, nothing is guaranteed.

RACHEL

I'll guarantee you this, in thirty days, I'm either a Bat or an embarrassment!

SHLOMO

Three letters, ends with an "e", bzzzz?

his (Without being too obvious that he knows the answer, SHLOMO twirls
hand around as if his fingertips were a bee.)

RASHI

Bee!

(SHLOMO gleefully enters "bee" into his puzzle.)

Do you remember when I said to you, "we'll get to your mother later"?

RACHEL

Yes?

RASHI

The time has come.

RACHEL

Huh?

(MOTHER, well-dressed, enters down left and faces audience. She is silently talking on a cell phone to a close friend.)

RASHI

To deal with your mother!

RACHEL

Now?

RASHI

Now, or never!

(HE points to MOTHER. RACHEL sees her and is startled.)

MOTHER

(into phone)

...oh I am so glad I called you... Right! I'll tell her that I simply will not be discounted. She has got to acknowledge that this is a group effort. A bat mitzvah is a family affair...Exactly. What can she do? Listen, thanks, sweetie, I'll keep you posted... Okay, bye!

(SHE pushes "end" on her cell phone. SHE dials a new number and begins a new conversation.)

RACHEL
Mom!

RASHI and SHLOMO
She can't hear you.

RACHEL
(a flustered moment, then):
Why is she doing this to me?

RASHI
She believes she's doing what's right.

RACHEL
It's not!

RASHI
Ben Kalba Savua thought what he did to Rakhel was right. Rakhel disagreed. Does that make him wrong?

RACHEL
Well, yes! But what does that have to do with--

RASHI
--Sh! You need to hear this:

MOTHER
(into phone)
You're telling *me* it'll be a big cake? I've got 500 people to feed!..And I have the lettering for the top layer, of course! Do you have a pencil?

(SHE clears her throat.)
"To our Rachel: Roses are red, violets are blue, no one's as wonderfully perfect as you."

RACHEL
(Pause. SHE is horrified. SHE cups her hands over her ears, closes her eyes and screams:)
Ahhhh!

(As MOTHER continues to talk silently with bakery shop employee,
SHLOMO

silently mouths the words "Plan B" to RASHI while emitting an "aren't-I-clever" grin; RASHI mimics SHLOMO's "bzzz" motion back as if to say, "Do you think I'm stupid?". RACHEL opens her eyes.)

RASHI

Rachel, your situation calls for extreme measures. We've got to act fast.

RACHEL

Okay.

RASHI

Your mother's first name?

RACHEL

Elaine.

SHLOMO
(jotting it in his book)

Elaine!

RACHEL

Wait, why?

RASHI

If you don't communicate to your mother what you're feeling about the Talmud, how do you expect her to share in your enthusiasm?

RACHEL

She won't listen!

RASHI

Then she'll just have to come along.

RACHEL

With us? No way!

RASHI
(sharply)

There is no other way!

[Song: "AN OPEN BOOK (Reprise)"]

OPEN HER EYES TO WHAT'S INSIDE HERE
SHE'LL BE SURPRISED BY ALL SHE SEES
NOTHING'S GAINED IF NOTHING IS TRIED HERE
SO BE WISE, DEAR:
SAY PLEASE

(MUSIC continues under.)

RACHEL

"Please, Mom, read this book?"

RASHI

(gesturing to MOTHER, who is wrapping up her conversation)
You'll find the right words.

(HE steps aside.)

MOTHER

It's a pleasure doing business with you, too. Goodbye.

(SHE pushes "end" on her cell phone, folds it up and turns to exit.
RACHEL moves towards her. MUSIC out.)

RACHEL

Mom?

MOTHER

(startled)

I thought you were upstairs.

RACHEL

I heard you talking. Look, I'm sorry about my letter.

MOTHER

You're sorry.

RACHEL

Please, Mom. (A beat.) There's something I want you to look at.

MOTHER

Rachel, you and I have a lot to discuss.

RACHEL

It's a book. The Rabbi gave it to me.

(SHE holds the Talmud out for MOTHER to see.)

It has magical powers.

MOTHER

So this is what you were practicing with the Rabbi? Magic?

RACHEL

If you'd only stop to read a little, maybe you'd understand me.

in (RACHEL tries to hand MOTHER the Talmud. MOTHER pushes it back
Rachel's direction.)

MOTHER
I understand you plenty well.

RACHEL
Please! Open it.

(RACHEL hands the book to MOTHER, who takes it, but does not open
it.)

MOTHER
The Talmud? I don't have time to read.

(MOTHER tries to hand the book back to RACHEL. RACHEL pushes it
back towards her.)

RACHEL
Please!

MOTHER
You're as stubborn as your father.
(SHE looks at the book.)
I don't know from history. And I don't believe in magic!

(On the word "magic" SHE opens the book. A magical musical chord
strikes.)

RASHI
Elaine?

MOTHER
(stopping in her tracks)
Hunh?

RASHI
Elaine Cohen?
(MOTHER looks all around. Still doesn't "see" him.)

MOTHER
Who's there?

RASHI

(stepping forward to where he can be seen)

Let's just say I'm a friend of your daughter.

(MOTHER sees RASHI and for a moment is frozen with incredulity.

SHE

can't imagine who it is.)

MOTHER

B-B-Bob?!

RACHEL

No, Mom. Relax! His name's Rashi. And this is Shlomo.

(SHLOMO steps forward.)

RASHI

My assistant and I were helping Rachel with one of the great stories of the Talmud. Are you familiar with Rakhel and Akiba?

MOTHER

Not really.

RASHI

Not a problem. May I fill you in?

(HE extends his elbow in a gentlemanly manner.)

MOTHER

Rachel?

RACHEL

(impatient)

What?

MOTHER

Is he--

RACHEL

--Yes, he's dead! Only right now, it's as if he's completely alive!

MOTHER

This is what I get for buying you "Harry Potter".

RASHI

Think of this as a temporary journey. You'll be back in no time at all.

SHLOMO

No real time.

RACHEL

Mom, do this for me. Please.

MOTHER

But I have an important meeting with the party planner. We're visiting the zoo! Do you have any idea what's involved in renting a camel?

RASHI

Come with me, and you'll ride one.

RACHEL

Please, Mom?

MOTHER
(acquiescing)

Okay.

(SHE accepts RASHI's arm. RASHI begins to slowly promenade across the stage with MOTHER on his arm, ultimately exiting.)

RASHI

Have you been to Israel?

MOTHER

Ages ago.

RASHI

The year is now 67 C.E., and Akiba, a former shepherd...

(His voice fades as they continue their conversation. RACHEL stands in disbelief for a moment.)

RACHEL

Just like that?

SHLOMO

He may be lacking in love, but not in charm.

(A beat.)

May I?

(SHLOMO extends his elbow in a manner identical to RASHI. RACHEL grabs his arm and both follow RASHI and MOTHER.)

RACHEL

So how is Rakhel? Did she get back with Akiba?

SHLOMO

Not yet. But they've exchanged some letters.

RACHEL

Really? What do the letters say?

SHLOMO

Well, a letter between two people is a very private thing.

(There is a beat as SHLOMO and RACHEL exchange a glance.

SHLOMO then

eagerly whispers words to a fascinated RACHEL. LIGHTS FADE TO

BLACK as

they exit. Scene changes to the Beit Midrash, some "ancient" years later. Several books sit open on the table. AKIBA is holding a letter from RAKHEL. HE has just read a humorous section of it aloud to MEIR. There is a burst of laughter from the two of them.)

MEIR

She has a sharp wit! Almost as sharp as yours!

AKIBA

(affectionately)

Ah, she puts me to shame!

MEIR

You are kind to read me her letters, Akiba.

AKIBA

There was a time *you* had to read them to *me*!

MEIR

A time long past!

(dreamily)

So, how does she end it?

AKIBA

She writes:

(HE reads)

"Waste not a worry. I am content with my life, patiently awaiting the day you are ready." And she signs it, "Your Loving Wife." I am indeed a lucky man.

MEIR
But, what does she mean by that?

AKIBA
By... what?

MEIR
“...the day you are ready.” “Ready” for what?

AKIBA
To return. To Jerusalem.

MEIR
To visit your Rakhel.

AKIBA
Not to visit. To live.

MEIR
(horrificed)
But how could you ever leave the Beit Midrash?!

AKIBA
(defensive)
Is it so strange to want to be with my wife? You know she can't live here. But even if she could,
I would choose to go back. I wouldn't spend the rest of my life at the study house.

MEIR
You should be so blessed -- to live out your days steeped in Torah!

AKIBA
You think I'm not grateful to be here?

MEIR
Then, how could you leave us--abandon the pursuit of Truth?!

AKIBA
Well, maybe I seek a different kind of truth.

MEIR
A fancy excuse!

AKIBA
(persisting)
The truth that comes from grasping knowledge and applying it in the world.

MEIR

Knowledge itself has value! It need not be applied.

AKIBA
(heating up)

Tell that to the farmer with no crop, who wonders if his sheep should be slaughtered.

MEIR
Where would I meet such a farmer?

AKIBA
My Friend, you forget. You are sitting with a shepherd. And what I learn here, I would like to share with others like me.

MEIR
Then let them come and study at the feet of Rabbi Eliezer. You did!

AKIBA
Not everyone can find their way here.

MEIR
(making a joke)
Shall we give them a map?

[Song: "ANYONE CAN!" MUSIC under.]

AKIBA
(stunned into silence for a moment. HE senses something.)
Yes! That's right! A "map!" That is exactly what we should give them!

MEIR
The road here may be winding, but surely it's not all that--

AKIBA
--No, no! Not that kind of map.

MEIR
What are you talking about?

AKIBA
(HE sings.)
WHY SHOULD THE TORAH
BE KEPT FROM THE AVERAGE MAN?
WHO GAINS FROM TORAH?
ANYONE CAN!

WHY SHOULD GOD'S TEACHINGS
BE CLAIMED BY A PRIVILEGED CLAN?
WHO CAN BEST LEARN FROM THEM?

ANYONE CAN!

IF WE'D OPEN WIDE THE BOOK
IT COULD BE SUCH A BLESSING!
SHOWING PEOPLE WHERE TO LOOK
FOR GUIDANCE THAT THEY NEED
COVER WORSHIP, FARMING, FOOD,
THE FINE DETAILS OF DRESSING
I'M GUESSING,
BUT THEY JUST MIGHT FEEL FREED!

JUST AS WHEN MOSES
FIRST MOVED US WITH GOD'S HOLY PLAN,
WE CAN MOVE MOUNTAINS
IF ANYONE CAN!

MEIR

And what mountain would you have us move? Mount Sinai?!

AKIBA

I am serious, My Friend. Just imagine a poor man picking olives on a Friday. Shabbat is coming quickly but he still has much harvesting to do. So, he needs to know how late he is permitted to work. But, when exactly does the Sabbath begin?

MEIR

Well, the Torah has many things to say on that subject--

AKIBA

--But, does he have time to sift through the Torah for his answer? With ten hungry children ...and a storm coming?!

MEIR

Well...maybe not--

AKIBA

Now,

(HE holds up his finger for silence. For a moment, HE is lost in thought, formulating a concept.)

...what if.... he had a book!?

MEIR

What do you mean, "a book?"

AKIBA

(both impatient and excited)

A book! Where all he had to do.... was turn to the section on observing the Sabbath....call it "Holidays" or "Seasons".... and there's his answer!

MEIR

But, where is such a book?

AKIBA

(emphatically tapping his own head)

Here, My Friend!

(HE points to MEIR's head, as well.)

And *here!*

(HE sings)

ALL THROUGH THE TORAH
ARE LAWS LAID SINCE EDEN BEGAN
LIST HOW TO FIND THEM
SO ANYONE CAN

MEIR

(trying it on for size)

Anyone can?

AKIBA

HIDDEN IN HIST'RY,
THOSE LAWS COVER QUITE A WIDE SPAN
SHOW HOW TO LIVE THEM
SO ANYONE CAN

MEIR

(echoing)

ANYONE CAN!

AKIBA

IF WE PUT THEM INTO GROUPS
THEY'RE EASIER TO FOLLOW
SHOULD OUR PEOPLE JUMP THROUGH HOOPS
TO SIMPLY KNOW WHAT'S RIGHT?
I SAY: SERVE IT ON A PLATE,
IT'S EASIER TO SWALLOW!
AND I KNOW,
AFTER A TASTE, THEY'LL BITE!

LIFE IS CHAOTIC
UNLESS YOU HAVE FAITH IN A PLAN
SURELY GOD MADE ONE,
AND WE'LL HAVE CONVEYED ONE,
THAT ANYONE,

ANYONE CAN!

(HE begins to play-act.)

Say, Farmer!

(MEIR looks around. HE is confused.)

Yes, you!...With the olive trees?...Shabbat coming?

MEIR

(catching on, after a moment)

Oh!...Yes?

AKIBA

Do you have that new book?

MEIR

The book...Why, yes, Neighbor,.... it's right here.

(HE pulls out imaginary "book." His play-acting is awkward.)

AKIBA

I need to know: shall I plant seeds next year or let my fields lie fallow? What does your book say?

MEIR

It says, well, let me look under--

AKIBA

--"Seeds!"

MEIR

Yes, "Seeds!" That would be a good place to find information. On seeds.

AKIBA

I agree, but wait! Something's come up! We found a dead cockroach in our oven!

MEIR

What a shame!

AKIBA

For the cockroach?

MEIR

For the oven! You'll have to get it purified!

AKIBA

Are you sure?

MEIR
 (pointing to a new “spot”)
 Well, it says so right here. Under...”Purities.”

AKIBA
 (as himself, for a moment)
 “Purities!” Excellent!

MEIR
 (gloating a bit)
 Sure! Where else would you look for a question on koshering?

AKIBA
 (taking him down a peg)
 Well, I might look under “Holy Things.”

MEIR
 (humbled)
 That’s also good.

(MEIR, suddenly competitive, turns to yet a new “spot.”)
 Say, have you seen this section yet? “Civil Law and Damages!”

AKIBA
 (as “Neighbor,” again)
 No, but that should help me decide what to do with your wandering goats!

MEIR
 My wandering goats?!

AKIBA
 They ate the bark off all my trees!

MEIR
 (attempting humor)
 You’ve got to be....kid-ding!

AKIBA
 I am, but all joking aside, what’s with that chapter?

MEIR
 What?

AKIBA
Look how thick it is!

MEIR
Oh. You mean the one about--

AKIBA
--"Women."

MEIR
Yes. (HE chuckles.) It should be its own book!

AKIBA
And I see you're having trouble with your wife.

MEIR
What makes you say that?

AKIBA
The pages are practically falling out.

MEIR
Oh. Just a little research.

(THEY laugh together. AKIBA sings.)

AKIBA
(sings)
IF WE'D OPEN WIDE THE BOOK

MEIR
IT COULD BE SO EXCITING!

AKIBA
SHOWING PEOPLE WHERE TO LOOK

MEIR
FOR WHEN IT'S PRIME TO PRAY.

AKIBA
LIKE A LANTERN IN A STORM

BOTH
THE DARKNESS WE'D BE LIGHTING

AKIBA

IGNITING

BOTH
SOMETHING AS BRIGHT AS DAY!

WHY CAN'T THE TORAH
BE USED BY THE AVERAGE MAN?
WE'LL SPREAD THE TORAH
FROM S'FAT TO GOMORRAH
SO ANYONE, ANYONE CAN!
ANYONE, ANYONE CAN!

[End of song.]

(THEY exit, arm in arm. RASHI, MOTHER, RACHEL, and SHLOMO emerge from the wings. MOTHER separates herself from the rest, and goes looking around inquisitively. SHE becomes increasingly agitated during the following:)

RASHI

And so, in the months and years to come, Akiba and Meir continued to give shape to their ideas--

SHLOMO

--and others joined in--

RASHI

--Yes, until they settled on the six sections that, to this day, comprise the Mishnah, half of the modern Talmud.

SHLOMO

Gemara is the other half.

RACHEL

I get it. Akiba's not just in this book, he wrote it!

RASHI

Well, he began it. Then, people like me come along, and it keeps growing and growing and is something the matter?..Mrs. Cohen!

MOTHER

What happened to the table? And the chairs?

RACHEL

Mom!

RASHI

They're gone. We've left the Beit Midrash.

MOTHER

So you can just pick up and go anywhere you want?

RASHI

Well...

SHLOMO

We go wherever Rachel leads us.

MOTHER

I see. Then...

(grabbing Rachel's arm)

...lead me home!

RACHEL

No! I have to see Rakhel. You have to see her!

MOTHER

Why? Do I really need to see the poor girl practically starve herself so her husband can bury his nose in a book? Yet once again, the woman is less important!

RASHI

She's not starving.

MOTHER

You told me she sacrificed a life of guaranteed comfort.

RASHI

Yes, but--

RACHEL

(to SHLOMO)

--I knew this was a bad idea!

MOTHER

(to RASHI)

Mr. Rashi, I mean no disrespect, but from my point of view, the wife gives up everything so the man can go dabble in philosophy. There's a word for their relationship, but it's not "marriage"!

RACHEL

As usual, Mom, you've missed the point. First of all, Akiba's not dabbling! He's the real deal! And second, Rakhel doesn't care about "comfort". If it was "comfort" she was after, she could have had any wealthy man she wanted. But she rejected all of them.

(with difficulty)

She's following her heart!

(Pause.)

SHLOMO

Rakhel is indeed an impressive woman, Mrs. Cohen. Not unlike yourself.

(RACHEL's eyes widen; SHLOMO motions to her to back down.)

You might be surprised.

MOTHER

Alright. This I gotta see.

RASHI

Rachel, your mother's not the only one questioning the choice Rakhel has made.

RACHEL

How so?

RASHI

There are others, of all walks, who are wondering how long she can--

SHLOMO

--Rash!

RASHI

Yes, I shouldn't spoil it. Come!

(ALL exit. Scene shifts to a small shop. RAKHEL is working at a spinning wheel, humming contentedly. SHE is surrounded by baskets filled with skeins of spun and dyed wool. A well dressed, haughty woman, MARTA BAT BAITUSI, appears in the doorway. The "Moderns" appear in the shadows, observing the scene.)

MARTA

Shalom, Rakhel.

RAKHEL

Marta, what a surprise!

MARTA

Are you open for business?

RAKHEL

I have never known you to do your own shopping.

MARTA

I wanted to see how you were doing.

RAKHEL

Never better.

MARTA

(looking around)

You needn't put up a front, Rakhel. I do have eyes.

RAKHEL

(sharply)

And a tongue!

(There is an uncomfortable silence.)

RAKHEL (continued)

I'm sorry. That was unkind.

MARTA

And I'm sorry you feel that my concern merits mockery!

RAKHEL

You didn't deserve that. (Pause) Now, what can I get for you? I have yarns of many colors.

MARTA

Why don't you give me...five skeins of each. I know how hard you must struggle to feed yourself.

(RAKHEL restrains herself from reacting, as SHE begins to collect the wool.)

You know, Rakhel, I have made some inquiries...and Rabban Gamliel says that this...marriage of yours...did not really "take." It could easily be annulled. After all, the shepherd abandoned you right after the wedding--if you can call it a wedding without a single witness.

RAKHEL

God was our witness.

(MUSIC under: "A CROWN OF STRAW")

And my husband did not "abandon" me. He went - with my blessing - to study Torah.

MARTA

Your blessing perhaps, but not your father's.

RAKHEL

He sent you!

MARTA

You know you can still restore your family's honor.

RAKHEL

And he can come and tell me that himself.

MARTA

Your father is in great despair...if you care to know.

RAKHEL

I've tried to visit him. He won't see me.

MARTA

Can you blame the man? You've humiliated him!

RAKHEL

(flabbergasted)

I've--?! How? By marrying a great soul?

MARTA

A shepherd!? You could have had anyone! A house with gardens! And servants!
Instead...look at this life you're condemned to!

RAKHEL

Not "condemned!"

(SHE sings)

[song: "NOT ANOTHER MAN (Reprise)"]

NOT ANOTHER WAY CAN I IMAGINE SPENDING TIME
KNOWING THAT AKIBA IS A SCHOLAR NOW, MEANS I'M CONTENTED

MANY OTHER MEN
MIGHT OFFER COMFORT AND EASE

PROMISING A LIFE
WHERE I COULD DO AS I PLEASE

BUT WOULD SUCH LIVING PLEASE ME?
COULD SUCH COMFORT DO?
WHEN YOU FIND A MAN SO TRUE...

(RAKHEL hands MARTA a basket full of yarns she has selected.)

MARTA
I don't begin to understand, Rakhel.

(SHE hands RAKHEL three large purses filled with coins.)

Here...will this be enough?

RAKHEL
(returning all but one of them)
I don't need your charity, Marta.

MARTA
(shaking her head)
You need a lot more than that.

(MARTA leaves.)

RAKHEL
(throws down the purse of coins)
TELL ME I'M ROMANTIC
AS I TELL YOU TRUE
NOT ANOTHER MAN WILL DO
NOT ANOTHER MAN, BUT YOU!

(RACHEL and MOTHER step forward to examine RAKHEL more closely; RASHI and SHLOMO follow behind. RAKHEL disappears. There is an awkward pause as RACHEL stares at her MOTHER.)

RACHEL
So?

MOTHER
It all makes sense.

RACHEL

You see, she is so amazing! Thank you, Mom. I know you really didn't want to come here, but aren't you glad now that you--

MOTHER

--It makes sense that you would be so affected by the girl's story.

RACHEL

Hunh?

MOTHER

The brashness, the flying in the face of common sense--

RACHEL

--wait, wait, wait! Are you saying Rakhel should have agreed to dump him?!

MOTHER

No, I'm just saying that I can see how you would think that Rakhel would be right to reject the annulment.

RACHEL

And you think she was wrong?

MOTHER

You want to know what I think? I think she's crazy -- giving up her *own* future so she can slave for a man?! It's pathetic. And she clearly doesn't think how her poor father must feel. Imagine, raising a fine young woman- and so wonderfully attractive- and what does the daughter do? Turns her father into the laughingstock of the community. No, Rakhel is no angel. She is as self-deluding and flawed a human being as they come. And that, my precious angel, is what I think!

(A short pause. RACHEL stewes over what MOTHER has just said.)

RASHI

I can see we may have a difference of opinion.

RACHEL

(angrily, almost shaking with emotion)

So Mom, you don't believe in True Love?

MOTHER

(caustic)

It's not true love, it's spite! Rakhel was spoiled rotten and now she's spiteful!

RACHEL

(screaming)

Ahhhh! How can you say that?

MOTHER

I just did.

RACHEL

(Taking an aggressive step towards her mother, RACHEL makes a threatening gesture as she is about to say the word "you"):

I -- hate --

(A magical musical chord strikes, and RACHEL freezes in position, as does MOTHER, in a defensive posture that is oddly comical, all simultaneously with):

RASHI

(singing a loud "cantorial" riff)

AH-----

(MUSIC under.)

SHLOMO

Cutting it a teeny bit close, wouldn't you say?

RASHI

Close is good. They both got to let off steam.

SHLOMO

(with pad in hand, "ready-to-go")

My pencil is sharp.

RASHI

I haven't found the words yet.

SHLOMO

I love it when you're pushed to your oratorical limits.

RASHI

Well, I may need back-up on this one. Okay, let 'er rip!

(Song: "OLD AS TIME." With a hand motion from SHLOMO, RACHEL is "unfrozen" and finishes her sentence. MOTHER remains "frozen" in her stance throughout the entire song.)

RACHEL

--YOU! (SHE notices her MOTHER is still "frozen.") What's happening?! (SHE turns to RASHI) Tell me what's happening!

RASHI

Standard policy: "No Train Wrecks Allowed!"

(RACHEL waves her hand in front of her MOTHER's face and gets no reaction.)

RACHEL

I see. This is kind of like: "Situation normal!" Nothing gets through! You don't know how that feels!

RASHI

Oh yes, Rachel, I think I do. And I suspect I'm not alone.

(HE gestures towards other ANCIENTS as THEY appear. HE sings.)

THERE'S A VOICE INSIDE OF YOU
A VOICE THAT'S ANCIENT AS IT'S NEW
CRYING: "TELL HER, HOW SHE TREATS YOU IS A CRIME!"
AND THIS LONGING TO REVEAL
EV'RY HURT YOU FEEL
IS A LONGING THAT IS OLD AS TIME

OLD AS TIME
OLD AS TIME
I KNOW THAT I'M NOT THE FIRST TO SAY
THAT HOWEVER MUCH YOU RAGE
YOU CANNOT ESCAPE YOUR AGE
YET WITH PATIENCE, YOU WILL MAKE YOUR WAY

RACHEL

But, it's hard to keep track of where I'm supposed to be going!

RASHI

(sympathetic)

I know. I know.

FIRST FEMALE ANCIENT

THERE'S A CHOICE AT EVERY TURN

SECOND FEMALE ANCIENT

YOU LEARN TO TAKE THE TIME TO CHOOSE

BOTH & MALE ANCIENT

AND YOU STUMBLE, EVEN WHEN YOU'RE IN YOUR PRIME

AKIBA & RAKHEL

THERE ARE CHANCES THAT YOU TAKE
WITH EACH CHOICE YOU MAKE

ALL OF THE ABOVE
NEEDING COURAGE THAT IS OLD AS TIME

RASHI (backed by ENSEMBLE)

OLD AS TIME
OLD AS TIME
I KNOW I WON'T BE THE LAST TO SAY
THAT WHENEVER YOU FEEL LOST,
UNMOORED AND TEMPEST-TOSSED,
IF YOU SAIL ON, GOD WILL LIGHT YOUR WAY

THREE FEMALE ANCIENTS
YOU QUESTION: ARE YOUR PARENTS REALLY ON YOUR SIDE?

THREE OR MORE MALE ANCIENTS
ARE TEACHERS THERE TO TEST YOU OR TO TEACH?

ENSEMBLE
ADULTS MIGHT UNDERVALUE WHAT YOU HOLD WITH PRIDE
AND COMPROMISE SEEMS EVER OUT OF REACH

RASHI
YOU'RE NOT ALONE IN ALL OF THIS
FOR TRUTH BE TOLD...,

RASHI, AKIBA, RAKHEL, BEN KALBA SAVUA
WE ALL AT SOME POINT WONDER

BEN KALBA SAVUA
AND WONDERING ITSELF IS OLD AS TIME

RACHEL
That's right! The bible says to honor your parents, but what if they don't honor you...and what *you* think is important?!

(SHE drops her head, moping.)

RASHI
Growing up can be like walking a tightrope-- it's best if you look ahead...(HE lifts her chin)...not down!

ALL
OLD AS TIME
OLD AS TIME
I KNOW THAT I'M NOT THE FIRST TO SAY
THAT WHATEVER PATH YOU TAKE

she was (SHLOMO helps RACHEL move back to the position she was in when about to finish the sentence "I hate you".)

RASHI

In a moment, your mom will snap back to life. You'll pick up the conversation with her exactly where you left off. Okay?

RACHEL

You mean?!--

RASHI

--Don't worry, you'll find the right words.

RACHEL

Stop saying that!

(A magical musical chord strikes. MOTHER "snaps" back to life. RASHI and SHLOMO retreat a bit. MUSIC under.)

MOTHER

Wha? Where? What were you saying?

RACHEL

I... ha.. (SHE cannot bring herself to say the word "hate.")

MOTHER

Yes?

RACHEL

I... ha..

MOTHER

Say it.

(MUSIC out.)

RACHEL

I...have an idea.

MOTHER

Hunh?

RACHEL

Uh, yes, I've been thinking. Wouldn't it be better if we could both just, "sail on?"

MOTHER

Wha?!

RACHEL

(mimicking RASHI's previous gesture during "OLD AS TIME")
"Sail on."

(MOTHER mimics RACHEL's gesture, but is still confused.)

RASHI

Uh, Rachel's trying to tell you that--

RACHEL

(quickly, half-embarrassed)
--we shouldn't give up on each other.

MOTHER

Oh.

(MOTHER repeats the "sail on" gesture.)

"Sail on." Okay. As long as it's a two-way ocean.

(The sound of thunder fades away.)

SHLOMO

Hey, the sun just pierced the clouds!

RASHI

Baruch HaShem! Come, there's another storm elsewhere, but it's the kind none of us can afford to miss!

(The MUSIC of "OLD AS TIME" wells up as RASHI escorts the others off. RACHEL is the last to exit. SHE turns to observe a single spotlight which represents the sun. SHE feels empowered. FADE TO BLACK. Scene changes to the Beit Midrash. AKIBA and RABBI ELIEZER appear to be in the midst of an argument.)

RABBI ELIEZER

So, this is all about the wife, then?

AKIBA

Not just the wife. But yes, I want to see my Rakhel.

RABBI ELIEZER

And for that you would not only leave us for good, but take with you nearly all of my best students?

AKIBA

They are choosing to go.

RABBI ELIEZER

I find that hard to--

AKIBA

But some have sworn they will return here, as soon as they have been with me in Jerusalem--

RABBI ELIEZER

Nonsense!

(HE slams his fist down loudly on a table. There is a tense pause.)

AKIBA

Look, I know how you must feel. When I was a shepherd, every so often I would have to say goodbye to part of my flock. And that wasn't so easy. Thanks to you, I am no longer a shepherd, and now, I, Meir, your other students- the ones who are going- feel as though we are being called away. Pulled by a power so undeniable we are compelled to either let ourselves be swept up in it, or hide our heads and pretend that the power does not exist. But it does exist!

RABBI ELIEZER

Don't tell me this is God's doing!

AKIBA

I can't say who or what is responsible. I only know that the ideas that Meir and I began discussing months ago and which have preoccupied so many minds, and dominated so many discussions here--

RABBI ELIEZER

--to the exclusion of real study!

AKIBA

(inflamed)

Oh, but how can you say what is "real study" and what is not? Is the study any less "real" if concerned men are debating how Torah can have meaning and purpose for real people in real life?

(A silence.)

RABBI ELIEZER

(HE has heard.)

I guess, like everything else, even the issue of what makes study "real" has more than one side.

(HE sings.)

[Song: "BOTH SIDES OF AN ISSUE (Reprise)"]

THE DAY I TOOK YOU IN
I NEVER WOULD HAVE GUESSED
THE SHEPHERD WHO COULD BARELY READ
WOULD SOON LEAD ALL THE REST

AKIBA
OH, HOW THE TABLES TURN

BOTH
JUST LOOK AT US TODAY

RABBI ELIEZER
YOU, INTENT ON LEAVING

AKIBA
YOU, ENTREATING ME TO STAY!

RABBI ELIEZER
I guess this is what the Almighty might call one of Life's little ironies.
(Suddenly serious.)
You'll leave behind a great hole.

AKIBA
It was *you* who turned my mind into a shovel. And taught me how to dig.

BOTH
SEEING BOTH SIDES OF AN ISSUE
CAN BE PAINFUL FOR A FRIEND

AKIBA
WHEN ONE SEES A NEW BEGINNING

RABBI ELIEZER
WHILE THE OTHER SEES AN END

BOTH
THOUGH THESE PARTNERS NOW ARE PARTING
AT A PLACE WE DON'T AGREE
WHEN YOU'RE GONE
YOU'LL STILL LIVE ON
INSIDE OF ME

(A clarinet continues the plaintive melody under.)

AKIBA

(extending his hand)

Well, I should go now, Rabbi--

RABBI ELIEZER

(interrupting)

Please, call me Eliezer.

AKIBA

(touched)

"Eliezer." It has truly been an--

RABBI ELIEZER

(dignifying AKIBA for the first time with the title...)

--No, "*Rabbi*" Akiba...the honor has been mine!

(THEY shake...then hug.)

[End of song.]

(BLACKOUT. RABBI ELIEZER and AKIBA exit. RASHI, SHLOMO, RACHEL and MOTHER enter.)

RASHI

And from that moment on, Akiba-the-shepherd became Rabbi Akiba to all those who knew him.

SHLOMO

And even those who didn't.

MOTHER

What happens now?

RASHI

They will head to Jerusalem. Rabbi Akiba, that is, and hundreds of disciples.

SHLOMO

Thousands.

RACHEL

And we get to go. Right?

RASHI

Yes, but there are two ways to go. One, as dispassionate observers.

SHLOMO

The other, as passionate participants.

RASHI

The two of you must choose: either the first way?

SHLOMO

Or the second.

(RASHI places his hand on RACHEL's shoulder and gently nudges her towards MOTHER.)

RASHI

Choose. Together.

(MUSIC under. RASHI and SHLOMO take a step back. RACHEL and MOTHER eye each other uncomfortably for a moment.)

MOTHER

Uh, we're better off watching.

RACHEL

No, Mom. Look, it's really fun! You get to talk with ancient people. And when it's over, it's like nobody knows you were even there!

(RABBI AKIBA enters wearing a colorful new robe. He is followed by a weary MEIR. In mime, they carry on a heated conversation. One or two weary OTHERS trail MEIR. They are all carrying bags.)

MOTHER

And that's how I prefer to be. Invisible!

RACHEL

(seeing AKIBA and MEIR)

Look! You see them there? You can't tell me you wouldn't like to just walk over and strike up a conversation with them, could you?

(RACHEL starts to pull a reluctant MOTHER closer to AKIBA.)

MOTHER

Please, I'm wearing high heels!

RACHEL

Come on!

(SHLOMO thinks to stop RACHEL, but RASHI motions to him to "let her learn for herself".)

RACHEL
Ahem! Rabbi Akiba? Rabbi Akiba?

RABBI AKIBA
(to MEIR)
Wait!

MEIR
What is it?

RABBI AKIBA
I thought I heard something.

MEIR
You're always hearing voices. It's probably God trying to convince you that we all have got to stop and set up camp for the night!

(Pause.)

RABBI AKIBA
Right.
(Clearly exhausted, MEIR slings his bag off his shoulder and eagerly sits down. HE signals OTHERS to sit. MEIR pulls out a gourd from his bag and drinks water. HE pours a little water on his face. RABBI AKIBA remains standing. HE is lost in thought.)

MOTHER
You see? He doesn't like us.

RACHEL
He doesn't see us!

RASHI
I'm afraid it will be difficult to engage Akiba in conversation just now.

RACHEL
Why?

[Song: "UP TO YOU (Reprise)"]

(RABBI AKIBA begins humming a melody. He takes a notebook out and makes some notes for an upcoming speech.)

RASHI

Rabbi Akiba has a great deal on his mind. His legion of followers is growing. Word of the human caravan is spreading throughout the countryside. A large crowd is rumored to be congregating in Jerusalem to greet him. What will he say to the gathered masses?

RABBI AKIBA

(HE sings introspectively; MEIR and OTHERS are oblivious:)

UP TO YOU
IT IS ALWAYS UP TO YOU
WHAT YOU SAY
AND WHAT YOU DO
IS UP TO YOU

(MUSIC under. As AKIBA hums, he is joined by offstage VOICES.)

RASHI

And when he finally sees Rakhel, what will he do?

SHLOMO

And what of Ben Kalba Savua?

RASHI

What will Akiba say to him?

SHLOMO

What will he say to Akiba?

RACHEL
(overloaded)

So many questions!

RASHI

The only way to get through to Akiba now would be for you to join the throng!

MOTHER

Hold on now! Throng, shmong!! I am not going to let my daughter go off and get squashed among the raucous, unwashed, ancient masses! Even if they *are* Jewish.

RACHEL

This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me! For us!

RASHI

Rachel cannot go unless you go, too, Mrs. Cohen. That's the deal.

MOTHER

So you're saying it's either the front row or the skybox?

RABBI AKIBA and RASHI

WISELY CHOOSE

WILL YOU GAIN OR WILL YOU LOSE?

ANCIENT CHORUS joins in

CAN YOU PUT YOURSELF IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES--?

MOTHER

('enough already!')

--I'll do it, I'll do it!

(SHE removes her high heels.)

RACHEL

You will, Mom? "Join the throng"?

MOTHER

Gotta give the heels a rest some time.

(RACHEL gives MOTHER a hug.)

RASHI

Ladies, no time to dawdle. Much to prepare! Come!

(RASHI exits briskly. RACHEL follows. SHLOMO whispers to MOTHER his ideas on a change of wardrobe for her as they exit together. The last strain of "UP TO YOU" plays as AKIBA puts his notebook away, sits down next to MEIR, and falls asleep with the OTHERS as LIGHTS FADE to BLACK. MUSIC under. At rise, BEN KALBA SAVUA is seated in a throne-like chair in his home. Standing to one side, ORNA, a female servant, pours him wine from a copper carafe.)

KALBA SAVUA

Is it sweet?

ORNA

Yes, of course.

(SHE hands him a goblet.)

The one you always like.

(HE drinks. BEN DAVID enters unannounced. Seeing the servant, BEN DAVID appears anxious. MUSIC out.)

BEN DAVID

Oh, pardon me. Perhaps I should come back-

KALBA SAVUA

-No, please! Stay! Would you care for some wine? Orna!- (HE beckons her.)

BEN DAVID

-No thank you.

KALBA SAVUA

Well? What brings you?

BEN DAVID

About tomorrow.

KALBA SAVUA

Ah, yes.

BEN DAVID

Have you come to a decision?

KALBA SAVUA

(mockingly)

On the visit of the "Great Rabbi"?

(HE sips more wine.)

I will go. If only out of curiosity.

BEN DAVID

And?

(HE affects a cough; KALBA SAVUA appears not to understand; BEN DAVID leans in and whispers:)

What about the servants? May they go?

KALBA SAVUA

No need to whisper, Ben David.

(loudly)

All my staff may attend!

(HE signals ORNA. BEN DAVID and ORNA seem enthusiastic.)

Why should they miss an opportunity to experience a false prophet?

(HE hands ORNA the depleted goblet.)

We all have to drink from the cup of disenchantment.

(BEN DAVID and ORNA eye each other despairingly. BLACKOUT.

SPOTLIGHT up on a corner where RABBI AKIBA has just handed MESSENGER a letter.)

RABBI AKIBA

It's a small yarn shop. Make sure to give it to her when there's no one else around. I don't want word to get back to her father. Not just yet.

MESSENGER

B'seder. (In Hebrew, b'seder means "okay")

(HE/SHE goes. LIGHTS UP to full revealing RABBI AKIBA beside a string of followers including MEIR and OTHERS on a tree-lined road.)

RABBI AKIBA

(loudly)

Now, my friends, are you ready for another chorus?

(Some impromptu reaction from the OTHERS. ALL begin to march jauntily as they sing a capella):

RABBI AKIBA
A SIMPLE SHAWL

MEIR and OTHERS

A SIMPLE SHAWL

A SIMPLE SHAWL

MORE GORGEOUS THAN THE
ROYAL ROBES OF SOLOMON AND SAUL

A SIMPLE SHAWL

SOLOMON AND--

POOR WOMAN ON ROAD

(appearing suddenly from behind a tree)

I have a simple shawl! It is tattered and torn, but just big enough to cover both of us as we lay at night.

(The WOMAN's young SON emerges from behind her. AKIBA and OTHERS have stopped in their tracks.)

RABBI AKIBA

You needn't own a shawl, or anything, Madam, to march in our parade.

WOMAN

So you're Rabbi Akiba?

RABBI AKIBA

I am.

WOMAN

May we join you?

RABBI AKIBA

Of course. Take any place in line. Would you like some food? Give them food, please!

(The WOMAN and SON move behind MEIR and OTHERS as RABBI AKIBA resumes:)

THOUGH WEALTHY MEN WEAR LINEN
WHILE WAILING AT THE WALL

(RACHEL and MOTHER suddenly appear roadside. THEY are in ancient garb, but relatively well-dressed, both with elegant shawls.)

RACHEL
(jumping out)

I have a simple shawl.

MOTHER

I have a simple shawl.

(RABBI AKIBA does a double-take.)

RABBI AKIBA

Why, our song has been heard throughout the land, then? Yes?

RACHEL

Oh, yes. We heard it from.. way yonder!

RABBI AKIBA

Do I know you? What village would you be from?

RACHEL

Village? Oh, well, you could say I'm from a village, but that's not how--

RABBI AKIBA

--From where then?

MOTHER

She's from Greenwich Village.

RACHEL

Oh, this is my mom...uh...my mother.

MOTHER

A pleasure.

RABBI AKIBA

Greenwich Village? Hmm, I once knew all the towns on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

MOTHER

It's a new one.

RABBI AKIBA

That would explain it. Care to join us? We will be entering the city square tomorrow at noon.

MOTHER

Certainly.

RABBI AKIBA

And if you wouldn't mind, I'd like the two of you at my side. Let all Jerusalem see that our followers come from near as well as far.

RACHEL and MOTHER

Okay.

RABBI AKIBA

(for all to hear)

Friends, let your voices be heard echoing from here to-? (HE looks at MOTHER.)

MOTHER

Greenwich Village.

RABBI AKIBA

Greenwich Village!

(As ALL sing again, they exit, marching. We observe that RASHI and SHLOMO have inconspicuously blended in.)

RABBI AKIBA

A SIMPLE SHAWL

A SIMPLE SHAWL

MORE GORGEOUS THAN THE
ROYAL ROBES OF SOLOMON AND SAUL

ALL OTHERS

A SIMPLE SHAWL

A SIMPLE SHAWL

SOLOMON AND

SAUL

THOUGH WEALTHY MEN WEAR LINEN
WHILE WAILING AT THE WALL

WHEN CALLED TO PRAYER
PRAYER

I WOULD RATHER WEAR
A SIMPLE SHAWL

WHEN CALLED TO

I WOULD RATHER WEAR
A SIMPLE SHAWL

(MUSIC continues. AKIBA and his followers vanish as RAKHEL appears on another part of the stage, alone in her yarn shop. SHE has just finished reading the letter RABBI AKIBA has sent ahead.)

RAKHEL

At last!!

SHE reaches into a special hiding place and pulls out the “crown of straw” that AKIBA had made for her years before. Singing the melody wordlessly, SHE places the “crown of straw” on her head, and begins to dance around the shop, clutching the letter to her breast. As SHE does so, MARTA BAT BAITUSI returns to the shop. SHE watches RAKHEL incredulously for a moment.)

MARTA

Have you lost your senses along with everything else?!

RAKHEL

(looking up, smiling)

So it would seem!

(MARTA stands awkwardly for a moment , unsure of how to interpret RAKHEL’s mood.)

MARTA

Well...I have what I *hope* will be good news.

RAKHEL

(stops dancing)

More?

MARTA

(ignoring her)

When I told your father how dire your circumstances were, he agreed to take pity and help you out with a small stipend--

(RAKHEL is too ecstatic about her husband’s imminent return to take offense.)

RAKHEL

(interrupting)

--Marta, I now see that under it all, you really do mean well.

MARTA

I imagine that was meant as a compliment. I would think your father's generosity might give you some actual cause for dancing.

RAKHEL

Oh, I already have cause!

MARTA

Oh?

RAKHEL

(almost mischievously)

Have you not heard? There's a great rabbi coming to Jerusalem! He will speak by the Western Wall this very day.

MARTA

If I thought the orations of some rabbi could fill one's belly, I would understand your glee--!

(RAKHEL grabs MARTA's hands and starts spinning her around.)

RAKHEL

--Oh, Marta, Marta! Come with me, and you *will* understand!

(SHE releases MARTA, grabs her own "simple shawl," then, threading her arm through MARTA's again, escorts her out the door. The shop disappears, and the two women join others gathered in the streets of Jerusalem to hear RABBI AKIBA speak. As the scene opens, AKIBA is addressing the throng which includes RACHEL and MOTHER. There is a great burst of laughter from the crowd. His good natured humor is winning them over.)

CROWD MEMBER

(shouting merrily)

No one told us the Great Rabbi was also a jokester!

RABBI AKIBA

Laughter opens the heart, my friends...and the ears! And now, a parable: One night, our blessed patriarch, Jacob, having fled into exile from his father's wrath, lay down, exhausted, in the wilderness. Nothing but a hard stone could he find for a pillow. But, so tired was he, no sooner did he rest his head, than he began to dream. He dreamed of a magnificent ladder, connecting earth to heaven and heaven to earth.

RACHEL

(aside, whispering)

Mom, it's my Torah portion!

MOTHER
(drawn into RABBI AKIBA's story)

Shh!

RABBI AKIBA
I, too, had a dream--of another sort of ladder...one that also connects earth to heaven. And as a good ladder should, it will help anyone who needs a little leg up. When you climb it, and look back down, you will be able to see the very earth you trod upon every day, with just a little more perspective. And the higher you climb, the more you understand how your life on earth may be led.

CROWD MEMBER
Where can we find this "ladder?"

MEIR
(excitedly)
It is a book! Of study!

BEN DAVID
A book?!

RABBI AKIBA
My friend speaks true. This "ladder" will come to be called the Talmud.

(AKIBA reveals a shiny book that he had been concealing.)

MARTA
But we already have five holy books. Why do we need another?

RABBI AKIBA
Why? (HE laughs.) Thank you for asking! Why is the act of interpreting the holy books left only to the scholars?

(Some hubbub among the CROWD.)

KALBA SAVUA
(loudly)
Because you can see what we do not.

(Hushed silence in the CROWD.)

Or so we're told.

RABBI AKIBA

(holding up the book)
 Yes, but with this “ladder” anyone can see as far as the eye will take them.

[Song: “ANYONE CAN (Reprise)”]

MEIR
 Anyone!

KALBA SAVUA
 Anyone?!

RABBI AKIBA
 (sings)
 WHY SHOULD THE TORAH
 BE KEPT FROM THE AVERAGE MAN?
 WHO GAINS FROM TORAH?

MEIR and RABBI AKIBA
 ANYONE CAN!

RABBI AKIBA
 WHY SHOULD GOD’S TEACHINGS
 BE CLAIMED BY A PRIVILEGED CLAN?
 WHO CAN BEST LEARN FROM THEM?

MEIR, 2 OTHERS (MALE), AKIBA
 ANYONE CAN!

MEIR, 2 OTHERS
 HAVING PROBLEMS ON THE FARM?

RABBI AKIBA
 (pointing to a page in the book)
 A PRACTICAL SOLUTION!

MEIR, 2 OTHERS
 IF A NEIGHBOR DOES YOU HARM?

RABBI AKIBA
 A WAY TO MAKE AMENDS

MEIR, 2 OTHERS
 IF YOUR COW’S NOT GIVING MILK?

RABBI AKIBA
 YOU FIND A SUBSTITUTION.

MEIR
(shouting joyfully)

It's a revolution!

RABBI AKIBA, MEIR, 2 OTHERS
ONLY WE ALL STAY FRIENDS!

DEEP IN THE TORAH
ARE LAWS LAID WHEN EDEN BEGAN
WE'VE DEMYSTIFIED THEM--
REVEALED THEM AND TRIED THEM--
NOW ANYONE,
ANYONE CAN!

(KALBA SAVUA steps out of the crowd)

Rabbi!
KALBA SAVUA

RACHEL
(whispering to her MOTHER)
That's Rakhel's father!

MOTHER
(finding him appealing)
Very nice!

(KALBA SAVUA takes the Talmud book and reacts to how thick
it is.)

KALBA SAVUA
This is an awfully big "ladder!" Aren't you afraid people may fall?!

RABBI AKIBA
People may...but the "ladder" won't! So, you can always climb back up.

(RABBI AKIBA retrieves the book and walks through the CROWD,
exhibiting it. CROWD MEMBERS come forward to ask/sing questions:)

CROWD MEMBER
IF I CAN'T ERASE A DEBT?

RABBI AKIBA
(thumbing to a section)
THERE'RE MANY WAYS TO PAY IT!

SECOND CROWD MEMBER
IF I NEED TO GET A "GET?"

RABBI AKIBA
 (pointing to the book)
 A METHOD TO EMPLOY.

SEVERAL CROWD MEMBERS
 IF I WANT TO THANK THE LORD?

RABBI AKIBA
 A THOUSAND WAYS TO SAY IT!

(add MEIR and TWO MEN)
 DISPLAY IT!
 (THEY joyfully raise their hands in praise toward heaven.)
 LIVING EACH DAY WITH JOY!

JUST AS WHEN MOSES
 FIRST MOVED US WITH GOD'S HOLY PLAN,

RABBI AKIBA
 (HE opens his arms to encompass the whole CROWD.)
 WE CAN MOVE MOUNTAINS!

ALL FOUR MEN
 'CAUSE ANYONE CAN!

RABBI AKIBA
 (enlisting individuals in the CROWD.)
 ANYONE CAN!

FEMALE CROWD MEMBER
 ANYONE CAN!

RABBI AKIBA
 ANYONE CAN!

FEMALE AND MALE CROWD MEMBER
 ANYONE CAN!

RABBI AKIBA
 ANYONE CAN!

SEVERAL CROWD MEMBERS
 ANYONE CAN!

RABBI AKIBA
ANYONE CAN!

ALL (except RABBI AKIBA)
ANYONE CAN, ANYONE CAN!

(Short musical interlude during which the CROWD puts RABBI AKIBA
in a chair and lifts him above their heads.)

ALL (with RABBI AKIBA)
ANYONE, ANYONE CAN!

[End of song.]

KALBA SAVUA
(stepping forward again)
So tell me, Rabbi. Does this Talmud of yours address how a father can ever forgive a
daughter who has disgraced him in the eyes of the world?

RABBI AKIBA
(motioning the CROWD to lower him down)
And how did this daughter do such a thing?

KALBA SAVUA
By marrying a man who could never bring honor to her family name. She could have wed
anyone in the land, rich man or scholar. But instead, she chose an ignorant shepherd.

RABBI AKIBA
And where is she now? This daughter... with her ignorant shepherd?

(RAKHEL steps out of the CROWD. SHE is wearing the “crown of straw.”)

RAKHEL
She has come, with pride...

[MUSIC under, quietly: “A CROWN OF STRAW”]

...to welcome the Great Rabbi back to Jerusalem!

(Her eyes meet AKIBA's. THEY are absolutely still for a moment,
drinking each other in. Then, AKIBA smiles broadly and RAKHEL
moves swiftly forward to embrace him. KALBA SAVUA is stunned to
see her, and embarrassed by her apparent disrespect towards the Rabbi.)

KALBA SAVUA

Rakhel!

(A MALE FOLLOWER steps forward, between RAKHEL and RABBI AKIBA.)

MALE FOLLOWER

Woman!

(HE intercepts RAKHEL.)

Show the Rabbi some respect!

(RABBI AKIBA moves to the FOLLOWER and gently frees RAKHEL from his grasp.)

RABBI AKIBA

No, my friend. It is *she* who deserves respect. For everything I am, or have to give, is thanks to her.

RAKHEL

(Turns to KALBA SAVUA)

Father, don't you recognize your shepherd?

(KALBA SAVUA's face registers the truth. HE falls to his knees and begins to sob.)

KALBA SAVUA

(to RAKHEL) Forgive me! (HE turns his face to RABBI AKIBA) Forgive me, Rabbi!

(RABBI AKIBA helps him up.)

RABBI AKIBA

(gently)

Father.

(KALBA SAVUA regains his composure and turns to the CROWD.)

KALBA SAVUA

(proudly pointing)

My son-in-law!

RAKHEL

(to AKIBA)

My husband.

RABBI AKIBA

(tenderly taking her hand)

My wife.

MOTHER

My God! (SHE chokes back tears.)

(The CROWD surges forward to get a closer look.)

MEIR

Make room, everyone, please! A little privacy for the couple!

(The CROWD steps back. A magical musical chord strikes, as RASHI steps forward. The CROWD then disappears. Remaining on stage are RASHI, SHLOMO, MEIR, RABBI AKIBA, RAKHEL, RACHEL, MOTHER and BEN KALBA SAVUA. RABBI AKIBA and RAKHEL are holding hands, gazing at each other lovingly.)

RASHI

Excuse me, Rabbi. May we have a brief word with you?

MEIR

Sir--

RABBI AKIBA

--Let him speak.

RASHI

Rabbi, we have come a long distance to be with you at this moment. In fact, we have traveled across centuries.

RABBI AKIBA

(extremely intrigued)

Aha! (Deja vu) Haven't you come before?

RACHEL

(excited to be remembered)

Yes! At the study house.

RASHI

When you were first learning Torah.

RABBI AKIBA

Of course! I remember! (To RACHEL) That's how I knew you!

RASHI

And we are all returning shortly to our respective homes. When Rachel returns, she will be entering adulthood through a distinctly modern ritual known as the bat mitzvah. Do you have any advice for her?

RABBI AKIBA

Adulthood? Enter slowly!

(The ADULTS laugh.)

RASHI

But, there's more -- unlike her daughter, Rachel's mother feels the bat mitzvah ought to include a lavish party, complete with a king's feast, dancing, and camels. What advice would you have for her?

RABBI AKIBA

Stay away from camels!

(ANCIENTS laugh.)

RASHI

(frustrated by the flipness of RABBI AKIBA's answers)

Hmm.

MEIR

(to RASHI)

Are you finished?

RABBI AKIBA

(waving MEIR off)

Meir!...Now, we have, on the one hand, Rachel and her mother, and, on the other, Rakhel and her father. My shepherd's instincts are telling me that they are all of the same flock.

RASHI

Yes, exactly!

MOTHER

Wait a minute! I am *not* a sheep!

AKIBA

Of course you're not. It's just that I still keep an eye out... when I notice some dear ones are straying too far apart.

[Song: "HALFWAY." MUSIC under.]

RASHI

Oh, I think they're all well on their way back together.

BEN KALBA SAVUA

(understanding, and stepping towards RAKHEL)

And it isn't as far as I feared.

(HE spreads his arms towards RAKHEL, beckoning her to hug him. SHE takes a few steps away from him. There is a moment of discomfort between them. Her back is half-turned away from him as HE lets his arms down and sings.)

I TRIED TO LISTEN
 COULDN'T ALWAYS HEAR YOU
 HAD SOME SORT OF FEAR
 YOU HAD TOO MUCH TO SAY
 CRAZY TO BE FRIGHTENED
 BUT SOMETIMES WE DON'T SEE
 THE PICTURE, COMPLETE
 THE HONEY, SO SWEET
 BUT LOOK! WE CAN MEET
 HALFWAY

RAKHEL
 (to KALBA SAVUA)

I TRIED TO TELL YOU
 COULDN'T SAY IT NICELY
 CANNOT SAY PRECISELY
 WHY I WENT ASTRAY
 BUT YOU DIDN'T NOTICE
 HOW I LONGED TO BE FREE

RACHEL
 (to her MOTHER)

I TRIED TO TELL YOU
 COULDN'T SAY IT NICELY

 YES, I'M DIFFICULT
 DID YOU EVER NOTICE
 I'M JUST ME!

(together)

STILL, LOVE'S THERE, YOU KNOW
 AND SUN MELTS THE SNOW
 THAT'S HOW I CAN GO

HALFWAY

HALFWAY

RAKHEL/KALBA SAVUA

HALFWAY TO HOME IS CLOSER
 THAN NOT GOING HOME AT ALL

RACHEL
 (to MOTHER)

HALFWAY'S A WHOLE LOT BRIGHTER,
 IT SEEMS, IF YOU'VE HIT THE WALL
 WE COULD STALL...

(MOTHER joins her.)

BUT WE'LL BOTH FEEL BETTER
MOVING ON

KALBA SAVUA
MOVING ON

RAKHEL
MOVING ON

KALBA SAVUA/MOTHER
I'LL TRY TO LISTEN
MAY NOT ALWAYS HEAR YOU
YOU
BUT YOU NEEDN'T FEAR
YOU'RE NOT WELCOME TO STAY
EVEN AS YOU LEAVE ME,
YOU'LL TURN AROUND AND SEE

RAKHEL/RACHEL
I KNOW YOU'LL LISTEN
STILL, I WILL BE NEAR

STAY, I WILL!
EVEN AS I LEAVE YOU,
YOU WILL SEE

(all four together)
THE LIGHT IN MY FACE
MY HEART STILL WILL RACE
WE'LL RUN AND EMBRACE

KALBA SAVUA/MOTHER
HALFWAY

RAKHEL/RACHEL
HALFWAY

(MUSIC under.)

KALBA SAVUA
Well, my child,...

(Stepping in between RABBI AKIBA and RAKHEL, HE places a hand on
AKIBA's shoulder.)

...I didn't choose him, but you found us a fine scholar!

RAKHEL
No, Father. I found a shepherd.

(RAKHEL moves to RABBI AKIBA's other side. SHE pulls AKIBA
away, moving in the opposite direction from KALBA SAVUA, as HE stands motionless.)

After several steps, AKIBA stops RAKHEL, and with his eyes, “tells” RAKHE to acknowledge her father. RAKHEL’s eyes lock with KALBA SAVUA’s. As the MUSIC swells, RAKHEL runs to KALBA SAVUA’s waiting arms. After hugging each other strongly but briefly, they let loose, but still holding hands, sing:)

RAKHEL and KALBA SAVUA

HALFWAY

(MUSIC under, quietly. RAKHEL and KALBA SAVUA let go of each other’s hands. RAKHEL goes to AKIBA; THEY exit. MEIR exits. KALBA SAVUA exits.)

RACHEL

So, that’s it?

RASHI

More to tell, just, not now.

RACHEL

You’re leaving, too, aren’t you?

his (RASHI looks over at SHLOMO, who nods as he puts his pencil behind ear and closes his notebook.)

RASHI

Our job is done.

RACHEL

Thank you.

RASHI

Thank *you*. Shalom, Mrs. Cohen.

MOTHER

Shalom.

RASHI

Sha--

RACHEL

--Wait! Will I see them again? Will I see you again?

RASHI

You will.

(The MUSIC under pauses.)

As long as your book is open. Shalom.

SHLOMO

Shalom.

(MUSIC resumes, as RASHI and SHLOMO disappear. RACHEL and MOTHER eye each other. RACHEL leans her head on her MOTHER'S shoulder. MOTHER strokes RACHEL's hair fondly.)

[End of song. LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.]

(MUSIC under: "SO MANY QUESTIONS" theme. The stage is quickly transformed into the "bimah" at RACHEL's synagogue, weeks later. At center, a lectern, behind which RACHEL stands. LIGHTS FADE UP as MUSIC fades down. RABBI LIPPMAN sits off to one side, watching RACHEL with genuine admiration. RACHEL is in the middle of her bat mitzvah speech.)

RACHEL

...my grandmas and grandpas, for as many hugs as I could ever want; my folks, for a million details, including— and please don't be alarmed when you see it at the entrance to the reception— the camel; and especially Rabbi Lippman, for cheering me on, and yes, I needed a lot of cheering!

You know, a couple of months ago, when I was trying to get ready for today, the Rabbi gave me my Torah portion. Sure, it helped that it was in English, but I still couldn't imagine what Jacob's ladder, or any other five thousand-year-old story, could possibly have to do with my thirteen-year-old life. Then one afternoon, s/he gave me something else— a book of Talmud. And something happened. Something magical. A door to the past had been opened. And when I walked through that door, I met a whole crowd of people who I hope and expect will be my role models and teachers and guides and friends for a long time to come. See, it turns out that some of their stories are an awful lot like mine. I guess history kind of repeats itself. But, you know, much as I treasure all of these new...old...friends....maybe the most important "new-old" friend I met there was an unexpected traveling companion...and I especially want to thank her today and also congratulate her, because she told me something that makes me just as happy and proud as I hope I've made her. She's decided to study for something she never had when she was my age--her own bat mitzvah! Congratulations, Mom! And thank you for everything! (To the congregation:) And thank you all for coming today!

(The RABBI and ELAINE COHEN join RACHEL on the bimah)

RABBI

Rachel! Beautiful speech!

(HE gives her a hug.)

RACHEL
(really pleased)

Thank you, Rabbi.

RABBI
(turning to RACHEL's MOTHER)
And Mrs. Cohen! I had no idea...!

MOTHER
Yes, Rabbi, why not?

(MUSICAL CHORD as the ANCIENTS begin to reappear.)

And I have a lot of friends to help me!

[Song: 'WELCOME TO THE TALMUD! (Reprise)']

SOLO MALE ANCIENT
AKIBA AND HIS SHEEP

SOLO FEMALE ANCIENT
AND JACOB FAST ASLEEP

BOTH
THE TALMUD HELPS THEM LEAP
ACROSS A THOUSAND YEARS

RABBI AKIBA, RAKHEL,
FROM CENTURIES BEFORE

Add MEIR, ROMAN SOLDIER, FEMALE ANCIENT
THEY'RE STANDING AT THE DOOR

Add MOTHER, STUART, SARAH, RABBI
EXCITED TO THE CORE
TO MEET THEIR MODERN PEERS

ALL
NOW ALL OF YOU CAN TAKE YOUR PLACE
WITH RACHELS, OLD AND NEW
SINGING WITH THE JOY
OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A JEW

RACHEL

I'm so psyched -- my family and all my old friends are getting to meet my..

RACHEL/MOTHER
(laughing)

.....*really* old friends!

ALL
SO, WELCOME TO THE TALMUD
WELCOME TO OUR CHOIR
WE COME TO ENLIGHTEN, INFORM AND INSPIRE
WELCOME TO THE TALMUD
IT'S A MAGICAL TOME
OH WELCOME, AND PLEASE
CONSIDER IT HOME!

RACHEL
WELCOME, AND PLEASE
CONSIDER IT HOME!

ENSEMBLE
OOH, OOH
AH, AH

(A final tableau is struck, the ANCIENTS encircling the
MODERNS,
with RACHEL and her MOTHER in the center of them all.)

[END OF PLAY]

CURTAIN CALL :

(Company bows, followed by:)

[Song: "ANYONE CAN! (Finale)]

ALL
WHY SHOULD THE TORAH
BE KEPT FROM THE AVERAGE MAN?
WHO GAINS FROM TORAH?
ANYONE CAN!

WHY SHOULD GOD'S TEACHINGS
BE CLAIMED BY A PRIVILEGED CLAN?

WHO CAN BEST LEARN FROM THEM?
ANYONE CAN!

MALES
IF YOU OPEN WIDE THE BOOK

FEMALES
YOU'LL FIND US THERE INVITING

MALES
SAYING: "COME AND TAKE A LOOK!"

FEMALES
YOU MAY DECIDE TO STAY

ALL
ARE WE STRANGERS WHEN WE MEET?
OR ARE WE REUNITING?
DELIGHTING THAT WE HAVE FOUND OUR WAY!

TORAH AND TALMUD
TWO HALVES OF A MARVELOUS PLAN
COME AND BE PART
NEVER TOO LATE TO START IT

RACHEL
AND ANYONE,

RACHEL/MOTHER
(smiling at each other)
ANYONE CAN!

ALL
ANYONE, ANYONE CAN!

(BLACKOUT)