

## SYNOPSIS:

### Act One:

On the night before Passover, peddlers, beggars and street entertainers ply their trades on the streets of the ghetto. Nathan, an out-of-work hat blocker, is hawking Passover dishes on a corner when Goldy, his fiancé, surprises him, teasing him that they will never have enough money to marry if he peddles so unenthusiastically. Nathan, embarrassed, contends that they have a reasonable amount, but Goldy, ashamed at the prospect of a modest wedding, accuses him of trying to embarrass her. If they use their savings to put on an elaborate wedding, she counters, their guests will certainly furnish the means to allow them to set up housekeeping. Nathan points out that times are hard throughout the ghetto, but Goldy argues that they have been engaged for two years already—about the time that Nathan has been out of work—and she's tired of waiting for their fortunes to improve. She paints a picture of their happy future life together, and Nathan reluctantly agrees to her plan.

Arriving home from the synagogue that evening, Asriel Stroon, a well-off but uneducated businessman, announces to his daughter Flora and their housekeeper Tamara that he has decided to return to Russia to see his home village once more before he dies. Incredulous, they try to talk him out of his plan, citing the trouble and expense, not to mention his age. Asriel, however, has grown devout as well as homesick, and stands his ground. He will pay a scholar to recite the *Kaddish* at his father's grave and, since he has no son to succeed him, perhaps return with a husband for Flora who will eventually do the same for him. Flora, who dreams of marrying a doctor or lawyer someday—but certainly an American-born one—is unimpressed.

As they stitch piecework tailoring in the Lipman's sweatshop, Heyman, Beile and David banter and flirt with one another. Mr. and Mrs. Lipman arrive, showing off their establishment to visitors, and when Beile is ordered to fetch refreshments, she refuses to be treated like a servant. As Heyman looks on in embarrassed silence, David defends her, Beile is fired for her impudence, and David quits in protest. On the street outside, David comforts Beile and promises that he will protect her.

Just as Sabbath is about to begin, Asriel arrives by wagon at the cemetery outside the village of Pravly, where he prays at his father's grave. Recognized, he is welcomed into the synagogue, where he encounters his former employer, Reb Lippe, and his protégée Shaya, a rabbinical student of great promise intended for Lippe's daughter. Asriel, as a guest, is asked to read a scriptural passage, but Reb Lippe derides him as a boor and demands that the privilege be auctioned off. They strive to outbid each other, to the entertainment of the congregation, and a dispute breaks out when both claim to have won the honor. The Rabbi appeals to Shaya to settle the dispute and Asriel, to better his rival, shows Flora's picture to Shaya, offering a

larger dowry than Reb Lippe can afford. A second competition ensues, and Shaya and his mother side with Asriel.

David, having found work for himself and Beile in the same shop, courts her, promising that, as his wife, she will never need to work again. Though she knows that Heyman is carrying a torch for her, she accepts David's proposal.

Asriel, arrived home with Shaya, entertains the elders of the synagogue to show off Shaya's skills. He announces to the group, including his dumbstruck daughter, that Shaya and Flora are to be married. Shaya distinguishes himself before the company, but Flora will have none of it.

Despite his misgivings, Goldy and Nathan sign the lease on an apartment beyond their means. She reminds him that invitations to their wedding have already been sent out and that presents could begin to arrive at any moment. As if to prove her right, a rocking chair is delivered to their otherwise empty home and Goldy, reassuring her fiancé, sends him off to work as she settles in to wait for more deliveries to arrive.

Having overcome his embarrassment at allowing Beile to have been fired, Heyman pays a call on her with the hope of regaining her interest. Instead, he finds himself in the hall outside her apartment, listening to Beile and David's engagement party.