

**Act I**

**Scene Six**

**DAVID** and **BIELE** exit left as the **COMPANY** enters and the scene changes back to Mott Street.

**NATHAN**

The nearer Asriel came to New York—

**TAMARA**

(Crossing left to right with a full shopping basket.)  
—with the prodigy in tow—

**GOLDY**

—the deeper did Pravly sink into the golden mist of romance—

**HEYMAN**

—and all the more real did the great American city grow in his mind.

**ASRIEL** enters with **SHAYA** and **TZALEL** following, his cart piled with luggage. They pause for a moment at down left, taking in the scene.  
**NATHAN** enters, joins **GOLDY**, and they stroll across arm-in-arm.

**GOLDY**

Every mile added detail to the picture—

**NATHAN**

—and every new bit of detail made it dearer to his heart.

**ASRIEL**

I am coming home!

**DAVID**

(Re-entering from left in an apron, holding a tape-measure.)  
Shaya saw a new version of his visions of paradise—

**BIELE**

(Re-entering and crossing left.)  
—where before, behind luxuriant foliage, the righteous of the world—

TZALEL

—venerable old men with silvery beards—

HEYMAN

—were nodding and swaying over gold-bound tomes of the Talmud.

**TZALEL** parks his cart at up right of center.

SHAYA

Oh, how tall the buildings are!

ASRIEL

Ten stories, if you can believe it! America is a fine country, is it not?

SHAYA

Truly a wonder.

ASRIEL

But it can't hold a candle to Flora. Wait till you see her!

SHAYA

But won't she be coming to meet us?

ASRIEL

Flora? Meet us? Here?

(A little too quickly.)

I have written in advance to everyone who will want to meet you, my boy! The Rabbi and the elders of the synagogue—all the big bugs in our neighborhood of New York! You know it is much larger—ten thousand times the size—of Pravly? They are all expecting you—our new prodigy!

SHAYA

But Flora? She's waiting, too? She must know to expect us.

ASRIEL

Flora knows a lot of things—she is an educated American girl. You just try to be a good boy—stick to your Talmud, and don't give a pepper for anything else, and all God has given me shall be yours.

SHAYA

But—

ASRIEL

(Turning to **SHAYA**, directly.)

I have no son to say Kaddish for my soul when I am dead. Will you be my Kaddish,

Shaya? Will you observe the anniversary of my death? Will you?

SHAYA

Of course I will, but—

ASRIEL

May you live long for it. In palaces will I house you! Like the eye in my head will I cherish you. I am only a boor, but Flora is my daughter, my only child, and my whole life in this world, and I give her to you with all my heart.

SHAYA

So where is she then? You did tell her when we were coming, didn't you?

ASRIEL

Where else should she be? Flora is waiting at home.

SHAYA

You didn't, did you? And you didn't tell her about me! What will she think?

ASRIEL

What? What a question! Of course you are nervous—who would not be? It will be love at first sight, you handsome devil! But first of course we have to make sure that her first sight of you is a proper American boy! That will win her heart!

**TZALEL, DAVID, HEYMAN and NATHAN** gather around the cart at up right of center. They unpack the trunks and raise a manikin in a man's suit from the bed of the cart; we are now a tailor's shop.

SHAYA

But... but I'm not—

ASRIEL

(Ushering **SHAYA** cross the stage, toward **REB TZALEL's** cart.)

Hush! Who can judge the nut by its shell? You? *Flora*? Of course not! So before we arrive, we will make you a real American—for your Flora, your predestined one! Here!

DAVID

Welcome to Essex Street, New York—

HEYMAN

—where the finest tailors in all of America—

NATHAN

—wait at your service!

## TAILOR SHOP QUARTET: AN AMERICAN MAN

### QUARTET

An American man doesn't wear a fur hat,  
Or a long, sober coat, or trousers like that!  
Nor a shirt that his mother, howsoever lovingly, sewed.  
An American man is a ready-made man—from his crown to his toes!

So off with the hat, and we'll measure its size  
And produce a new felt one, be-ribboned—surprise!  
And off with the coat—  
And the trousers and shoes!

A pause. **SHAYA**, abashed, gives **ASRIEL** a pleading look.

And the trousers and shoes!

Again. **SHAYA** is deeply embarrassed at the prospect.

### SHAYA

What? Here? But—

### QUARTET

(Forcefully.)  
*And the trousers and shoes!*

**ASRIEL** snaps his fingers and the tailors forcibly undress **SHAYA** to his underwear.

### QUARTET

(Producing two pairs of shoes from the cart.)  
Here's a pair of high-buttons for everyday use  
And, in fine patent leather, for Sabbath and synagogue,  
To leave even dandies from Mott Street chagrined! Agog!

Now a jacket and trousers to go with that hat,  
And a celluloid collar and silken cravat  
To knot with a four-in-hand.

### SHAYA

But tell me—what's that?

### QUARTET

And a fine linen shirt in a tattersall print  
With a pair of gold cufflinks, like coins from the mint.

Now behold the American gentleman in't!

Interlude. The **QUARTET** rapidly dress **SHAYA** in his new outfit.

QUARTET

He's a ready-made man all the ladies adore!  
He's a ready-made man, cuts a figure, and more:  
A respectable presence, at home, on the street,  
Sure to impress anyone that he meets!

An American man—  
An American man—  
No matter the plan, howsoever he can—  
Is a ready-made man!

Music continues under.

ASRIEL

So there you are! Look at you—a proper American fiancé for my Flora.

SHAYA

That is, if she'll even have me.

ASRIEL

Have you? She will if she knows what's good for her! And look at you now—what could be better for her? I ask you that. What could be more pleasing to her eyes?

QUARTET

(Exiting with the cart; we are approaching Mott Street.)

An American man—*maybe?*

The **QUARTET** exits as **FLORA** enters with a broom and the scene shifts to the **STROON** house; the **COMPANY** moves the furniture (a rocking chair down right, a few dining room chairs at left, as before) into place as **ASRIEL** takes out his keys and lets himself and **SHAYA** in. Unaware, **FLORA** sweeps in the parlor, singing to herself.

### AN AMERICAN MAN (Reprise)

FLORA

(Singing to herself as she sweeps.)

An American man, from north of Delancy,  
Whose beard and moustache, if he has one, is trimmed  
By a barber each morning, brushed brilliantine-fancy.

In a suit and a tie, with a watch and stick-pin.

ASRIEL

Hush! Do you hear? That's your predestined bride. Well, you stay here, Shaya, and don't budge till you are called.

FLORA

A dentist, a doctor, a clerk or a lawyer,  
A reader of serious novels and tracts:  
Cervantes' *Quixote*, Walt Whitman, *Tom Sawyer*.  
A man in possession of up-to-date views:

A banker, a broker, a man of plain facts.  
No peddler or tailor, no hawker of news,  
No butcher or collier, and no common trader,  
An American man...

ASRIEL

(Spoken.)

An American man? That much, I can do!

FLORA

(Dropping the broom, running to hug him.)

Papa! Ah, you dear, cranky papa!

ASRIEL

And you—my *Bloome*! My Flora! How well you look! Like Sheba prepared to meet Solomon! Well, Flora, guess what sort of present your papa has brought you! I'll bet you, you won't hit it even if you keep on guessing till tomorrow.

(Crossing back to **SHAYA** and pushing him in front of her.)

No girl has ever got such a present as long as America is America!

FLORA

(Bewildered.)

Papa—who...?

QUARTET

(Sung, offstage.)

An American man!

ASRIEL

(Prompting **SHAYA**.)

There, go on with you! Introduce yourself! Take her hand!

(To **FLORA**.)

Handsomest and smartest fellow on earth. He is an *illoui*.

FLORA

A what?

ASRIEL

Oh, *a wonderful chap*, you know—deep in the Talmud and the other holy books! He could knock all the rabbis of Europe to smithereens!

A pause. **FLORA** turns **SHAYA's** hand over and examines it, an alien object.

ASRIEL

Is that not a scholar's hand—soft! The biggest bug in Pravly was after him, but I beat him clean out of his boots.

(He braces **SHAYA's** shoulders, inching them closer together.)

Shaya! Step right up! This is your predestined bridegroom, my daughter. A fine present, is he not? Did you ever expect such a raisin of a sweetheart, hey?

**FLORA** hands **SHAYA's** hand back to him, then draws herself up. She crosses left and calls.

FLORA

Tamara! There is a man here, downstairs. He must be hungry.

SHAYA

You didn't tell her?! You *didn't!*

TAMARA

(Off.)

Then why don't you give him something to eat? But who is he and what is he doing downstairs? Let him come in.

FLORA

(Crossing back right.)

Come and see him for yourself! You will find him one of your set—*a wonderful chap!*

(With a glance back at **SHAYA**.)

A pious soul!

**TAMARA** enters in apron, wiping her hands on a cloth.

SHAYA

(To **TAMARA**.)

He didn't tell her.

TAMARA

*This is your prodigy?*

ASRIEL

Hush! She's simply... simply overwhelmed, that's all—struck dumb by her good fortune.

(To **TAMARA**.)

Tamara, we will soon have guests arriving. See that they are made welcome.

(To **SHAYA**.)

In the meantime, Shaya, make yourself at home—in your new home! And what is more, I shall soon have a surprise for you, too!

SHAYA

I can hardly wait.

TAMARA

(Following **FLORA** right.)

In the old country a girl like you would be glad to marry such a child of the Law.

FLORA

Mind your own business!

ASRIEL

(Crossing right.)

Don't darken my days, Flora. I am only a boor, and how long does a fellow live?

TAMARA

It is only here that girls marry none but worldly men. May every daughter of Israel be blessed with such a match.

ASRIEL

(Walking **TAMARA** to left, where she exits.)

Leave her alone. The storm will blow over.

(Back to **FLORA** and **SHAYA**.)

Well, children, I must go around to see about the baggage. Have a chat and get acquainted.

**ASRIEL** exits. For the first time, the couple's eyes meet.

FLORA

(Chasing after him to left.)

Papa! Papa!

(She pauses then and turns back to **SHAYA**.)

Mister, you had better go. If you think you are going to be my bridegroom, you are sadly mistaken.

SHAYA



Where shall I go? I don't know anybody here.

(Pause. Pleadingly.)

Where is my fault?

**FLORA** crosses to **SHAYA**, then circles him, considering him carefully. She is not entirely displeased. She takes his chin in her hands, then laughs.

SHAYA

And where is your hat?

FLORA

Where is my hat? On the hook where it ought to be, where else? My father has really brought you over to marry me?

**SHAYA**, taken in by her good humor, laughs with her. Embarrassed, **FLORA** breaks it off, turns on her heel and crosses down right to her 'room,' sitting in the rocking chair. **TZALEL, DAVID, HEYMAN** and **NATHAN** enter from left, each pair carrying a long crate, which they deposit at center. **NATHAN, DAVID** and **HEYMAN** exit, and return with a small table and an empty bookcase, which they leave at up center before taking their places as guests in the parlor. **ASRIEL** enters, drying his hands on a handkerchief.

ASRIEL

And here! Here, Shaya, my gift to you, as you are my gift to Flora!

(Lifting the lid on one of the crates and extracting a book.)

The whole of the Babylonian Talmud—for you, and for my soul in the hereafter! Look! Twenty-five volumes. Gilded!

SHAYA

(Taken aback.)

Oh—Reb Asriel!

ASRIEL

And I had to keep the whole thing quiet—it was under my hat the whole time! All the way across the ocean!

SHAYA

(Receiving the book from **ASRIEL**.)

I—I don't know what to say!

ASRIEL

Say? What is there to say? May they be a blessing on all of our heads!

SHAYA

It's beautiful! Thank you!

**TAMARA** returns with a tray of glasses and decanter, which she sets on the table, followed by **GOLDY**, and **BIELE** as **GUESTS**. **SHAYA** opens the book, kneeling down center and placing it on the floor before him.

TZALEL

(Raising a glass.)

Here is life, Mr. Stroon!

GUESTS

Here is life, Shaya! Life and peace! Life and peace!

DAVID

God bless the union and let them live a hundred and twenty years!

NATHAN

And grant that they give birth to children and bring them up to the Law, the bridal canopy, and deeds of righteousness—

DAVID

—and may Shaya continue a child of the Law and study it with never-failing zeal!

ASRIEL

That's the very point!

ALL

Amen!

## THE PROMISED LAND

SHAYA

I never thought to ask before—  
How high were the towers?  
Were they taller than the tenements,  
Taller than the monuments,  
Higher than the skyscrapers—  
Or was the sky so much the higher in the promised land?

Maybe it was higher then,  
And miracles were plainer.

Maybe men saw clearer then,  
Where paradise was nearer then  
And men were still God-fearing men—  
And the Uppermost was nigh-er, in the promised land.

Maybe in Jerusalem the streets are bright as gold.  
Maybe in Jerusalem the streams run milk and honey,  
But here in New York there are wonders enough.

I never wanted more, before,  
Than what I could imagine.  
I never sought to know, before,  
Wherever else I'd go before  
I crossed that ocean, opened that door  
And saw the Uppermost was also nigh in a new promised land!

Music continues under.

TAMARA

(Drawing **ASRIEL** aside.)

Look, look! What a find Heaven has placed in your way! The Uppermost has blessed you.

ASRIEL

May he enjoy long life with us!

TAMARA

Flora does not know what a treasure the Lord of the Universe has sent her.

ASRIEL

She will, she will.

SHAYA

I never thought to ask, before:  
Who builds the towers?  
Who can make a promised land  
Spring forth from earth at his command?  
Who owns the towers can command  
A fortune of his own in his own promised land.

Maybe in Jerusalem the sun is so much brighter.  
Maybe in Jerusalem the snow is so much whiter  
Than anything I've seen before, but wonders enough

Are wonders enough. If in a new Jerusalem  
Are streets that run with that same milk and honey,  
Then who pays for these miracles? Whose is the—money?

NATHAN

But where is the bride?

DAVID

She must show herself! She must show herself!

The **GUESTS** tease **SHAYA** as **ASRIEL** creeps down right to **FLORA's**  
room.

NATHAN

That's right! Out with the bride! "And the daughters of Jerusalem come out  
dancing," and what do they say?

(Taking **SHAYA's** chin.)

"Lift thine eyes, young man, and behold the maiden thou choosest."

NATHAN

"Go forth and look, O ye daughters of Zion, on King Solomon, with the crown his  
mother hath crowned him with on the day of the joy of his espousals, and on the day  
of the joy of his heart."

(Pulling **SHAYA** closer.)

So says the Talmud: "By 'the day of his espousals' is meant the day of the Giving of  
the Law."

DAVID

(From the opposite side, pulling **SHAYA** back.)

Accordingly, when the wedding takes place, God willing, it will be an espousal in the  
literal as well as in the Talmudic sense, for is he not full of Law? It will be the Giving  
of the Law to Reb Asriel's daughter!

Abashed, **SHAYA** breaks away as **TZALEL** comes to his rescue.

TZALEL

Never mind blushing, Shaya. Here, have a glass!

ASRIEL

(Entering **FLORA's** room.)

Flora dear, I want to speak to you.

FLORA

(Standing, her back to him.)

Leave me alone, papa, will you? I've got a headache. It must be all that shouting out

there.

ASRIEL

That's all right, but hear me, please. I won't eat you up.

(Meekly.)

I beg you, my daughter, do not shorten my days. Come out and greet our guests. The Uppermost has sent me a piece of comfort so I might die a righteous Jew—will you take it away from me? Will you put me to shame before God and man?

FLORA

(Turning, in tears.)

Oh, papa! Will you ever put an end to it? You know I'll never marry him.

ASRIEL

(Taking a new tack.)

Do I compel you to? I don't chase you under the bridal canopy with a strap, do I? Imagine that he is your brother and don't bother your head about him. The boy has become so dear to me that I feel as if he were my own son.

FLORA

But Father, he isn't—

ASRIEL

Hold on! Let me talk the heart out of myself. God thought I was not good enough to have a son, but he sent me Shaya to take the place of one. As I hear him read the holy books, it melts like ice cream in my heart. God has put this boy in my hands; He sent me all the way to Pravly for him—all to give me a chance to make up for my sins.

FLORA

Papa!

ASRIEL

And do you see him—dressed as he is? That's how he'll be every day—I made sure of it. He's a proper American boy now, and he'll look the part. He will lead a life of piety and spend his time studying the Talmud—but like an American gentleman.

FLORA

Well, then.

ASRIEL

You are my daughter, and he is my son. If God does not wish the match, it won't come off, that's all. Do you want me to kick him out? Not if New York turned upside down. And perhaps you could help him—teach him.

FLORA

Teach him? Teach him what?

ASRIEL

Just fix him up in English and a little figuring, that's all. But mind you, don't take him too far into those worldly gentile books of yours. He does not want any of the monkey tricks they teach the children at college. Do you understand?

Pause. **FLORA** considers the idea.

FLORA

(Crossing toward center. Changing the subject.)

We have guests, papa, don't we?

TZALEL

Good Sabbath, Flora. Good Sabbath!

NATHAN

Good Sabbath!

FLORA

Good Sabbath!

HEYMAN

May your guest be pleasing to you and, if God be pleased, we shall live to make merry at your wedding.

TZALEL

Give us some Law, Shaya!

GUESTS

Yes, some Law! That's right. Give us the Law!

TZALEL

Your prospective father-in-law is feasting us upon fare of the earth, and it is meet that you should regale us with Words of Law.

TAMARA

(Drawing him out in front of **FLORA**.)

Please—use your new library. Show us the wonders of your learning!

DAVID

(Nudging him teasingly; quoting:)

“Do not set thine eye on beauty!”

SHAYA

(Quoting back.)

“No conversing during repast.”

NATHAN

“Words of Law are no converse.”

SHAYA

But the Commentary adds: ‘Not so much as to quote the precept about silence during repast.’

Wry approval from the **GUESTS**. **SHAYA** picks up a volume and opens it, crossing to center. The game is on. **FLORA** watches, impressed in spite of herself.

SHAYA

Now the precept is Words of the Law, is it not? Which means that the prohibition does extend to Words of Law.

TZALEL

Why did you quote it then?

SHAYA

What else would you have me quote?

DAVID

But surely you mean only after the washing of hands? Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi said “The blessing should follow immediately on the washing of hands.” So—no converse between the washing and the blessing—but not throughout the meal?

HEYMAN

(Nudging **DAVID** aside.)

I disagree! Rashi understands that “the blessing” in question is the *grace after* meals, and “the washing of the hands” is the ritual hand washing that some do *after* meals. In either case, then, talk is permitted as we eat.

SHAYA

(Confidently.)

But the Rosh himself, in his commentary on the Talmud, opined that the blessing in question is *hamotzi*, the blessing over bread, and the hand washing is the washing done *before* a meal, not after.

DAVID

And, while it may not be definitive, Shulchan Aruch suggests that it is a good idea to go straight from washing hands to eating bread.

HEYMAN

And while that is certainly so, does Aruch specify that one must stay silent between

the two blessings. He does not! So?

**TAMARA** picks up a chair and, crossing to **FLORA**, offers her a seat. The conversation of the **MEN** continues under, with **SHAYA** refuting the others.

FLORA

That ain't fair a bit! Three old-timers against one boy—I declare!

TAMARA

Let them have their argument—but behold what a fine mind your intended has!

HEYMAN

Is this truly the way you understand the passage?

SHAYA

I do! It's as plain to me as black on white.

DAVID

But it seems to me that Rabbi Yohanon does not say that. I am afraid you have misquoted him.

SHAYA

Have I? You are sure, are you?

DAVID

I am.

SHAYA

All right. We shall see!

**SHAYA**, with great confidence, places the book in front of **DAVID** and, without looking at it, turns a few pages and wordlessly points out the correct passage. The **MEN** huddle together over the text before erupting in congratulations.

NATHAN

The boy is a genius! What a head!

HEYMAN

What a memory, what an argument!

TZALEL

Yes, and what a *scholar*—one cannot help wondering when he had time to study up so much.



ASRIEL

He'll just take a peep at a book and then he knows it all by heart. He licked all the rabbis around Pravly.

NATHAN

You have got a treasure, Mr. Stroon.

ASRIEL

You bet!

TZALEL

You know what the Talmud says, Mr. Stroon? That he who supports a scholar of the Law is like unto him who offers sacrifices.

ASRIEL

I know, I know!

(Overcome, he crosses to **SHAYA**, picks him up and tosses him like a child.)

Oh, you dear little sparrow!

The **MEN** free **SHAYA** as **TAMARA** turns to **FLORA**.

TAMARA

Tell me now, ought you not to thank God for such a treasure of a sweetheart?

FLORA

(Standing, stamping her foot.)

Sweetheart? He is nothing of the kind to me—and he never will be, either. I don't care how long Papa is going to keep him in the house.

TAMARA

Well then, I would suggest you get used to him.

**TAMARA** crosses left and **SHAYA** counter-crosses to **FLORA**. The party breaks up at right with the **MEN**, **GOLDY**, **TAMARA** and **BIELE** clearing the stage as they go.

SHAYA

(Confidentially, to **FLORA**.)

I gave it to them, didn't I?

**FLORA** smiles in spite of herself, then corrects herself and turns on her heel, crossing into 'her room' and off right.

**THE PROMISED LAND (REPRISE)**

SHAYA

I never thought to think, before:  
Can I build a tower?  
I can make a promised land  
Spring forth from earth at my command,  
And who can build a tower can command  
A fortune of his own in his own new promised land.

Maybe in Jerusalem the sun is so much brighter.  
Maybe in Jerusalem the snow is so much whiter  
Than anything I've seen before, but wonders enough

Are wonders enough. If in a new Jerusalem  
The streets can run with sacred conversation,  
Then who commands the argument commands his own new nation!

**SHAYA** exits right. Dimout.