

The
DYBBUK

and the Yiddish Imagination

A H A U N T E D R E A D E R

Edited and Translated from the Yiddish by

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Includes a New Translation of
S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*



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S. ANSKY (1863–1920)

The Dybbuk (1914–1919)
or **Between Two Worlds**
A Dramatic Legend in Four Acts

Characters

SENDER OF BRÍNNITZ

LÉAH, his daughter (*in Hebrew the name means "despondent"*)

FRÁDDE, her old nurse

GÍTL, Leah's friend

BÉSSYE, Leah's friend

MENÁSHE, Leah's fiancé

NÁKHMAN, Menáshe's father

MENDL, Menáshe's rebbe (*Hasidic rabbi*)

THE MESSENGER

RABBI AZRÍEL OF MÍROPOLYE, a Hasidic rebbe (*the Hebrew derivation of his name means "God's help"*)

MIKHL, his *gabbe* (*overall manager and administrator*)

RABBI SHIMSHIN (*Sampson*), rabbi in Míropolye

FIRST JUDGE

SECOND JUDGE

MÉYER, *shammes* (*beadle*) at the synagogue in Brínnitz

Translator's note: Names of historical figures are transcribed according to their normal English spellings. All the names of the characters, including those deriving from the Bible, are transcribed according to their standard Yiddish pronunciations. For instance: King David (Biblical), but Rabbi Dúvid. For a performance, any of the characters' names can be changed if they are too difficult to pronounce, unless the director wishes to retain the etymological overtones. However, some names, as clarified in the text, are discussed in terms of their numerological Cabalistic values. So obviously, those names would have to be kept.

KHÓNEN (*the name derives from the Hebrew root for "merciful"*), yeshiva student

HÉNEKH, yeshiva student

ÓSHER, yeshiva student

FIRST IDLER

SECOND IDLER

THIRD IDLER

(*The IDLERS are usually paid by the Jewish community to stay around in order to take part in a minyan, a quorum of ten men, if need be.*)

FIRST HASID

SECOND HASID

THIRD HASID

AN OLD WOMAN

A WEDDING GUEST

A POOR HUNCHBACK

A POOR CRIPPLE

A LAME OLD WOMAN

AN OLD WOMAN WITH ONE ARM

AN OLD BLIND WOMAN

A TALL PALE YOUNG WOMAN

A YOUNG MOTHER HOLDING A BABY

HASIDS, YESHIVA STUDENTS, HOUSEHOLDERS, SHOPKEEPERS, WEDDING GUESTS, PAUPERS, CHILDREN

Scene and Time

The first and second acts take place in the town of Brínnitz, the third and fourth in the town of Míropolye. Three months go by between the first and the second acts, two days between the second and the third acts, twelve hours between the third and the fourth.

Act I

Before the curtain goes up to reveal utter darkness, we hear something like a soft, mystical chanting in the distance.

Why, oh why,

Did the soul descend

From the highest height

To the deepest end?

The greatest fall

Contains the upward flight.

The curtain slowly rises.

A small, very ancient wooden synagogue with black walls. The roof is held up by two posts. At the center of the ceiling, an old brass lamp hangs above the sloping bimah (the platform from which the Torah—Pentateuch—is read to the congregation). The bimah is covered with a dark tablecloth. On the rear wall, several small windows indicate the women's gallery. A long bench, and in front of it a long, wooden table with sacred tomes scattered across it; among them, lower than the books, a few clay candle holders with two burning tallow candles. To the left of the bench and the table, a small door leading to the rabbi's private room. In the corner, a bookcase containing sacred tomes. At the center of the right-hand wall, the Holy Ark (the repository of the Torah scrolls); to its left, the cantor's reading stand, on which a thick wax memorial candle is burning. There is a window on either side of the Holy Ark. Benches with several bookstands along the full length of the wall. On the left-hand wall, a huge tile stove; next to it a bench with a long table also with scattered holy books. A ritual washstand with a towel hanging from a ring. A wide door leading to the street. Near the door, a chest; above the chest, a niche with an eternal light (ner-tomid).

At a pulpit near the cantor's stand, HENEKH sits, absorbed in a holy book. At the table by the front wall, five or six yeshiva students, sprawling wearily, are studying while dreamily humming a Talmudic melody. At the bimah, MEYER stands, leaning, and laying out pouches containing prayer shawls and phylacteries. The three IDLERS, starry-eyed, thoroughly lost in thought, are sitting around the table. On a bench by the tile stove, the MESSENGER lies, with his head on a sack. KHONEN, lost in thought, stands with his hand resting on the top of the bookcase.

It is evening. A mystical atmosphere pervades the synagogue and its shadowy corners.

THREE IDLERS. (*Finish chanting*).

Why, oh why,

Did the soul descend

From the highest height

To the deepest end?

The greatest fall

Contains the upward flight.

A long pause. All three sit motionless, lost in thought.

FIRST IDLER. (*As if telling a fairy tale.*)

Rabbi Dúvid of Talne—may his good deeds deliver us from evil—had a golden chair, and seven words were engraved in the gold: "David, King of Israel, He Lives Eternal." (*Pause*)

SECOND IDLER. (*In the same tone.*) Rabbi Yisróel of Ruzin—blessed be his memory—lived like a real monarch. His meals were always accompanied by a twenty-four-piece orchestra, and he always traveled in a coach drawn by six horses in tandem.

THIRD IDLER. (*Rapturous.*) And people say that Rabbi Shmúel of Kamink would go around in golden slippers (*ecstatic*)—in golden slippers!

MESSENGER. (*Sits up on the bench, speaks in a soft, quiet voice as if from far away.*)

The holy Rabbi Zúsyé of Anipólye
was a pauper all his life. He lived on alms
and he wore a peasant smock with a rope around his waist.
Yet his achievements were as great as those
of Rabbi Yisróel or Rabbi Dúvid.

FIRST IDLER. (*Annoyed.*) If you don't mind my saying so, you have no idea what we're talking about, yet you butt in all the same. When we praise the greatness of these rabbis, do you think we mean their material wealth? Are there so few fabulously wealthy men in the world? Don't you see that the golden chair and the orchestra and the golden slippers contained deep secrets, hidden meanings?

THIRD IDLER. It's so obvious. How can anyone misunderstand!

SECOND IDLER. Anyone who had open eyes could see. People say that the first time the Rabbi of Apt encountered Rabbi Yisróel of Ruzin, he fell to the ground and kissed the wheels of his coach. And when the Rabbi of Apt was asked what his action meant, he shouted: "You fools! Can't you see that this is the Divine Chariot, the one that Ezekiel saw in his vision, the one that took Elijah to Heaven?!"

THIRD IDLER. (*Ecstatic.*) Oh, oh, oh!

FIRST IDLER. The point is that the golden chair was not a chair, the orchestra was not an orchestra, and the horses were not horses. Those things were nothing but fancies, reflections; they were just clothes, just envelopes for their greatness.

MESSENGER. True greatness doesn't need a lovely wardrobe.

FIRST IDLER. You're wrong! True grandeur should wear the finest garments!

SECOND IDLER. (*Shrugs.*) Their grandeur! Their power! They were beyond measure.

FIRST IDLER. Their power was remarkable! Did you ever hear the story of Rabbi Shmelke of Nikelshberg and his whip? It's worth hearing. Rabbi Shmelke once had to judge a dispute between a poor man and a rich man. The rich man had influence at the royal court, and everyone

was terrified of him. Rabbi Shmelke listened to both sides and then he ruled in favor of the poor man. The rich man was very annoyed and he refused to abide by the rabbi's judgment. So the rabbi quietly said: "You will go along with my decision. When a rabbi issues an order, you have to obey." The rich man grew angry and began yelling: "The hell with you and your rabbinical judgments!" Now, Rabbi Shmelke stood up to his full stature and shouted: "You are to obey my order this very instant. Otherwise—I'll use my whip!" The rich man hit the ceiling! He started cursing and swearing at the rabbi! So Rabbi Shmelke opened the drawer in his desk—and out jumped the Original Serpent, the one from the Garden of Eden, and it coiled itself around the rich man's neck. Well, you can imagine the commotion. The rich man screamed and wept: "Help me, Rebbe, forgive me! I'll do anything you say, but please take away the Serpent!" Rabbi Shmelke replied: "You will tell your children and your children's children to obey the rabbi and to fear his whip!" And he removed the Serpent from the rich man's neck.

THIRD IDLER. Ha ha ha! A fine whip! (*Pause.*)

SECOND IDLER. (*To the FIRST.*) I think you've made a mistake. The story couldn't have involved the Serpent from the Garden of Eden. . . .

THIRD IDLER. Huh? What do you mean?

SECOND IDLER. It's quite simple. Rabbi Shmelke couldn't have used the Serpent. The Original Serpent in the Garden of Eden was the Devil, the other side . . . Lucifer—God help us! (*Spits.*)

THIRD IDLER. C'mon! Rabbi Shmelke knew what he was doing!

FIRST IDLER. (*Offended.*) I don't know what you're talking about! I described an event that took place in public—dozens of people saw it with their own eyes. And now you claim it couldn't have happened. You think it's all mumbo jumbo?

SECOND IDLER. God forbid! But I figure there are no incantations or conjurations for summoning the Devil! (*Spits.*)

MESSENGER.

There's only one way to conjure up the Devil:

You have to utter the Holy Name twice:

Its fire melts the highest mountaintops,

dissolving them into the deepest valleys.

(*KHONEN looks up and listens carefully.*)

THIRD IDLER. (*Nervous.*) Isn't it dangerous to use the Great Name?

MESSENGER. (*Thoughtful.*)

Dangerous? . . . No. . . . The vessel can burst

only under the impact of great lust—

the lusting of the spark for the flame. . . .

FIRST IDLER. In my shtetl there's a rebbe who can perform the most incredible miracles. He can start a fire just by pronouncing the Holy Name and he can put it out in the same way. He can see what's happening for hundreds of miles around. He can tap wine from the wall with his fingers. . . . He once told me that he knows spells for doing all sorts of things: creating a golem, resurrecting the dead, becoming invisible, summoning demons . . . and even conjuring up the Devil. (*He spits.*) I heard it from his very own lips.

KHONEN. (*Has been standing motionless, listening carefully, now walks over to the table, looks at the MESSENGER, then at the FIRST IDLER, and speaks in a dreamy, faraway voice.*) Where is he? (*The MESSENGER gazes at KHONEN, never once removing his eyes.*)

FIRST IDLER. (*Surprised.*) Who?

KHONEN. Your miracle worker.

FIRST IDLER. Where else? Back in my shtetl—if he's still alive.

KHONEN. Is it far from here?

FIRST IDLER. My shtetl? It's very far away! Deep in Polisia.

KHONEN. How far?

FIRST IDLER. How far? It would take you at least a month to walk there. . . . (*Pause.*) Why are you asking? Would you like to visit him? (*KHONEN remains silent.*) The name of my shtetl is Krasne. The miracle worker's name is Rabbi Elkhonen.

KHONEN. (*Surprised, speaks to himself.*) Elkhonen? El-Khonen? The God of Khonen?

FIRST IDLER. (*To the other IDLERS.*) I tell you—he can perform the most incredible miracles! Once, in broad daylight, he used a spell to—

SECOND IDLER. (*Interrupting.*) That's enough! We shouldn't talk about these things at night! Especially in a house of prayer. You might accidentally blurt out a spell, a formula—God forbid!—and something awful could happen. Such mishaps have occurred—Heaven preserve us! (*KHONEN slowly exits. The others peer after him. Pause.*)

MESSENGER. Who is that boy?

FIRST IDLER. A yeshiva student. (*MEYER closes the doors of the bimah and walks over to the table.*)

SECOND IDLER. A prodigy, a genius!

THIRD IDLER. That boy has a mind like a steel trap! He's already memorized five hundred pages of the Talmud, they're at his fingertips!

MESSENGER. Where is he from?

MEYER. Somewhere in Lithuania! He studied at our yeshiva, he was the first in his class, and he was ordained as a rabbi. Then all at once, he vanished, no one knew where, and he didn't turn up again for a whole

year. People said he was doing penance, wandering in exile. He returned a short time ago, but he was no longer the same boy. He's always lost in thought, he fasts from one Sabbath to the next, he constantly goes through ritual cleansings. . . . (*Lowering his voice.*) They say he's dabbling in the Cabala. . . .

SECOND IDLER. (*Quietly.*) The townspeople are also talking about it. . . . Some are even asking him for amulets. But he won't give them any. . . .

THIRD IDLER. Who knows who or what he is? Perhaps he's one of the great scholars? Who can say? And it would be dangerous to pry. . . . (*Pause.*)

SECOND IDLER. (*Yawns.*) It's late. . . . Time to go to bed. . . . (*To the FIRST IDLER with a smile.*) Too bad your miracle worker isn't here. He could tap some wine from the wall. I wouldn't mind a shot of something. You know, I haven't had a bite all day!

FIRST IDLER. I've practically been fasting myself. After praying, all I had was a buckwheat cookie.

MEYER. (*Half-secretively, content.*) Just wait, I think we'll have more than enough to drink soon. Sender has gone to see a bridegroom for his daughter. If he signs an engagement contract, God willing, then he'll treat us all to a fine round of drinks!

SECOND IDLER. Ah! I don't believe he'll ever sign a contract. He's already gone to see three bridegrooms, and he's always come back empty-handed. Once he didn't like the boy, the second time the family wasn't good enough, another time the dowry wasn't big enough. He shouldn't be so persnickety!

MEYER. Sender can afford to be picky. He's rich, he comes from a good family, he's got a fine and beautiful daughter—may Heaven preserve her.

THIRD IDLER. (*Ecstatic.*) I like Sender! He's a true Hasid, he's a follower of the Rebbe of Miropolye, and his faith is very ardent! . . .

FIRST IDLER. (*Coldly.*) He is a good Hasid, there's no denying it. But if he wants to find a husband for his daughter, he ought to think about his standards.

THIRD IDLER. Huh? What do you mean?

FIRST IDLER. In the old days, whenever a rich man with a fine background had to find a husband for his daughter, he didn't look for money, he didn't look for a good family tree. All he cared about was the boy's character. He would travel to the Great Yeshiva with a lovely present for the director, and the director would then select a student, the finest in the school, the *crème de la crème*. Sender could try the same approach.

MESSENGER. He might also find the right husband in this yeshiva.

FIRST IDLER. (*Surprised.*) How do you know?

MESSENGER. Just speculating.

THIRD IDLER. (*Hurriedly.*) Well, well, well. Let's not gossip, especially about good friends. A marriage comes about if the bride and groom are meant for each other. (*The door flies open and an OLD WOMAN hurries in, leading two children by the hand.*)

OLD WOMAN. (*Hurries with the children to the Holy Ark, shouting and weeping.*) Oh, oh, God, oh God! Help me, Lord! (*Runs to the Holy Ark.*) Children! We're going to open the Holy Ark, we're going to kneel before the Torah scrolls, we're going to weep and wail, and we're not leaving until we obtain a complete cure for your mother! (*She opens the Holy Ark, kneels down, thrusts her head inside, and launches into a tearful recitative.*) God of Abraham, God of Isaac and Jacob, look at this disaster, look at the sorrow of these little children. Their mother is so young—please don't take her away from this world. Holy Torahs, please intercede for a poor, unhappy widow! Holy Patriarchs, dear Matriarchs, go to God, run to the Lord of the Universe, scream, beg! Don't let the tender sapling be torn out by its roots, don't let the baby dove be hurled out of its nest, don't let the gentle lamb be wrenched from its herd! . . . (*Hysterically.*) I'll destroy the world, I'll split the heavens! I won't leave here until God restores the apple of my eye! . . .

MEYER. (*Goes over, touches her quietly, speaks calmly.*) Khanna-Esther, should we gather a minyan and recite psalms?

OLD WOMAN. (*Pulls her head out of the Holy Ark. Looks blankly at MEYER. All at once, she blurts out.*) Oh! Get a minyan together, have them recite psalms. Now! Hurry, hurry! Every minute is precious! She's been flat on her back for two days now, unable to talk, struggling with death!

MEYER. I'll get ten men together immediately! (*In a beseeching tone.*) But we have to give them something for their trouble. . . . They're very poor.

OLD WOMAN. (*Rummaging in her pocket.*) Here's a ruble! Just make sure they recite!

MEYER. A ruble!? . . . That comes to just a few kopeks per man! . . . It's not exactly generous. . . .

OLD WOMAN. (*Paying no attention.*) C'mon, children! We have to hurry to the other synagogues! (*Hurries out.*)

MESSENGER. (*To the THIRD IDLER.*) This morning, an old woman came to the Holy Ark to pray for her daughter, who's been in labor for two days already and the baby still won't come out. And now an old

woman has come to pray for a daughter who's been struggling with death for two days.

THIRD IDLER. Well? What's your point?

MESSENGER. (*Musing.*) When the soul of a person who hasn't yet died has to enter a body that isn't yet born, there is a struggle. If the sick woman dies, then the other woman will bear the child. If the sick woman recovers, then the baby will be stillborn.

THIRD IDLER. (*Surprised.*) Oh my! How blind people are! They never see what's happening under their very noses!

MEYER. (*Goes over to the table.*) Well, the Good Lord has sent us something for a drink. We'll recite some psalms, we'll drink to our health. So God will take pity on the woman, and she'll recover completely.

FIRST IDLER. (*To the YESHIVA STUDENTS sitting drowsily at the large table.*) Boys! Who wants to recite psalms? Each of you will get a buck-wheat cookie. (*The STUDENTS get up from the table.*) We're going into the private room. (*The THREE IDLERS, MEYER, and all the YESHIVA STUDENTS but HENEKH go off into the private room. They soon launch into a mournful recitation of the First Psalm: "Blessed be the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly. . . ." [This recitation may be in Hebrew.] Meanwhile the MESSENGER has remained immobile at the smaller table, his eyes glued to the Holy Ark. A long pause. KHONEN enters.*)

KHONEN. (*Very tired, lost in thought, walks aimlessly toward the Holy Ark. Noticing that the Ark is open, he halts in surprise.*)

The Holy Ark is open? Who opened it?

Whom did it open for at midnight? (*Peers inside the Ark.*)

Torah scrolls. . . . Huddling together, calm, silent. . . .

And they conceal all the mystical meanings,

All the allegorical meanings,

all the combinations of letters and numbers—

from the Six Days of Creation to the end of time.

And it's so hard to grasp a single secret,

a single allusion, it's so difficult. (*Counts the Torah scrolls.*)

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine.

A magical number, the numerical sum

of the letters in the word *EMES* (truth)

—and each of the nine scrolls has four wooden handles,

four "Trees of Life" . . . which adds up to thirty-six. . . .

I keep running into that number all the time—

and I still don't know what it means.

But I feel it contains the essence of the truth. . . .

How about the letters in the name *Leah*?
 Lamed is thirty, aleph is one, hey is five. . . .
 That adds up to thirty-six.
 Three times thirty-six makes 108,
 the numerical value of the name *Khonen*.
 But *Leah* also breaks down into
 "lo" (not) and the letter "hey"
 —the symbol of God. No God! . . . Not through God. . . . (*He trembles.*)

What a horrible thought . . . and how tempting. . . .

HENEKH. (*Looks up, scrutinizes KHONEN.*) Khonen! You keep wandering around in a dream. . . .

KHONEN. *Moves away from the Holy Ark; lost in thought, he slowly walks over to HENEKH.*)

Endless secrets, endless allusions,
 and I can't see the straight and narrow path. . . .

(*Brief pause.*) The shtetl's name is Krasne. The rebbe's name is El-khónen. . . .

HENEKH. What did you say?

KHONEN. (*As if awakening.*) Who me? Nothing. . . . Just thinking out loud. . . .

HENEKH. (*Shaking his head.*) You've gotten lost in the Cabala, Khonen. You haven't touched a holy book since your return.

KHONEN. (*Not comprehending.*)

A holy book? What sort of holy book?

HENEKH. How can you ask? The Talmud. . . . The Commentators. . . .

KHONEN (*Still not quite conscious.*)

The Talmud? . . . The Commentators? . . . I haven't touched?

The Talmud is all cold and dry. . . .

The Commentators are all cold and dry. . . .

(*Comes to all of a sudden, grows lively.*)

Beneath the earth there is another world
 just like our surface world.

It has fields and forests, oceans and deserts, towns and villages.

And powerful hurricanes blast across fields and deserts,

and huge ships sail across the oceans there,

and the dense forests are haunted by eternal terror,

and thunder keeps on thundering and thundering. . . .

Yet one thing is missing from that netherworld:

It doesn't have a lofty sky

with fiery lightning and a dazzling sun. . . .

And that's what the Talmud is like.

The Talmud is profound, it's grand and splendid.

But it shackles us to the earth,

it doesn't let us soar to the heavens.

(*Ecstatically.*) The Cabala, however! . . . The Cabala! . . .

It tears the soul away from the earth!

It carries us to God's highest palaces,

it opens all the heavens to our eyes.

It takes us straight to Paradise,

it draws us all the way to endlessness!

It lifts a corner of the infinite curtain. . . .

I'm worn out. . . . I feel faint. . . .

HENEKH. (*Very earnest.*) That's all true. But you're forgetting something: Soaring in ecstasy is the greatest danger. You can easily drop and fall into the abyss. . . . The Talmud raises the soul aloft, very slowly, and it protects us like a loyal sentry who never sleeps or dozes. It surrounds us like an iron armor and it never lets us leave the path of righteousness, it never lets us go right or left. Unlike the Cabala. . . .

You remember that story in the Talmud. . . . (*He switches into a Talmudic melody.*)

Four rabbis entered Paradise:

Rabbi Ben Azzai, Rabbi Ben Zoma,

Rabbi Aher, and Rabbi Akiba.

Rabbi Ben Azzai looked around and died.

Rabbi Ben Zoma looked and lost his mind.

Rabbi Aher "laid waste the plants"—that is,
 he abandoned Judaism and seduced the young.

Rabbi Akiba was the only one
 who entered Paradise unscathed

and came out unscathed. . . .

KHONEN.

Don't try to terrify me with those rabbis.

We don't know how they went or why.

Perhaps those men were yielding to temptation,
 perhaps they stumbled because they went to look
 and not to purify their souls. . . .

We know that others entered after them—

the saintly Ari, the holy Baal-Shem-Tov—

and none of them were sinners.

HENEKH. Are you comparing yourself to them?

KHONEN.

I'm not making any comparisons.
I'm just following my own path. . . .

HENEKH. Which path is that?

KHONEN. You wouldn't understand.

HENEKH. I want to understand. My soul also yearns for the highest spheres.

KHONEN. (*Thinking for a while.*)

Our saints all have the task of cleansing human souls,
they root out the evil spirit of sin
and restore our souls to radiant perfection.
It's a hard task because "sin lurks by the door."

When one soul has been purged and purified,
another takes its place immediately,
a soul that's tainted with far greater sins.

When one generation has repented,
another takes its place immediately,
a generation with a stiffer neck.

And people keep growing weaker and weaker,
and sins keep growing stronger and stronger,
and saints keep growing scarcer and scarcer.

HENEKH. Then what do you think we should do?

KHONEN. (*Quiet but very confident.*)

We must never wage war against sin,
we should simply try to ameliorate it.
It's like a goldsmith tempering gold in an intense fire,
or like a farmer separating chaff from wheat.

That's how we have to purify sin:

Remove all impurity and leave
nothing but holiness. . . .

HENEKH. (*Surprised.*) Holiness in sin? How is that possible?

KHONEN.

Everything that God has created
contains a spark of holiness.

HENEKH. It wasn't God who created sin, it was the *sitra-akbra*, the other side—the Devil!

KHONEN.

And who created the other side? God!
The *sitra-akbra* is the other side of God.
And since the Devil is a side of God,
he must contain a spark of holiness.

HENEKH. (*Shocked.*) Holiness in the Devil? I don't understand! I can't! Let me think. (*He buries his head in his hands on the lectern. Pause.*)KHONEN. (*Goes to him, bends over him. In a trembling voice.*)

Which sin is the worst?

Which sin is the hardest to conquer?

The sin of lust. Isn't that so?

HENEKH. (*Without lifting his head.*) Yes. . . .

KHONEN.

And if you purify that sin in powerful fire,
the vilest sinfulness becomes
the most exalted holiness
—it becomes the Song of Songs. (*Breathless.*)

The Song of Songs.

(*Standing up straight, he begins to croon softly and ecstatically.*)

You are beautiful, my beloved, you are beautiful.

Your eyes are like doves,

peering out from under your brows.

Your hair is like a flock of goats

scampering down from Mount Gilead.

Your teeth are like a herd of sheep

that have just bathed,

and they are all twins,

and there are no barren sheep among them. . . .

(MEYER emerges from the private room. We hear a quiet tap on the door; it grates softly and opens hesitantly. LEAH enters, holding FRADDE's hand. Next comes GITL. They halt by the door.)

MEYER. (*Surprised to see them; in a flattering and ecstatic voice.*)

What? Sender's daughter? Leah? . . .

LEAH (*Timidly.*) Don't you remember? You promised to show me the old embroidered curtains on the Holy Ark. (*The instant he hears her voice, KHONEN stops crooning and stares at her wide-eyed. From now on, he stands there, either gaping at her or closing his eyes ecstatically.*)

FRADDE. Meyer, please show her the oldest and most beautiful curtains. Leah promised she would embroider a curtain for the anniversary of her mother's death. She'll use gold thread and she'll embroider lions and eagles into the finest velvet, the way women did in the old days. And when they hang the curtain on the Holy Ark, her mother's pure soul will be so happy in Paradise.

(LEAH looks around shyly, she notices KHONEN, her eyes drop, and she makes an effort to keep them down.)

MEYER. Of course, of course! I'd be absolutely delighted! I'll bring the curtains out right away, the oldest and most beautiful. (*Goes over to the chest by the entrance door and takes out some curtains.*)

GITL. (*Grabs LEAH's hand.*) Leah, aren't you scared to be here at night?

LEAH. I've never been inside a synagogue at night before. . . . Except for Simkhes-Torah, the rejoicing in the Torah. That night, the synagogue was radiant and cheerful, but now. . . . How sad it is, how sad.

FRADDE. Girls, a synagogue has to be sad. At midnight, the dead come to pray and they leave their sorrows here.

GITL. Fradde! Don't talk about ghosts, I'm scared!

FRADDE. (*Ignoring her.*)

And every morning, when the Almighty weeps
for the destruction of the Holy Temple,
his holy tears flow into all the synagogues.
That's why their walls are always damp—with tears.
And the walls must never be whitewashed.
If ever they were, they would get angry and hurl stones.

LEAH.

The synagogue is old, so very old.

I couldn't really tell from the outside.

FRADDE. It's old, it's very old, my darling. They say it was discovered under the ground, intact. There's been so much destruction here, the whole town's been wiped out by so many fires—and yet the synagogue has always survived unscathed. One time only, the roof caught fire, but doves came flying, masses of doves. They beat and beat their wings until they blasted out the flames.

LEAH. (*Not hearing her, talking to herself.*)

How sad the synagogue is and how sweet!

I don't feel like leaving, I'd like to kneel
at the tear-stained walls and embrace them lovingly
and ask them why they look so sad and dreamy,
so silent and gloomy. I'd really like to—

I don't know what. But it's heart-wrenching, I feel
so much pity for them, so much tenderness. . . .

MEYER. (*Brings curtains to the bimah and spreads one out.*) This is the oldest curtain, it's over two hundred years old. We only hang it up on Passover.

GITL. (*Delighted.*) Look, Leah, isn't it glorious! It's made of brown velvet and there are two lions embroidered in thick gold thread. They're holding a Mogen Dovid, a Shield of David, and they're flanked by two

trees with doves! You could never get such heavy velvet today or such rich gold thread.

LEAH. The curtain, too, is sweet and sad.

(*She smooths it out and kisses it.*)

GITL. (*Clutches LEAH's hand, speaks quietly.*) Look, Leah. There's a boy standing over there and he's staring at you! He's staring at you so strangely!

LEAH. (*Dropping her eyes even more intensely.*) He's a yeshiva student . . . Khonen. He sometimes had meals in our home.

GITL. He's staring at you as if he were trying to call you with his eyes. He wants to come closer, but he's afraid.

LEAH. I wonder why he looks so pale and sad. He must have been sick. . . .

GITL. He's not the least bit sad. His eyes are sparkling.

LEAH. His eyes are always sparkling . . . and they're so incredible. And whenever he talks to me, he becomes breathless. And so do I. . . . After all, it won't do for a girl to speak with a strange boy. . . .

FRADDE. (*To MEYER.*) Meyer, you have to let us kiss the Torah scrolls. How can we pay God a visit without kissing his Holy Torah!?

MEYER. All right, all right! C'mon! (*He goes ahead, GITL leads FRADDE, then comes LEAH. MEYER takes out a Torah scroll and hands it to FRADDE, who kisses it.*)

LEAH. (*Right across from KHONEN, LEAH pauses for a moment, speaks softly.*) Good evening, Khonen. So you've come back?

KHONEN. (*Breathless.*) Yes. . . .

FRADDE. Leah, come and kiss the scroll! (*LEAH goes over to the Holy Ark. MEYER holds out the Torah. She embraces it and kneels down, kissing it passionately.*) Fine, my child, that's enough! You shouldn't kiss a scroll too long. After all, a Torah is written with black fire on white fire! (*FRADDE is suddenly startled.*) Goodness, look how late it's getting! C'mon, you two, we have to get home as fast as possible. (*They hurry out. MEYER shuts the Holy Ark and goes out behind them.*)

KHONEN. (*Stands a while with closed eyes, then continues to croon the Song of Songs from where he broke off.*)

Your lips are like a scarlet thread and they
are beautiful; and your temples are like
pomegranates under your bridal veil.

HENEKH. (*Raises his head, looks at KHONEN.*) Khonen! What are you singing?! (*KHONEN breaks off. Opens his eyes, looks at HENEKH.*) Your earlocks are wet—you've been to the ritual bath again.

KHONEN. Yes.

HENEKH. When you cleanse your body, do you recite incantations? Do you use spells and rituals from the Book of Raziel?

KHONEN. Yes.

HENEKH. And you're not afraid?

KHONEN. No.

HENEKH. And you really fast from one Sabbath to the next? It's not hard for you?

KHONEN. It's harder for me to eat on the Sabbath than to fast all week. I've lost all desire for food. (*Pause.*)

HENEKH. (*Intimately.*) Why do you do all those things? What are you hoping to achieve?

KHONEN. (*Almost to himself.*)

I want. . . .

I want to find a clear and sparkling diamond.

I want to melt it into tears and soak

the tears into my soul. . . . I want to find

the rays of the Third Heavenly Temple,

the Third Divine Emanation . . .

the Sphere of Tiferet—Beauty.

I want . . . (*He suddenly becomes very agitated.*) Yes! I still have to get two small barrels of gold coins. . . . For the man who can only count money. . . .

HENEKH. (*Astonished.*) What are you saying? Listen, Khonen, you're walking on a slippery path. . . . You won't get all those things with holy forces. . . .

KHONEN. (*Eyes him boldly.*) And if I don't use holy forces? If I don't use holy forces?

HENEKH. (*Terrified.*) I'm scared of talking to you. I'm scared of standing next to you! (*Hurries out. KHONEN remains motionless, with a bold expression. MEYER enters from the street. The FIRST IDLER emerges from the rebbe's private room.*)

FIRST IDLER. I've recited eighteen psalms—that's enough. After all, eighteen is the symbol of life. I'm not going to recite all one hundred fifty psalms for just a few lousy kopeks. But there's no way of talking to the others, they're absorbed in their psalms, and once they get going—forget it! (*OSHER comes dashing in, very excited.*)

OSHER. I just ran into Borekh, the tailor. He's back from Klimóvke—Sender went there to meet with the bridegroom's parents. Borekh says they failed to reach an agreement. Sender wanted them to put the couple up for ten years, but the boy's parents wouldn't go beyond five. So they just went their separate ways.

MEYER. That's the fourth bridegroom he's rejected!

THIRD IDLER. It's heartbreaking!

MESENTER. (*To the THIRD IDLER, smiling.*) You yourself said that a marriage comes about if the bride and groom are meant for each other.

KHONEN. (*Stands up straight; highly enthusiastic.*) I've won again! (*Collapses on the bench and sits with a blissful expression on his face.*)

MESENTER. (*Picks up his sack, removes a lantern.*) It's time I got going.

MEYER. What's your hurry?

MESENTER. Look, I'm a messenger. My wealthy clients hire me to deliver important messages and precious objects to one another. So I have to hurry. My time is not my own.

MEYER. Why don't you wait till dawn?

MESENTER. The dawn is far away, and I have far to go. So I'll be leaving around midnight.

MEYER. It's pitch-black outside.

MESENTER. I've got a lantern, I won't get lost. (*The other two IDLERS and the yeshiva students emerge from the private room.*)

SECOND IDLER. Mazel tov! May God grant the sick woman a complete recovery.

ALL. Amen! Amen!

FIRST IDLER. We ought to spend our ruble on some liquor and cookies.

MEYER. It's all been taken care of. (*He takes out a bottle and some cookies.*) Let's go to the anteroom. We'll have our drinks there. (*The door opens wide and SENDER walks in. His coat is unbuttoned, his hat pushed back; he is in high spirits. He is followed by three or four men.*)

MEYER AND IDLERS. (*Together.*) Ah, Sender. Welcome, welcome!

SENDER. I was driving past the synagogue, so I thought I'd drop in and see how my friends are doing. (*Notices MEYER's bottle.*) I figured you'd be studying a holy book or talking about some Talmudic dilemma. But I see you're about to have a drink! Ha ha! True Hasids!

THIRD IDLER. You'll have a sip, too, won't you, Sender?

SENDER. C'mon now! I'm going to be treating you to a drink, and a fine drink. Congratulate me! I've signed the engagement contract for my daughter—thank goodness!

(*KHONEN jumps up, he is shaken.*)

ALL. Mazel tov! Mazel tov!

MEYER. Hey, we were just told you couldn't work things out with the boy's father, so the engagement was off.

THIRD IDLER. We were devastated!

SENDER. It did look hopeless, but at the last moment the boy's father came around, and so my daughter's engaged.

KHONEN. Engaged? . . . Engaged? . . . What do you mean?

How can that be? . . . (*In great despair.*)

Were all my efforts useless—all my fasts,
my ritual ablutions and my spells,

and all the mortifications of my flesh?

Was everything for nothing? . . . And what now? . . .

Where should I go? Where can I get the strength?

(*Grabs at his chest, straightens up, with an ecstatic face.*)

Aah! . . . Aah! I see the revelation now.

The huge, the twofold utterance of the Name.

I . . . see it now! I . . . I . . . I've won! I've won!

(*Collapses on the floor.*)

MESSENGER. (*Opens the lantern.*) The candle has burned down. I have to light a new one. (*Terrifying pause.*)

SENDER. Meyer! Why is it so dark here? Can't you light some candles. (*MEYER lights a candle.*)

MESSENGER. (*Quietly walks over to SENDER.*) So you've come to terms with the boy's father?

SENDER. (*Looks at him in surprise, slightly amazed.*) Yes. . . .

MESSENGER. Sometimes parents accept a condition, but then they don't keep their word. Sometimes people have to go to a rabbinical court. You've got to be very careful. . . .

SENDER. (*Frightened, to MEYER.*) Who's that man? I don't know him.

MEYER. He's not from here, he's a messenger. . . .

SENDER. What does he want from me?

MEYER. I don't know.

SENDER. (*Calming down.*) Osher! Zip over to my house and tell them to set out drinks, preserves, and other treats! Hurry! Get a move on! (*OSHER dashes out.*) In the meantime, let's sit for a while and talk. . . . Maybe somebody can tell us some news about our rebbe—a story, a miraculous feat. Every gesture of his is more precious than pearls.

FIRST IDLER. (*To MEYER.*) Put away your bottle. It'll come in handy tomorrow. (*MEYER puts it away.*)

MESSENGER.

I'll tell you a story about him:

The rebbe had a visitor, a Hasid,

A very rich but very stingy man.

The rebbe took him by the hand and led

him to the window, saying, "Have a look!"

The rich man then peered out into the street.

The rebbe asked him: "Well, what do you see?"

And the rich Hasid answered: "I see people."

And then the rebbe took him by the hand

again and led him over to the mirror,

and said: "Now have a look. What do you see?"

The wealthy man replied: "I see myself."

The rebbe went on: "Do you understand?"

"The window is made of glass

and the mirror is made of glass.

"But the glass in the mirror has a thin silver coat.

"And because of that silver,

"you can't see other people,

"you see only yourself."

THIRD IDLER. Ohhhh! Our rebbe's words are sweeter than honey.

FIRST IDLER. Sacred words! . . .

SENDER. (*To the MESSENGER.*) Hey! Was that a dig?

MESSENGER. God forbid.

SECOND IDLER. We ought to sing something. (*To the THIRD IDLER.*)

Hum the rebbe's special melody. (*The THIRD IDLER launches into a soft, mystical, Hasidic melody. The others join in.*)

SENDER. (*Gets up.*) And now a dance, a *rikud!* C'mon! My daughter's getting married and no one's dancing?! What kind of Hasids are we? (*SENDER, the THREE IDLERS, and MEYER each puts his hand on the next man's shoulder and they form a round. Starry-eyed, they chant a repetitious mystical tune while slowly moving in a circle. SENDER merrily dashes out of the circle.*) And now, a merry dance. All of you—get over here!

THIRD IDLER. Boys! Boys! All of you get over here. (*Several BOYS go over.*) Henekh! Khónen! Where are you? We're dancing our socks off!

SENDER. (*A bit confused.*) Aha, Khónen! Our Khónen ought to join us. Where is he? Where is he? Bring him here immediately!

MEYER. (*Sees KHONEN on the floor.*) He's sleeping on the floor.

SENDER. Wake him up, wake him up!

MEYER. (*Tries to waken him; terrified.*) He won't wake up! (*The others join him; they bend over the boy and try to waken him.*)

FIRST IDLER. (*Cries out in terror.*) He's dead!

THIRD IDLER. The book's fallen out of his hand, it's The Book of the Angel Razi! (*All of them are shaken.*)

MESSENGER. He's been destroyed by the demons!

Act II

Three months later. A square in Brinnitz. To the left, the old wooden synagogue, ancient in its architecture. In front of the synagogue, slightly off to the side, a mound of earth with an old gravestone bearing the inscription: "Here lie a pure and holy bride and groom who were martyred in the year 5408 [1648]. Blessed be their souls." Next to the synagogue, a narrow lane with some tiny houses merging into the backdrop. To the right, SENDER's home, a large wooden house with a porch; next to the house, a wide gate leading into a courtyard; then a tiny alley with a row of shops, which also merge into the backdrop. On the backdrop, to the right near the shops, a tavern and an aristocratic mansion with a large garden. A wide road runs down to the river. On the high bank on the other side of the river, a Jewish cemetery with headstones. To the left, a bridge across the river and a windmill; nearby, a bathhouse and a poorhouse; in the background, a dense forest.

The gates to SENDER's courtyard are wide open. In the courtyard, long tables stick all the way out into the square. The tables are set, and beggars and cripples, old and young, are sitting around them, eating ravenously. Waiters emerge from the house with huge platters of food and baskets of bread, which they place on the tables.

In front of the shops and houses, women sit, darning stockings, their eyes glued to SENDER's home. Householders and students with prayer shawls and phylacteries emerge from the synagogue; some go into shops or houses, others form small groups. Music, dancing, and noisy conversation are heard from SENDER's courtyard.

It is evening. In the middle of the street, in front of the synagogue, we see the WEDDING GUEST, an elderly man wearing a long satin frock, with his hands tucked into the back of his belt. Next to him, the SECOND IDLER.

GUEST. (Looks around the synagogue.) This is a grand synagogue you've got here. . . . It's huge, it's beautiful. The shekhina, God's spirit, is resting on it. It looks very old.

SECOND IDLER. It's ancient. Our old people say that even their grandparents couldn't remember when it was built.

GUEST. (Spots the gravestone.) And what's this? (Walks over and reads the inscription.) "Here lie a pure and holy bride and groom martyred in the year 5408. Blessed be their souls." A bride and groom were martyred here?

SECOND IDLER. Yes, they were killed by Khmielnitsky—may he rot in hell. He and his Cossacks butchered most of our people in this area.

When they attacked Brinnitz, they slaughtered half the Jews—including a bride and groom, just as they were being led to the wedding canopy. Afterwards, the two of them were buried in one grave and in the very spot where they'd been murdered. Ever since, it's been known as the Holy Grave. (He murmurs softly, mysteriously.) Now, whenever the rabbi marries a couple, he hears sighs coming from the grave. . . . And so we have an old custom here: After a wedding ceremony, we dance around the grave and entertain the buried couple.

THE GUEST. A fine custom! (MEYER emerges from SENDER's courtyard and comes over.)

MEYER. (Raving.) What an incredible banquet for the poor! I've never seen anything like this in all my life.

THE GUEST. It's not surprising. Sender is marrying off his only daughter.

MEYER. (Ecstatically.) Everyone is getting a piece of fish, a slice of roast, and then carrot stew! And before the meal, they were served cake and brandy. It must be costing millions—it's beyond belief!

SECOND IDLER. Sender knows what he's doing. If you don't treat an invited guest properly, it's no big deal, he'll just pout and get huffy. But if you don't go out of your way for the poor, then you're skating on thin ice. . . . You never know who may be dressed in beggar's clothing. Perhaps a pauper or perhaps someone else. A hidden saint, or even a *lámmed-vóvnik*—one of the thirty-six righteous men. . . .

MEYER. And why not the Prophet Elijah—Elly-ha-nóvi? He always comes disguised as a beggar.

THE GUEST. You should treat everyone decently, not just the poor. You can never tell who a person is, or who he was in an earlier life, or why he was reborn. (The MESSENGER, with a sack slung over his shoulder, enters from the street on the left. MEYER spots MESSENGER, goes to him.)

MEYER. Shólom aléikhem—peace be with you! So you're back in our town?

MESSENGER. I've been sent here again.

MEYER. You've come at the right time. We're having a sumptuous wedding.

MESSENGER. People are talking about it all over the district.

MEYER. Did you happen to run into the bridegroom's family on your way here? They're late.

MESSENGER. The groom will arrive on time. (Goes over to the synagogue. The GUEST, the SECOND IDLER, and MEYER go into the courtyard. LEAH, in her wedding gown, emerges from behind the tables, dances with each of the poor old women in turn; other paupers come over to her. The

ones who have finished dancing go out into the square, where they form small groups.)

WOMAN WITH A CHILD. (*Contented.*) I danced with the bride.

LAME WOMAN. So did I. I took her in my arms and we danced. Hee hee!

HUNCHBACKED MAN. Why is the bride only dancing with women? I'd like to take her in my arms and whirl her around. He he he!

SEVERAL PAUPERS. He he he! (FRADDE, GITL, and BESSYE come out of the house and stand on the porch.)

FRADDE. (*Nervously.*) Oh my! Leah is still dancing with the paupers. She's going to be too dizzy. Girls, please go and get her. (*She sits down on a chair. GITL and BESSYE go over to LEAH.*)

GITL. That's enough dancing, Leah. Come on.

BESSYE. You're going to get very dizzy. (*She and GITL take LEAH by the hands and try to lead her away.*)

THE POOR WOMEN. (*Clustering around LEAH, with pleading and tearful shrieks.*)

She hasn't danced with me yet! Am I any worse than the others?

I've been waiting for hours to dance with her!

Let me. I'm supposed to dance with her after Elke.

She's spun around ten times with that cripple Yakhne, and not even once with me! I never have any luck!

MEYER. (*Comes from the courtyard and sits down on a chair. Chants loudly like a wedding jester.*)

The father, the rich man, he asked one and all

To come to his home for the big wedding ball!

He said he'd distribute his alms to the poor—

Ten kopeks for everyone who came to his door!

THE POOR. (*Dashing, shoving, jostling their way into the courtyard, shouting excitedly.*) Ten kopeks! Ten kopeks! (*The square empties out. The only people remaining are LEAH, GITL, BESSYE, and the BLIND OLD WOMAN.*)

BLIND OLD WOMAN. (*Grabs LEAH.*) I don't need your charity. Just dance with me. Just spin around with me once. I haven't danced in forty years! Oh, how I danced when I was a girl, how I danced! (*LEAH and the BLIND OLD WOMAN dance, the OLD WOMAN refuses to let go, she pleads.*) More, more! (*They keep dancing, the OLD WOMAN becomes breathless, hysterical.*) More, more! (*GITL yanks away the OLD WOMAN, leads her to the courtyard, and returns; then she and BESSYE take LEAH to the porch and they all sit down. The WAITERS and SERVANTS take in the tables and lock the gates.*)

FRADDE. You're pale as a ghost, Leah. You must be exhausted!

LEAH. (*Her eyes closed, her head bowed, she speaks almost dreamily.*) They grabbed me, they crowded around me, they crushed against me, they touched me with their cold, dry fingers. . . . My head whirled, I felt faint. . . . Then someone lifted me up and carried me far, far away. . . .

BESSYE. (*Frightened.*) Leah! Look at your wedding gown, it's smeared and crumpled! What are you going to do now?

LEAH. (*In the same tone.*) If the bride is left alone before the ceremony, evil spirits come and carry her off. . . .

FRADDE. (*Frightened.*) Leah! What are you saying! You mustn't use their real names. They lurk and hide in every nook and cranny, in every hole and crack. They see everything, they hear everything, and they're just waiting for someone to use their real names, their unclean names—then they leap out and attack. (*She spits three times to ward off evil.*)

LEAH. (*Opens her eyes.*) They're not evil. . . .

FRADDE. And never trust a demon. If you do, he goes berserk and starts playing his pranks. . . .

LEAH. (*Very self-confident.*) Fradde!

The spirits that surround us aren't evil.

These are the people who died before their time.

And now their souls watch everything we do

and listen now to everything we say. . . .

FRADDE. God help you, darling! What are you saying! Souls? What souls? Pure souls fly to Heaven and rest in the brightness of Paradise. . . .

LEAH. No, they're here, with us!

(*Her tone of voice changes.*)

When a person is born,

he can look forward to a long, long life.

But if he passes on before his time,

what happens to the life he hasn't lived?

What happens to his joys and sorrows?

The thoughts he had no time to think?

The deeds he had no time to do?

What happens to the children

he had no time to conceive?

Where does everything go? Where? (*Musing.*)

Oh. . . . Once upon a time there was a boy.

His soul was lofty, and his mind was deep.

A long, long life stretched out ahead of him. . . .

Then all at once, in a split second,

his life was cut short.

And strangers buried him in a strange soil. (*Mournfully.*)
 What happened to the life he never lived?
 The words he never spoke, the prayers he never prayed? . . .
 Fradde, when a candle goes out, we light it again,
 and it keeps burning down until it's gone.
 So if a life has not burned down,
 how can it be possibly be snuffed forever?
 How can that be?

FRADDE. (*Shaking her head.*) Darling, you shouldn't think about such things! The Good Lord knows what He's doing, but we are blind, we know nothing. (*The MESSENGER comes over unnoticed and stations himself somewhat behind the others.*)

LEAH. (*Ignoring FRADDE, self-assured.*)

No, Fradde,
 no human life is ever lost forever.
 If anybody dies before his time,
 his soul comes back into the world and lives
 the lifetime that he should have lived on earth.
 it does the deeds he never got to do,
 it feels the joys and pains he never felt. (*Pause.*)
 Fradde! You told me that the dead
 come to the synagogue to pray at midnight.
 You see, they come to finish up the prayers
 that they had no time to recite. (*Pause.*)
 My mother died when she was very young.
 She had no time to do and feel and know
 the things that she was destined for on earth.
 So now I'm going to the cemetery,
 I'd like to ask her to attend my wedding
 and lead me to the canopy with my father.
 And she will come and she will dance with me. . . .
 And that's what always happens to the souls
 that leave the world before their time is up:
 They lurk among us, but we never see them,
 we never feel their presence. . . .

(*Softly.*)

But Fradde, if we wish very hard, we can see them and we can hear
 their voices and even understand their thoughts. . . . I know. . . .

(*Pause. She points to the gravestone.*)

I've known the Holy Grave since childhood,
 I know the bride and groom who are buried there.

I've seen them so often,
 in my dreams and in the flesh,
 and they're as close to me
 as my own family and my friends. (*Musing.*)
 When they walked to the wedding canopy,
 they were young and beautiful.
 A long life lay ahead of them, a lovely life.

But all at once,
 evil men attacked them with hatchets—
 and the bride and groom lay dead on the ground.
 The two of them were buried in one grave
 so they could be together for all eternity.
 And at every wedding, when people dance around their grave,
 their ghosts emerge and they participate
 in the joy of the newlyweds.

(*LEAH stands up and goes over to the grave. FRADDE, GITL, and BESSYE follow her. LEAH spreads out her hands and holds them high.*)

Holy bride and groom! I invite you to my wedding!

Please come and stand at my side under the canopy.

(*Suddenly we hear a lively klezmer march. LEAH cries out in terror and nearly collapses.*)

GITL. (*Holding her.*) Don't be scared. It's probably the bridegroom coming. They must be welcoming him with music.

BESSYE. (*Excited.*) I'm gonna sneak over and have a look at him.

GITL. Me too. Then we'll come and tell you what he's like. Do you mind?

LEAH. (*Shaking her head.*) No. . . .

BESSYE. She's embarrassed! Don't be embarrassed, silly. We won't tell anyone. (*They hurry off. LEAH and FRADDE return to the porch.*)

FRADDE. A bride always asks her friends to go and look at the groom. Then they tell her what he's like, and whether his hair is blond or black or brown.

MESSENGER. (*Comes closer.*) Bride!

LEAH. (*Trembles, turns around.*) What do you want? (*Peers intently at him.*)

MESSENGER.

The souls of the dead do return to the world,
 but not as spirits without bodies. There are souls
 that transmigrate through several bodies,
 trying to purify themselves.

(*LEAH listens more and more attentively.*)

The sinful souls come back as animals,
as birds, as fish, or even plants—but they're unable
to purify themselves and so they wait
until a holy man, a tsaddik,
can liberate them and bring them salvation.

And there are souls that enter a newborn baby
and purify themselves through their own deeds.

LEAH. (*Trembling.*) Go on! Please tell me more!

MESSENGER.

And there are homeless souls that find no rest,
and so they enter living bodies
to purify themselves.

Such a soul is called a dybbuk. . . .

(*He vanishes. LEAH remains astonished. SENDER emerges from the house.*)

SENDER. Why are you sitting there, my darling?

FRADDE. She was entertaining the poor people at their banquet. She
danced with them, and now she's exhausted, so she's resting.

SENDER. Ah! Entertaining the poor. That's a very good deed, a great
mitzvah! (*Looks at the sky.*) It's getting late. The bridegroom and his
parents have arrived. Are you both ready?

FRADDE. She still has to go to the cemetery. . . .

SENDER. Go on, dear, go and visit your mother's grave. (*Sighs.*) Cry
your eyes out and invite your mother to the wedding. Tell her I'd like
her to join me so the two of us can lead our only daughter to the can-
opy. . . . Tell her I've done everything she asked me to do when she was
dying. I've devoted my entire life to you, I've brought you up, I've
raised you as a virtuous Jewish daughter. And now I've found you a
studious and God-fearing husband from an excellent family. (*Wipes his
tears and goes back inside, his head lowered. Pause.*)

LEAH. Fradde, when I go to the graveyard, can I invite other people
to my wedding?

FRADDE. Only next of kin. You can invite your grandfather, Fraim,
and your Aunt Mirrele.

LEAH. I'd like to invite someone . . . who's not a relative.

FRADDE. That's not allowed, darling. If you invite an outsider, the
other dead people will be jealous, and they might do something
awful. . . .

LEAH. No, he's not really an outsider. . . . He was like a member of
the family. . . .

FRADDE. (*Quiet, frightened.*) Oh. . . . Darling, I'm scared! . . . They
say he died a horrible death. . . . (*LEAH weeps softly.*) Oh, c'mon, please

don't cry, don't cry. Invite him. I'll take the responsibility. (*Tries to re-
member.*) But I don't know where his grave is located, and it won't do to
inquire.

LEAH. I know where it is.

FRADDE. (*Surprised.*) How do you know?

LEAH. I dreamt about his grave. (*Closes her eyes, muses.*)

I dreamt about him too.

He told me what was happening with him. . . .

He asked me to invite him to my wedding.

(*GITL and BESSYE come hurrying back.*)

GITL, BESSYE. (*In unison, excited.*) We saw him! We saw him!

LEAH. (*Shaken.*) Who? Who did you see?

GITL. The bridegroom! He's got dark hair, dark hair!

BESSYE. No, he's got blond hair, blond hair!

GITL. C'mon, let's have another look! (*They hurry off.*)

LEAH. (*Stands up.*) Fradde! Let's go to the cemetery.

FRADDE. (*Sad.*) I'm coming, darling. Oh, me. . . . (*LEAH pulls a black
shawl over her shoulders, and she and FRADDE exit into the right-hand
lane. For a while, the stage remains empty. Music is heard. From the street
on the left, NAKHMAN comes with RABBI MENDEL and MENASHE, a short,
skinny, terrified boy with huge, gaping eyes; next come the bridegroom's
parents and relatives in their holiday best. SENDER goes out to meet them.*)

SENDER. (*Shaking NAKHMAN's hand.*) Shólom aléikhem, Nakhman,
welcome! (*They kiss. SENDER greets MENASHE and kisses him, and then
greets the others.*) How was your trip, Nakhman?

NAKHMAN. We've had a very arduous and confusing trip! Somehow
we left the road and wandered through the countryside for a long time.
Then we wound up in a swamp and we almost sank in, we barely man-
aged to crawl out. I began to think that the demons—God spare us!—
were trying to keep us from traveling. . . . But in the end, we managed
to arrive in time, thank goodness!

SENDER. You must be exhausted. Would you like to rest a little?

NAKHMAN. There's no time to rest. We still have to discuss our obli-
gations—the dowry, the gifts, the fees for the rabbi, the cantor, the
beadle, the musicians.

SENDER. By all means! (*He puts his arm around NAKHMAN's shoulder,
and the two fathers start walking up and down the square, talking
quietly.*)

RABBI MENDEL. (*To MENASHE.*) Now remember! During the meal, you
have to sit quietly at the table and not leave, and always keep your eyes
down. . . . Right after the wedding dinner, the clown will announce:

"The groom will now deliver his Talmudic discourse." At that point, you have to get to your feet immediately, stand up on your chair, and begin. You have to chant in a loud, clear melody—the louder, the better. And don't get stage fright! Do you hear me?

MENASHE. (*Mechanically.*) I hear you. (*Softly.*) Rebbe, I'm scared. . . .

RABBI MENDL. (*Startled.*) Why are you scared? Have you forgotten your speech?

MENASHE. No, I remember it. . . .

RABBI MENDL. Then why are you scared? . . .

MENASHE. (*In deep sorrow.*) I don't know. . . . The instant we left home, I started feeling terrified: The places we drove through were alien to me, I've never seen so many strangers in my life. . . . I was frightened whenever they looked at me. . . . I was scared of their eyes. . . . (*Trembles.*) Rebbe! There's nothing I'm so scared of as the eyes of strangers!

RABBI MENDL. You've been harmed by an evil eye. I'll have to exorcise it.

MENASHE. Rebbe! I'd like to be alone and hide out in some nook. I'm surrounded here on all sides by strange people, and I have to talk to them, answer their questions. . . . As if I were being led to the gallows! (*In mystical fear.*) Rebbe! Most of all, I'm terrified of her . . . the girl! . . .

RABBI MENDL. Get a hold of yourself! Conquer your fear! Otherwise you'll forget your speech, God forbid! C'mon, let's go to the inn. You can rehearse your speech one more time. (*They start walking.*)

MENASHE. (*Spots the Holy Grave, trembles, grabs RABBI MENDL's hand.*) Rebbe! What's this? A grave in the middle of the street? (*They stop, silently read the inscription, then, with lowered heads, walk off into the left-hand lane. SENDER, NAKHMAN, and the IN-LAWS enter the house. One after another, the beggars, with sacks slung over their shoulders and sticks in their hands, come out of SENDER's courtyard. Sad and silent, they plod across the square and disappear into the left-hand lane, some of them pausing for an instant.*)

TALL PALE WOMAN. Now the banquet for the poor is over, as if it had never been. . . .

LAME OLD WOMAN. We were told that each of us would be getting a bowl of broth, but we got nothing.

HUNCHBACKED WOMAN. We got tiny bits of chalah. . . .

MAN ON CRUTCHES. With all his money he couldn't afford to serve each guest a whole roll?

TALL PALE WOMAN. He could have served us pieces of chicken, you know. For the rich guests, they prepared hens and geese and stuffed turkeys. . . .

BLIND OLD WOMAN. What's the difference? . . . When we're dead,

there'll be nothing but worms. Oh my, oh my! (*They slowly go away. The stage is empty for a while. The MESSENGER slowly walks across the stage and enters the synagogue. Dusk. The shopkeepers close their shops, leave. Candles are lit in the synagogue and in SENDER's house. SENDER, GITL, and BESSYE come out on the porch, look around.*)

SENDER. (*Nervous.*) Where's Leah? Where's her nanny? Why are they spending all this time in the cemetery? I hope nothing's happened, God forbid.

GITL, BESSYE. Let's go and meet them. (*LEAH and FRADDE enter hurriedly from the right-hand street.*)

FRADDE. Hurry, hurry, Leah, we're horribly late! (*Women emerge from the house.*) Why did I ever listen to you! Now I'm scared something awful might happen, God help us!

SENDER. Well! Here they are! What's been keeping you? (*WOMEN come out of the house.*)

WOMEN. Take the bride indoors, she has to bless the Sabbath candles. (*They take LEAH indoors.*)

FRADDE. (*Softly to GITL and BESSYE.*) She fainted. I barely managed to bring her around. I'm still shaking. . . .

BESSYE. She's fasting, that's why she fainted.

GITL. Did she cry a lot at her mother's grave?

FRADDE. (*Waving her hand.*) Better not ask what happened there! I'm terrified! (*A chair is placed next to the door, LEAH is brought out and she sits down on the chair. Music is heard. From the left-hand lane come NAKHMAN, MENASHE, RABBI MENDL, and the groom's PARENTS. MENASHE is carrying a bridal veil in both hands, he goes over to LEAH and places it on her head and her face. The MESSENGER comes out of the synagogue.*)

LEAH. (*Tears off the bridal veil, jumps up, pushes MENASHE away, and shouts.*) You are not my bridegroom! (*Commotion all about. The others surround LEAH.*)

SENDER. (*Shaken.*) Leah! My darling daughter! What's wrong?!

LEAH. (*Tears herself away, runs over to the gravestone, spreads out her arms.*) Holy bride and groom, protect me, save me! (*She collapses. The others run over to her, lift her up, she looks around wild-eyed and screams in a strange voice, a male voice.*) Aaah! Aaah! You buried me! But I've returned to my beloved, and I'll never leave her! (*NAKHMAN goes over to LEAH. She screams into his face.*) Murderer!

NAKHMAN. (*Terrified.*) She's lost her mind.

MESSENGER. A dead soul has entered the body of the bride: a dybbuk. (*Great commotion.*)

Act III

Miropolye, two days later. RABBI AZRIEL's house. A huge room. To the right, a door leading to the other rooms. In the middle of the front wall, the front door, with benches on either side. Windows in the wall. To the left, for almost the entire length of the wall, a broad table covered with a white tablecloth. On the table, piles of sliced chalah for the blessing of the meal. At the head of the table, an armchair. At the right-hand wall, next to the inner door, a small Holy Ark and a reading stand. Opposite the Ark, a small table, a sofa, several chairs.

Saturday night, a short time after evening prayer (Maariv). There are HASIDS present. MIKHL, the beadle, stands at the table, dividing the piles of chalah. The MESSENGER, sitting next to the Holy Ark, is surrounded by a group of HASIDS. Other HASIDS are sitting apart, perusing holy books. FIRST HASID and SECOND HASID are standing by the small table in the middle of the room. From the interior rooms, a soft singing emerges: "Got fun Avrom, fun Yitzik un fun Yankev. . . ." (God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob).

FIRST HASID. The guest is telling such amazing stories. . . . They're terrifying. I'm afraid to listen. . . .

SECOND HASID. What kind of stories?

FIRST HASID. The symbols are too deep, they don't make sense. They're probably inspired by the teachings of Rabbi Nakhman of Braslev. . . . Who knows? . . .

SECOND HASID. The older Hasids are listening, so there's probably nothing to worry about. (*They join the group around the MESSENGER.*)

THIRD HASID. Tell us another story.

MESSENGER. It's getting late. There's not much time left.

FOURTH HASID. It doesn't matter, the rebbe won't be going out so soon.

MESSENGER. At one end of the world, there is a high mountain, and on that mountain, there is a huge rock, and from that huge rock a pure spring comes gushing out. And at the other end of the world, there is the heart of the world, for everything in the world has a heart, and the world itself has a big heart. And the heart of the world gazes and gazes at the pure spring and it can never see enough of it, and it longs and yearns and thirsts for the pure spring, yet it cannot take even the smallest step toward it. For the moment the heart so much as stirs from its place, it loses sight of the mountain peak and the pure spring, and if the heart of the world ever loses sight of the pure spring for even an instant, it

loses its life. And at the very same time, the world starts dying. Now the pure spring has no time of its own and so it lives on the time it receives from the heart of the world. And the heart of the world gives it only one day at a time. . . . And when that day has faded, the pure spring begins to sing to the heart of the world. And the heart of the world sings to the pure spring. And their singing spreads all over the world, and radiant threads emerge from the singing and they reach the hearts of all things in the world and they reach from one heart to the next. . . . And there is a righteous and gracious man who wanders about the world and gathers the radiant threads of the hearts and weaves them into time. And as soon as he finishes weaving an entire day, he passes it on to the heart of the world, and the heart of the world passes it on to the pure spring. And so the pure spring lives for another day. . . .

THIRD HASID. The rebbe is coming! (*They all lapse into silence and stand up. Through the right-hand door comes RABBI AZRIEL, a very old man in a white caftan and a shtreymel—the fur-edged hat worn by rabbis and Hasidic Jews on the Sabbath and holidays.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Lost in thought, he trudges slowly and wearily, settles arduously into his easy chair. MIKHL stations himself at the rabbi's right, the HASIDS sit down around the table. The older ones sit down on the benches, the younger ones stand behind them. MIKHL distributes chalah to the HASIDS. RABBI AZRIEL raises his head and slowly begins chanting in a quivering voice.*) *Do hi soodássa d'dovid malka m'shiekha.* This is the banquet of King David the Messiah. (*The others respond, recite the blessing on the bread, then they start chanting a sad, mystical melody without words. Pause. RABBI AZRIEL sighs deeply, rests his head on both hands, and sits there for a while, absorbed in his own thoughts. A fearful silence. RABBI AZRIEL raises his head and speaks in a soft, trembling voice.*) There is a story they tell about the holy Baal-Shem-Tov—may his merits deliver us from evil. (*Brief pause.*) Once some German acrobats came to his town and they performed stunts in the streets. They stretched a rope all the way across the river, and one of them walked across the rope. People came running from all over town to watch this amazing feat. And the holy Baal-Shem-Tov also came to the river and stood there with everyone else, watching the tightrope walker. His students were astonished to see him there and they asked him what it meant: Why had the holy Baal-Shem-Tov come to watch the stunts? And the holy Baal-Shem-Tov replied: "I wanted to see a man walking over a deep abyss. And as I watched him, I thought to myself: If that man could work as hard on his soul as he worked on his body, then just imagine what deep abysses his soul could cross on the very slender string of his life!" (*A deep sigh. Pause. The HASIDS exchange rapturous glances.*)

FIRST HASID. As high as the world!

SECOND HASID. Marvels and wonders!

THIRD HASID. The finest of the finest.

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Softly to MIKHL, who is leaning over to him.*) There's a stranger here. . . .

MIKHL. (*Looking around.*) He's a messenger. . . . He seems to be a follower of the Cabala. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. What sort of message has he brought?

MIKHL. I don't know. Should I ask him to leave?

RABBI AZRIEL. God forbid! Absolutely not! We have to show respect to an outsider. Offer him a chair. (MIKHL, *slightly surprised, offers the MESSENGER a chair. No one notices.* RABBI AZRIEL *glances at one* HASID, *who is chanting a mystical melody without words. Pause.* RABBI AZRIEL *as before.*)

God's world is huge and holy. The holiest land in the world is the Holy Land. In the Holy Land, the holiest city is Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, the holiest site was the Temple; and in the Temple, the holiest place of all was the Holy of Holies. (*Brief pause.*)

Now there are seventy nations in the world. The holiest nation is the people of Israel; and of the twelve tribes of Israel, the holiest of all is the Tribe of Levi; and in the Tribe of Levi the holiest men are the priests. Of all the priests, the holiest was the high priest. (*Brief pause.*) Now there are 354 days in the year, and some of them are Holy Days. The holiest of these days are the Sabbaths, and the holiest Sabbath of all is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement—the Sabbath of Sabbaths. (*Short pause.*)

Now there are seventy languages in the world. And the holiest of them all is the Holy Tongue, Hebrew. And the holiest Hebrew of all is the Hebrew of the Holy Torah, and the holiest part of the Torah is the Ten Commandments, and in the Ten Commandments the holiest word of all is the *Shem-ha-Váwyaw*, the name of God. (*Brief pause.*) And once a year, at a specific moment, the four holiest holies in the world used to join together: That was on Yom Kippur when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies and uttered the *Shem-ha-Mfóyrosb*, the complete and ineffable name of God, the Tetragrammaton, the Four Letters: Yud, Hey, Vov, Hey. And because that moment was immeasurably holy and fearful, it was the most dangerous—both for the high priest and for the entire Jewish people. For if at that moment—God forbid—a sinful thought had come to the high priest, an impure thought, a *makhshóvve zórre*, then the world would have been destroyed. (*Pause.*)

Any place where a man raises his eyes to heaven is the Holiest of Holies; every man whom God has created *b'tsálmoy ukhd'músoy*, in His

Own Image and after His Own Likeness, is a high priest. Every day of a man's life is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and every word that a man speaks artlessly is the *Shem-ha-Váwyaw*, the name of God. Hence, every sin and every injustice that a man commits will destroy the world. (*In a trembling voice.*)

Human souls. . . . They pass through great sorrows and sufferings, through many transmigrations and incarnations, drawn to their origin like a baby to its mother's breast, drawn aloft, to the *Kísse-ha-Kóved*, the Throne of God. But sometimes, when a soul reaches the highest levels, then suddenly—God preserve us—the evil spirit wins out, and the soul stumbles and falls. And the higher the soul has soared, the deeper it plunges. And when such a soul falls, then the world is destroyed and all the celestial temples are overcome by darkness and all the Ten Spheres of Heaven, the Ten Emanations of God, weep and wail. (*Pause. As if awakening from a trance.*)

My children! Today the Sabbath dinner, the *melaveh-malke*, will be shorter than usual as we usher out the Sabbath. (*Everyone but MIKHL leaves quietly, under the spell of the rebbe's words. A brief pause.*)

MIKHL. (*Walks over to the table, unsure of himself.*) Rebbe! (RABBI AZRIEL *gazes at him, sad and weary.*) Rebbe, Sender of Brínnitz has come to see you. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. (*As if echoing him.*) Sender of Brínnitz. . . . I know. . . .

MIKHL. Something horrible has happened to him. His daughter is possessed by a dybbuk—God help us.

RABBI AZRIEL. A dybbuk. . . . I know.

MIKHL. Sender has brought his daughter to you. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. (*As if to himself.*) To me? . . . To me? . . . How could he have come to me since my "me," my "I," does not exist? . . .

MIKHL. Rebbe, the whole world comes to you.

RABBI AZRIEL. The whole world. . . . A blind world. . . . Blind sheep following a blind shepherd. . . . If they weren't blind, they wouldn't come to me, they would go to the only one who can say "I," the only "I" in the world.

MIKHL. Rebbe, you are His emissary. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. That's what the world says, but I don't know. . . . I've been sitting in a rebbe's chair for forty years now, and I'm still not sure that I am the emissary of God—Blessed Be He. . . . There are times when I feel so close to Him, and I'm not assailed by any doubts, I feel confident, and I have power over the higher worlds. But there are also times when I lose my confidence, and then I'm as tiny and feeble as a baby. And then I'm the one who needs help. . . .

MIKHL. Rebbe, I remember something. . . . You once came to me at midnight and asked me to recite psalms with you. And all through the night, we recited psalms and we wept. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. That was long ago. Now I feel a lot worse. (*In a trembling voice.*) What do they want from me? I'm old and weak. My body needs rest, my soul craves solitude. Yet I attract the sorrows and sufferings of the world. Every request that someone aims at me pricks my flesh like a needle. I have no strength. . . . I can't! . . .

MIKHL. (*Frightened.*) Rebbe! Rebbe!

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Moans.*) I can't anymore! I can't! (*Weeps.*)

MIKHL. Rebbe! You mustn't forget that entire generations of saints and holy men stand behind you—may they all rest in peace: your father and your grandfather, the great man, who was a disciple of the Baal-Shem-Tov. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Comes to, raises his head.*) My ancestors: my holy father, who saw the Prophet Elijah three times; my uncle, Rabbi Meyer Ber, who ascended to heaven whenever he recited the Sh'ma Isroel. . . . My grandfather, the great Rabbi Vélvele, who could bring the dead back to life. (*Turns to MIKHL; lively.*) Mikhl, my grandfather was able to drive out a dybbuk without resorting to spells or incantations! All he had to do was yell at the dybbuk, just yell! Whenever I face a difficult moment, I turn to him, and he helps me out. And he's not going to desert me now. . . . Call in Sender. (*MIKHL exits and then returns with SENDER.*)

SENDER. (*Stretching out his hands with a tearful plea.*) Rebbe! Take pity! Help me! Save my daughter!

RABBI AZRIEL. How did the disaster come about?

SENDER. Well, the groom was placing the veil on her head—

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Interrupting.*) That's not what I'm asking. Why did this disaster come about in the first place? A worm can make its way into a fruit only after the fruit starts rotting.

SENDER. Rebbe! My daughter is a God-fearing Jewish girl. She's modest and humble, and she obeys me in everything.

RABBI AZRIEL. Children can be punished for the sins of their parents.

SENDER. If I knew of any sin that I've committed, I would do penance. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. Did anyone ask the dybbuk who he is and why he's possessing your daughter?

SENDER. He won't answer. But we recognized his voice: He was a student at our yeshiva. Several months ago, he died very suddenly in our synagogue. He used to dabble in the Cabala, and that damaged his soul.

RABBI AZRIEL. What forces damaged him?

SENDER. Supposedly, the evil spirits. . . . Several hours before he

died, he told a friend that we shouldn't wage war against sin. He also said that there is a spark of holiness in the Devil—God help us! And he tried to create two barrels of gold by using magic. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. Did you know him personally?

SENDER. Yes. . . . He sometimes had meals in my home—like other yeshiva students.

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Looks sharply at SENDER.*) Did you offend him in any way, did you disgrace him? Think hard.

SENDER. I don't know. . . . I don't remember! (*Despairing.*) Rebbe, I'm only human. (*Pause.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. Bring in the girl. (*SENDER exits and returns immediately with FRADDE, who leads LEAH by her hands. LEAH halts at the threshold, refuses to enter.*)

SENDER. (*Tearful.*) My darling daughter, have pity. Don't shame me in front of the rebbe. Please come in.

FRADDE. Come in, Leah darling. Come in, dear.

LEAH. I want to go in but I can't.

RABBI AZRIEL. Leah! I order you to come in. (*LEAH crosses the threshold and goes to the table.*) Sit down.

LEAH. (*Sits down obediently. Suddenly, she leaps up and shouts in an alien voice.*) Leave me alone! I don't want to! (*She tries to run away, but SENDER and FRADDE hold her fast.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. Dybbuk, I order you to tell me who you are.

DYBBUK.

Rebbe of Miropolye!

You know very well who I am,

and I won't reveal my name to anyone else.

RABBI AZRIEL. I didn't ask you for your name. I ask: Who are you?

DYBBUK. (*Silent.*) I am one of those who looked for new paths. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL.

A person looks for new paths only if

he wanders from the path of righteousness.

DYBBUK. The path of righteousness is far too narrow. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL.

Those are the words of a wanderer

who couldn't find his way back. (*Pause.*)

Why have you entered this girl's body?

DYBBUK. I am her destined bridegroom.

RABBI AZRIEL.

According to our Holy Torah, the dead may not linger among the living.

DYBBUK. I have not died.

RABBI AZRIEL.

You've left our world, and you have no right to come back until the Great Shofar, the ram's horn, is blown on Judgment Day.

Therefore I order you to leave the girl's body.

Otherwise a living branch will wither on the eternal tree of the people of Israel.

DYBBUK. (*Shouting.*)

Rebbe of Miropolye!

I know how strong you are, how omnipotent!

I know you can command angels and seraphim.

But you can do nothing to me!

I have nowhere to go!

All paths are blocked for me, all roads are barricaded, and evil spirits lurk on all sides, waiting to grab me.

(*In a trembling voice.*)

There is Heaven, there is earth, and there are worlds beyond number throughout the cosmos, but there is no place for me anywhere in the universe.

And now that my bitter and banished soul has found a haven,

you want to drive me away!

Have pity on me, don't expel me.

Don't exorcise me.

RABBI AZRIEL.

Homeless soul!

I pity you from the bottom of my heart, and I will try to save you from the demons.

But you must leave the body of this girl.

DYBBUK. (*In a decisive voice.*) I'll never leave!

RABBI AZRIEL. Mikhl, go to the synagogue and round up a quorum of ten men. (*Mikhl exits and soon returns, followed by ten men, who station themselves on the side.*) Holy minyan! Do you give me the authority, in your names and with your power, to expel, from the body of a daughter of the Jewish people, a spirit that refuses to leave of its own accord?

ALL TEN JEWS. Rebbe! We give you the authority, in our names and with our power, to expel, from the body of a daughter of the Jewish people, a spirit that refuses to leave of its own accord.

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Stands up.*)

Dybbuk! Soul of a man who left our world:

In the name and with the power of a holy minyan of Jews, I, Azriel the son of Hadas, order you to leave the body of this girl, Leah, the daughter of Khanna.

And I order you not to injure her or any other living creature as you leave.

If you refuse to obey,

then I will curse you, I will conjure you, hurl maledictions and anathemas at you, with all the power of my outstretched arm.

But if you obey,

then I will focus all my power on your salvation, and drive out all the demons and the devils that surround you. . . .

DYBBUK. (*Shouting.*)

I'm not scared of your conjuring and cursing,

I have no faith in your assurances!

No power in the universe can help me!

Nothing is so lofty and sublime

as my resting place here,

and no abyss is so dark

as the one that awaits me!

I refuse to leave!

RABBI AZRIEL.

In the name of Almighty God,

I beseech you one last time.

I order you to leave the girl's body.

Otherwise, I will excommunicate you

and then hand you over to the demons. (*A terrifying pause.*)

DYBBUK.

In the name of Almighty God,

I am joined forever with my destined bride,

and I will not leave her in all eternity.

RABBI AZRIEL. Mikhl, bring in a white robe for every person in this room and also seven rams' horns and seven black candles. Then get seven Torah scrolls from the Holy Ark. . . . (*A terrifying pause, during which MIKHL exits, then returns with rams' horns and black candles. He is followed by the MESSENGER with white robes.*)

MESSENGER. (*Counts the robes.*) There's an extra robe here. (*Looks around.*) Is someone missing?

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Nervous, recollecting.*) In order to excommunicate a Jewish soul, one has to obtain authorization from the town rabbi. . . .

Mikhl, hold on to the rams' horns, the candles, and the robes. Take my staff, go over to Rabbi Shimshin, and ask him on my behalf to come here immediately! (MIKHL *takes the rams' horns and the candles and exits together with the messenger, who is carrying the robes.* RABBI AZRIEL *speaks to the TEN MEN.*) You can go out in the meantime. (*They exit. Pause.* RABBI AZRIEL *raises his head.*) Sender! Where are the bridegroom and his parents?

SENDER. They're spending the Sabbath at my home in Brínnitz.

RABBI AZRIEL. Send a horseman to them on my behalf. He should tell them to wait there until I summon them.

SENDER. I'll send one right away.

RABBI AZRIEL. Meanwhile take the girl to the next room.

LEAH. (*Wakes up, speaks in her own voice.*) Fradde! I'm scared. . . . What are they going to do to him? And to me?

FRADDE. Don't be afraid, child! The rebbe knows what he's doing. He won't do anything bad. The rebbe would never do anything bad. (FRADDE *and SENDER lead LEAH into the next room.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Sits absorbed in his thoughts. Then, as if awakening.*) And if the higher spheres decree otherwise, I will reverse the divine judgment. (RABBI SHIMSHIN *enters.*)

RABBI SHIMSHIN. Good day, Rebbe!

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Stands up to greet him.*) Good day to you, Rabbi. Please have a seat! (RABBI SHIMSHIN *sits down.*) I have taken the liberty of asking you to come here because of a dreadful problem. A Jewish girl has been possessed by a dybbuk—God preserve us—and he refuses to leave her body. We have no choice, we're forced to use our last resort: We are going to drive him out with curses and excommunicate him. So I would like to ask your consent. That way, the *mitzvah* of saving a life will stand you in good stead.

RABBI SHIMSHIN. (*Sighs.*) Anathema is a harsh punishment for a living Jew and even more so for a dead Jew. . . . But if there's no other way, and if a godly man like you considers it necessary, then I grant my permission. . . . But first, Rebbe, I have to reveal a secret that pertains to this matter.

RABBI AZRIEL. Really?

RABBI SHIMSHIN. Rebbe, think back twenty years. Do you remember a young man who used to come here from Brínnitz? He was a Hasid and also a practitioner of the Cabala: Nissin, the son of Rivka.

RABBI AZRIEL. Why yes, eventually he moved far away, and he died at a very young age.

RABBI SHIMSHIN. Exactly. Well, last night, that very same man, Nissin,

the son of Rivka, appeared to me in three dreams and asked me to summon Sender of Brínnitz before a rabbinical court.

RABBI AZRIEL. What is his grievance against Sender?

RABBI SHIMSHIN. He wouldn't tell me. All he said was that Sender had spilled his blood.

RABBI AZRIEL. When a Jew asks another Jew before a rabbinical court, then naturally a rabbi cannot refuse—especially if it's a dead man, for he can demand a hearing before God's own tribunal. . . . But what does all this have to do with the dybbuk?

RABBI SHIMSHIN. There's a connection. . . . I've been told that the dead boy who entered the girl's body as a dybbuk was Nissin's son. . . . I've also heard that Sender had a certain obligation toward Nissin and that he failed to honor it. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Thinks for a while.*) In that case, I'll put off the exorcism until noon tomorrow. We'll interpret your dream after morning prayers, God willing, and then you'll summon the dead man for the rabbinical trial. After that, with your authorization, I'll drive out the dybbuk by means of an anathema. . . .

RABBI SHIMSHIN. Rebbe, a rabbinical trial between a living man and a dead man is very unusual and extremely difficult. So I would like to ask you to officiate as the presiding judge.

RABBI AZRIEL. I accept. Mikhl! (MIKHL *enters.*) Bring in the girl. (SENDER *and FRADDE bring in LEAH, who sits down with closed eyes.*) Dybbuk! I will give you exactly twelve hours, until noon tomorrow. You must leave of your own free will by the stroke of twelve. If not, then, with the permission of the town rabbi, I will drive you out by means of a very harsh anathema. (*Pause.*) You can take out the girl now. (SENDER *and FRADDE are about to take LEAH out.*) Sender, please stay a bit longer. (FRADDE *takes LEAH out.*) Sender! Do you remember your old friend Nissin, the son of Rivka?

SENDER. (*Startled.*) Nissin? . . . Why, he's dead. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. I have to tell you that last night the town rabbi dreamt about him three times. (*Points to RABBI SHIMSHIN.*) He demanded the right to bring charges against you before a rabbinical court.

SENDER. (*Shaken.*) A rabbinical court? . . . Oh my God! . . . What does he want from me? . . . What should I do, Rebbe?

RABBI AZRIEL. I don't know what he's accusing you of, but you must agree to the trial.

SENDER. I'll do as you say.

RABBI AZRIEL. (*In a different tone of voice.*) Send the fastest horses to Brínnitz without further delay and bring the bridegroom and his parents.

They are to get here tomorrow morning before noon. The instant the dybbuk is driven out, we will perform the marriage.

SENDER. Rebbe! They may not want to be related to me now. Suppose they refuse to come? (*The MESSENGER appears in the doorway.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Firmly.*) Tell them that I order them to come. Just make sure the bridegroom arrives in time.

MESSENGER. The bridegroom will arrive in time.

(*The clock strikes midnight.*)

CURTAIN

Act IV

Twelve hours later. The same room as in Act III. At the left, the long table has been replaced by a small table closer to stage front. An armchair flanked by two other chairs has been placed behind the table. RABBI AZRIEL, in his prayer shawl and phylacteries, is sitting at the table, flanked by the two rabbinical judges. RABBI SHIMSHIN is standing at the table. Further off: MIKHL. They have just finished interpreting RABBI SHIMSHIN's dream.

RABBI SHIMSHIN. *Khélmo tóvo khózze*, I have dreamt a good dream. *Khélmo tóvo khózze*, I have dreamt a good dream.

RABBI AZRIEL AND BOTH JUDGES. *Khélmo tóvo khazéyso*, you have dreamt a good dream. *Khélmo tóvo khazéyso*, you have dreamt a good dream. *Khélmo tóvo khazéyso*, you have dreamt a good dream.

RABBI AZRIEL. Rabbi, we've interpreted your dream, and it's going to work out for the best. So please join us as a judge. (*RABBI SHIMSHIN sits down next to RABBI AZRIEL at the table.*) We will now summon the dead man to the rabbinical court. But first I want to draw a circle. He is to remain within its circumference and he will not be allowed to leave. Mikhl, hand me my cane! (*MIKHL hands him the cane. RABBI AZRIEL goes over to the left-hand corner of the room and draws a circle with his cane from left to right. He sits down again at the table.*) Mikhl! Take my cane and go to the cemetery. When you get there, close your eyes and grope your way with my cane. Halt at the very first grave that my cane touches, tap the grave three times and say the following words:

"*Mes tóhor*, righteous dead man: Azriel, the son of the great and saintly Rabbi Itshela of Míropolye, asks your forgiveness for disturbing your rest, and he enjoins you, by ways you are familiar with, to tell the righteous dead man, Nissin, the son of Rivka, that the rabbinical court of Míropolye requires his immediate appearance and orders him to wear the clothes in which he was buried."

You are to repeat those words three times, then turn and come back. Pay no heed whatsoever to the shouts, shrieks, and cries that you may hear behind you, and do not let go of my cane for even an instant. Otherwise you will be in mortal danger. Go, and God will protect you, for someone who is performing a good deed, a *mitzvah*, cannot be harmed. . . . Before you leave, send in two men to put up a partition for the dead man. (*MIKHL leaves. Then, two men bring in a sheet, which they hang up, so that the edge reaches the floor, thereby covering the entire left-hand corner. They leave.*) Call in Sender. (*SENDER comes in.*) Sender, have you done what I told you? Have you dispatched horses to summon the bridegroom and his parents?

SENDER. I sent out the fastest horses, Rebbe, but the bridegroom and his parents haven't arrived yet.

RABBI AZRIEL. Send out another horseman, he is to tell them to drive faster.

SENDER. Yes, Rebbe. (*Pause.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. Sender! We are notifying the righteous dead man, Nissin, the son of Rivka, that he is being summoned to the rabbinical court to settle a dispute with you. Will you accept our judgment?

SENDER. I will accept it.

RABBI AZRIEL. Will you do anything we tell you to do?

SENDER. I will do anything you tell me to do.

RABBI AZRIEL. Then go and stand on the right.

SENDER. Rebbe! Now I remember. . . . Nissin, the son of Rivka, probably wants to take me to court because of an agreement we once made. . . . I failed to keep my pledge, but it wasn't my fault. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. You can explain later, when the plaintiff presents his grievance. (*Pause.*) Soon a man from the True World, the realm of the dead, will appear before us, so that we can settle his dispute with a man from our Illusionary World, the realm of the living. (*Pause.*) A trial like this proves that the laws of the Holy Torah rule all the worlds and all the creatures, and these laws apply to both the living and the dead. (*Pause.*) Such a proceeding is very difficult and frightening. It will be watched from all the heavenly palaces. And if the rabbinical court should deviate from the law by even a hair's breadth—God forbid!—then there will be loud protests from the celestial court. We therefore have to conduct our trial with fear and trembling. . . . Fear. . . . And trembling. (*He nervously looks around, focuses on the sheet and lapses into silence. A fearful silence.*)

FIRST JUDGE. (*To the SECOND JUDGE, softly, timidly.*) I can feel he's here.

SECOND JUDGE. (*In the same tone.*) He is here, I can feel it. . . .

RABBI SHIMSHIN. He is here. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. Righteous dead man, Nissin, the son of Rivka, the rabbinical court decrees that you shall not step beyond the circle and the partition that have been prepared for you. (*Pause.*) Righteous dead man, Nissin, the son of Rivka, the rabbinical court orders you to state your complaint and grievance against Sender, the son of Henya. (*A terrifying pause. All listen, petrified.*)

FIRST JUDGE. (*As before.*) I think he's answering. . . .

SECOND JUDGE. I think he's answering. . . .

FIRST JUDGE. I hear a voice, but I hear no words.

SECOND JUDGE. I hear words, but I hear no voice.

RABBI SHIMSHIN. (*To SENDER.*) Sender, son of Henya! The righteous dead man, Nissin, the son of Rivka, claims that when you were young the two of you were fellow students in the yeshiva, and your souls were joined in true friendship. You both married in the same week. Later, when you met at the rebbe's home for the Days of Awe, the two of you made a pledge: When your wives got pregnant, and one bore a girl and one a boy, the two children would someday be united as man and wife.

SENDER. (*In a trembling voice.*) Yes, that was our agreement.

RABBI SHIMSHIN. The righteous dead man, Nissin, son of Rivka, further claims that he soon left your town and moved to a remote place, where his wife gave birth to a son at the very same moment that your wife gave birth to a daughter. A short time later, he passed away. (*Brief pause.*) Then, in the True World, the realm of the dead, he learned that his son was blessed with an exalted soul and that he was rising to loftier and loftier heights. And Nissin's heart swelled with fatherly pride. And he also saw that when his son grew older, he went out and wandered across the world, roaming from village to village, from town to town, from country to country, for his soul was seeking his beloved. Now one day, he came to your town and he frequented your home and he sat at your table. And his soul was drawn to your daughter's soul. But you are rich, and Nissin's son was poor. And so you completely ignored him and went looking for a son-in-law with a noble family and a large settlement. (*Brief pause.*)

And Nissin watched his son suffering in profound despair, and the boy began roaming the world again, searching for new paths. And the father's soul was filled with grief and anxiety. And the powers of darkness, upon seeing the boy's despair, spread their nets before him and caught him and snatched him from the world before his time. And his soul wandered about until it entered his beloved's body as a dybbuk. (*Short pause.*)

Nissin, the son of Rivka, states that with the boy's death, he, the

father, has been cut off from both worlds. He is unremembered—without a name, without an heir, without a son to say Kaddish for him. His candle was snuffed for all eternity, and his pride and joy plunged into an abyss. And so he asks the rabbinical court to judge Sender, according to the laws of our Holy Torah, for spilling the blood of Nissin's son and his son's children and his children's children until the end of time. (*Terrifying hush. SENDER sobs.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. Sender, son of Henya, have you heard the grievance of the righteous dead man, Nissin, son of Rivka? What is your response?

SENDER. I can barely speak, I have no words to justify what I did. But I beg my old friend to forgive me for my sin, because it was not ill will on my part. A short time after we swore our oath, Nissin moved away, and I never knew that his wife had given birth, I never learned about their son. Eventually, I heard that Nissin had died. I received no further news about his family, and little by little I forgot all about him.

RABBI AZRIEL. Why didn't you make inquiries? Why didn't you try to investigate?

SENDER. Normally it's the groom's family that takes the first step. I figured that if Nissin had had a son, he would have notified me. (*Pause.*)

RABBI SHIMSHIN. Nissin, son of Rivka, asks why it was that when his son visited your home and sat at your table, you never once asked him who he was or where he came from?

SENDER. I don't know. . . . I can't remember. . . . But I swear that I constantly felt a longing to make the boy my son-in-law. That was why whenever someone proposed a husband for my daughter, I made such exorbitant demands that the parents always refused. And so three possible engagements didn't work out. However, this time the mother and the relatives insisted. . . . (*Pause.*)

RABBI SHIMSHIN. Nissin, son of Rivka, says that in your heart of hearts you recognized his son, and that was why you were afraid to ask him who he was. You wanted a rich and cozy life for your daughter, and so you hurled his son into the abyss. (*SENDER weeps quietly, covering his face. An intense pause. MIKHL arrives and hands the cane to RABBI AZRIEL.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Speaks softly with RABBI SHIMSHIN and THE JUDGES. Stands up, takes hold of the cane.*) The rabbinical court, having heard both sides, has now come to the following decision:

Whereas it is not known whether their wives were already pregnant when Nissin, the son of Rivka, and Sender, the son of Henya, made their agreement; and whereas according to our Holy Torah, an agreement has no validity if it refers to something that has not yet been created, we

cannot determine that Sender was obligated to keep his promise. On the other hand: Since the heavenly palaces accepted the agreement, and since they planted in the heart of Nissin's son the thought that Sender's daughter was his destined bride; and since Sender's subsequent behavior caused great calamities for Nissin and his son, it is the judgment of this rabbinical court that Sender must donate half his wealth to the poor; furthermore, for the rest of his life, he is to burn memorial candles and recite Kaddish on the anniversaries of Nissin's death and his son's death, as if they were his own kinsmen. (*Pause.*) The rabbinical court asks the righteous dead man, Nissin, the son of Rivka, to grant full and complete forgiveness to Sender and also to exert his paternal authority by ordering his son to leave the body of the girl, Leah, the daughter of Khanna; otherwise a living branch will wither on the fruitful tree of the people of Israel. And the Almighty will then show his vast grace to Nissin, the son of Rivka, and to his homeless son.

EVERYONE. Amen! (*Pause.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. Righteous dead man, Nissin, the son of Rivka, have you heard our judgment? Do you accept it? (*A fearful pause.*) Sender, son of Henya, have you heard our judgment? Do you accept it?

SENDER. Yes, I accept it.

RABBI AZRIEL. Righteous dead man, Nissin, son of Rivka, the litigation between you and Sender, son of Henya, is terminated. Now you have to go back to your rest. We enjoy you not to hurt any human being or any other living creature on your way. (*Pause.*) Mikhl! Remove the partition and bring us some water. (*Mikhl summons two men, who take down the curtain. With his cane RABBI AZRIEL draws a circle in the same place as before, but this time from right to left. The servants bring in a bowl and a pitcher. They all wash their hands.*) Sender? Has the bridegroom's family arrived?

SENDER. We haven't heard them yet.

RABBI AZRIEL. Send another horseman out to meet them. They should drive their horses as hard as they can. Set up the wedding canopy and alert the musicians. Have the bride put on her wedding gown. That way, the instant the dybbuk leaves her body, the ceremony can take place. Make sure that everything is ready. (*Takes off his prayer shawl and phylacteries and folds them up.*)

RABBI SHIMSHIN. (*Softly to the JUDGES.*) Did you notice that the dead man did not forgive Sender?

FIRST AND SECOND JUDGES. (*Softly, terrified.*) We noticed.

RABBI SHIMSHIN. Did you notice that the dead man did not accept the judgment?

FIRST AND SECOND JUDGES. We noticed.

RABBI SHIMSHIN. Did you notice that he did not say "amen" to Rabbi Azriel's words?

FIRST AND SECOND JUDGES. We noticed.

RABBI SHIMSHIN. A very bad omen!

FIRST AND SECOND JUDGES. A very bad omen!

RABBI SHIMSHIN. Look how agitated Rabbi Azriel is! His hands are trembling. (*Pause.*) We've done what had to be done, now we can go. . . . (*The JUDGES steal out unnoticed. RABBI SHIMSHIN is about to leave, too.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. Rabbi, stay here until the dybbuk leaves. And then you can perform the ceremony. (*RABBI SHIMSHIN sighs and, lowering his head, he sits down off to the side. An oppressive silence.*) Lord of the Universe! Obscure and wondrous are your ways. But the path that I take is illuminated by the blazing flame of your sacred will. And I will not deviate from this path either to the left or to the right. . . . (*Raises his head.*) Mikhl, is everything ready?

MIKHL. Yes, Rebbe.

RABBI AZRIEL. Call in the girl. (*SENDER and FRADDE bring in LEAH. She is wearing a white wedding dress with a black cape on her shoulders. They seat her on the sofa. RABBI SHIMSHIN sits down next to RABBI AZRIEL.*) Dybbuk! On behalf of the town rabbi, who is sitting here, on behalf of a holy minyan of Jews, on behalf of the Great Sanhedrin of Jerusalem, I, Azriel, the son of Hadas, issue this order one last time: You are to leave the body of the girl, Leah, daughter of Khanna!

DYBBUK. (*Resolutely.*) I will not leave!

RABBI AZRIEL. Mikhl, bring in the men and the white robes and the rams' horns and the black candles. (*MIKHL goes out and then comes back with fourteen men, plus the MESSENGER. They bring in smocks, rams' horns, and black candles.*) Get the Holy Torahs! (*MIKHL takes out seven Torahs, distributes them to seven men. Hands out seven rams' horns.*) Obstinate spirit! Since you refuse to submit to our decree, I am placing you under the authority of the higher spirits, and they will pull you out with all their violence. Blow the horns! Blow *tekiah*. (*They blow the horns.*)

LEAH (*DYBBUK*). (*Jumps away, thrashes, screams.*) Stop it! Stop pulling me! I don't want to! I can't leave!

RABBI AZRIEL. Since the higher spirits cannot control you, I am placing you under the authority of the middle spirits, those that are neither good nor evil. And they will pull you out with all their cruelty. Blow the horns! Blow *shvórim*! (*They blow the horns.*)

DYBBUK. (*With waning strength.*) Oh God! All the powers in the

universe have risen up against me! I'm being pulled by the most horrible demons, the most ruthless devils. Great souls and righteous souls are confronting me, and my father is among them, and they are ordering me to leave. But so long as there's even a spark of strength left in me, I'll keep fighting and I won't leave.

RABBI AZRIEL. (*To himself.*) Some powerful entity must be helping him! (*Pause.*) Mikhl! Put the Torahs back in the Holy Ark. (*They are put back.*) Now shroud the Holy Ark in a black curtain. (*MIKHL does so.*) Now light the black candles. (*They are lit.*) Now put on the white robes—all of you! (*Everyone, including RABBI AZRIEL and RABBI SHIMSHIN, dons a white robe. RABBI AZRIEL stations himself and raises his arm high and fearfully.*) Rise up, oh Lord! May your enemies flee and disperse. Let them scatter the way smoke scatters. . . . Sinful and obstinate spirit! With the strength of Almighty God and with the power of the Holy Torah, I, Azriel, the son of Hadas, rip apart all threads that tie you to the world of the living and to the body and soul of Leah, the daughter of Khanna. . . .

DYBBUK. (*Shrieks.*) Oh God!

RABBI AZRIEL. And I anathematize you and expel you from the community of Israel!! *Teruah!*

MESSENGER. The final spark has blended with the flame.

DYBBUK. (*Powerless.*) I can't fight anymore. . . . (*They blast teruah on the rams' horns.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Stops the blasting. To the DYBBUK.*) Do you surrender?

DYBBUK. (*In a dying voice.*) I surrender. . . .

RABBI AZRIEL. Do you swear in good faith to leave the body of Leah, the daughter of Khanna, and never return?

DYBBUK. (*As before.*) I swear.

RABBI AZRIEL. By the same power and authority with which I anathematized you, I hereby revoke your anathema. (*To MIKHL*) Snuff the candles and remove the black curtain. (*MIKHL obeys.*) Put away the rams' horns. (*MIKHL gathers them.*) All of you, take off your robes. You may leave. (*The fourteen men take off the robes and leave together with the MESSENGER and MIKHL. RABBI AZRIEL raises his arms high.*) Lord of the Universe! God of mercy and goodness! Behold the great suffering of the homeless and afflicted soul who stumbled because of someone else's sins and errors. Avert Your eyes from this soul's transgressions, take into account his earlier good deeds, his great torments, and the merits of his ancestors. Lord of the Universe, clear away all the demons from his path and grant him eternal rest in Your heavenly palaces. Amen!

ALL. Amen!

DYBBUK. (*Leah shudders violently.*) Say Kaddish for me. My time is running out.

RABBI AZRIEL. Sender! Recite the first Kaddish!

SENDER. *Yisgadál ve-yiskadásh shmey rabó b'olmá di b'rà khiruséy.* . . . Magnified and sanctified be His Great Name throughout the world that He has created according to His will. May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of all the House of Israel, soon and speedily; and say amen— (*The clock strikes twelve.*)

LEAH (*DYBBUK*). (*Leaps up, terrified.*) Ohhhh! (*LEAH falls on the sofa, unconscious.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. Take the bride to the canopy! (*MIKHL comes running in.*)

MIKHL. (*Very agitated.*) The last horseman has just returned. He says a wheel broke on the groom's carriage, and the family is continuing on foot. They're almost here. Look! They're on the hilltop, we can see them now!

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Greatly surprised.*) Whatever must be must be! (*To MIKHL.*) Leave the old woman here with the bride. The rest of us will go out to welcome the groom. (*With his cane, the rebbe draws a circle around LEAH from left to right. He takes off his robe, hangs it up by the door, and exits, gripping his cane. He is followed by SENDER and MIKHL. Long pause.*)

LEAH. (*Wakes up; her voice is very weak.*) Who's here with me? . . . Oh, it's you, Fradde? Dearest Fradde? I feel so heavy. Help me. . . . Cradle me. . . .

FRADDE. (*Caressing her.*)

You shouldn't feel heavy, my darling.

Let the rat feel heavy, let the black cat feel heavy.

Your heart should be as light as a bit of down,
a puff of breath, a white snowflake.

Let holy angels fan you with their wings.

(*We hear a klezmer band playing a wedding tune.*)

LEAH. (*Shuddering, clutches FRADDE's hand.*)

Do you hear that? They're dancing at the Holy Grave,
they're entertaining the dead bride and groom!

FRADDE.

Don't shiver, my darling, don't be afraid.

You're surrounded by a ring of powerful guards.

Sixty sturdy men with drawn swords

will protect you against any misfortune.

Our holy Patriarchs and Matriarchs

will protect you against the evil eye.

(She gradually passes into a rhythmic chant.)

Soon you will walk to the canopy
In a good moment, in a happy moment. . . .
Your saintly mother will come from Heaven,
Will come from Heaven,
All decked out in silver and gold.
And two angels will welcome her,
Will welcome her with all their might.

They will take her hands,

One left, one right:

"Khanna mine, Khanna fine,

"Why are you in gold and silver,

"Why do you shine?"

Khanna answers without a whine:

"Why shouldn't I wear silver and gold?

"Today is a great holiday!

"My only daughter is being given away,

"My darling girl is marrying today!"

"Khanna mine, Khanna fine?

"Why is your face full of sadness and pain?"

Khanna answers without a whine:

"Why shouldn't I grieve? Why should I smile?

"Strangers are walking my daughter to the canopy,

"And I have to stand on the side and pine. . . .

"The bride will be taken to the canopy,

"Old and young will come to see.

"The Prophet Elijah will join the spree.

"He will take the goblet in his hand. . . .

"And he will bless the entire land.

"Amen! Amen!" *(She falls asleep. Long pause.)*

LEAH. *(Closes her eyes, sighs deeply, opens her eyes.)*

Who sighed so deeply?

KHONEN'S VOICE. I did.

LEAH. I hear your voice, but I can't see you.

KHONEN'S VOICE. We're separated, you're in a magic circle.

LEAH.

Your voice is as sweet as a violin

weeping in a hushed night. . . .

Tell me—who are you?

KHONEN'S VOICE.

I've forgotten. . . .

I can remember only if you remember me. . . .

LEAH.

I do remember. . . .

My heart was drawn to a radiant star. . . .

In hushed nights, I shed sweet tears

and I kept dreaming about someone. . . . Was that you?

KHONEN'S VOICE. Yes. . . .

LEAH. I remember. . . . Your hair was soft and delicate, and your eyes were mild and sad.

Your fingers were long and slender. . . .

You haunted me day and night. . . . *(Pause. Sadly.)*

But then you left me, and my light went out

and my soul shriveled,

I felt like a sorrowing widow

when a stranger approached me. . . .

All at once, you came back, and in my heart

death brought life and sorrow brought joy. . . .

Why did you desert me again?

KHONEN'S VOICE.

I smashed all barriers, I conquered death,

I flouted all the laws of time and space.

I wrestled with the powerful, the ruthless.

And when my final spark of strength was snuffed,

I left your body so I could return to your soul.

LEAH *(Tenderly.)*

Come back to me, my bridegroom, my husband. . . .

I'll carry you in my heart as a dead man,

and in dreams at night we'll cradle our unborn babies.

(She weeps.)

We'll sew shirts for them,

we'll sing lullabies to them.

(Sings tearfully.)

Weep, oh weep, my babies sweet,

No cradle for you and no sheet.

Babies dead and never born,

Babies lost in time, forlorn. . . .

(A wedding march is heard from outside, coming closer. LEAH trembles.)

They're going to marry me off to a stranger!

Come to me, my bridegroom.

KHONEN'S VOICE. I've left your body, I'm coming to your soul.

(Wearing white for his wedding, he appears at the wall.)

LEAH. *(Joyous.)* The circle is broken! I can see you, my bridegroom!
Come to me!

KHONEN. (*Echoing.*) Come to me!

LEAH. (*Stands up joyously.*) I'm coming to you.

KHONEN. (*Echoing.*) I'm coming to you.

VOICES. (*offstage.*) Take the bride to the canopy!

(*A wedding march. LEAH leaves the black cloak on the sofa and, all in white, she approaches her bridegroom to the rhythm of the wedding march. She reaches him and fuses with him. RABBI AZRIEL comes in, holding the cane. He is followed by the MESSENGER. They halt by the door. SENDER, FRADDE, and the OTHERS appear in the doorway.*)

LEAH. (*In a distant voice.*)

A giant light is pouring all around us. . . .

I'm joined to you forever, my beloved. . . .

We'll float together, higher, higher, higher. . . .

(*The stage grows darker and darker.*)

RABBI AZRIEL. (*Lowering his head.*) Too late. . . .

MESSENGER. *Bórukhh dáyan ho-émes.* Blessed be the true judge. May they rest in peace.

(*The stage becomes pitch-black. In the distance, we hear.*)

Why, oh why,

Did the soul descend

From the highest height

To the deepest end?

The lowest fall

Contains the upward flight. . . .

CURTAIN