

SAVING NINEVEH

Act I

Scene 1

Setting: The house of JONAH BEN-AMITTAI, in the village of Gath-Hepher, in Galilee of Israel, in the waning decades of the Northern Kingdom, before the Exile.

At Rise: The main living area of Jonah's house. A table, chairs, a sofa, and a heavy chest. JONAH sits at the table, hard at work. On the table sits an open lock box, a ledger, and stacks of coins. JONAH is counting his money, figuring, and entering the results in his ledger. HE is scowling and overwrought, not arriving at any solutions that satisfy him. Atop a ladder, which is not really part of Jonah's furnishings, sits the Archangel RAPHAEL. RAPHAEL watches with an unhurried stillness that suggests he would be content watching JONAH forever.

JONAH does not see RAPHAEL. After a minute, JONAH rises and crosses by the ladder (which HE does not see, either) to the chest. HE opens the chest, pulls out a sheaf of papers, and returns to his table. JONAH begins sorting the documents, muttering to himself.

JONAH

(Rips a sheet from his ledger, crumples it, and hurls it on the floor.)

Blast! Hang the Assyrians anyway! Ah, I'm not getting anywhere with this. Rachel! Rachel!

RACHEL

(Enters)

What is it?

JONAH

It's hopeless. Hopeless! Nothing adds up. None of the numbers make any sense. Assyrian blood-suckers!

RACHEL

Could you have forgotten anything? Some—I don't know—some account? Some expense?

JONAH

I don't know. Not that I know of.

RACHEL

Don't the numbers come out right? Or are we just not going to have the money to pay them?

JONAH

Both. Every time I do the addition, I get something different. And if any of the answers are right, we're ruined! It's a thousand miles away, this Nineveh! They're way off over the desert! They have no right to our money! We can't do this! We can't go on like this! It's... I'm... Oh...

RACHEL

Jonah, look here—you carried wrong. That should be a two. Two, eight, eleven . . .carry the one. Three, four. Four hundred fifteen shekels. That's right, isn't it?

JONAH

Sounds better. What'd you do?

RACHEL

Here, right here. Nine, seventeen, twenty-five, carry two, two, eight, elev-- Wait a minute.

JONAH

Wait a minute, what?

RACHEL

Oh, holy—. Jonah!

JONAH

What? Holy Jonah what? You're taking my name in vain now?

RACHEL

These are last year's receipts! Look at these dates! These are all from the twelfth year of Sargon's reign and this year is the thirteenth. No wonder it looks so bad.

JONAH

You're right. These are all from last year. How did that . . . ?

RACHEL

(Already on her way to the chest. SHE passes the ladder, not seeing it, while RAPHAEL continues his bemused observation. RACHEL opens the chest and retrieves a new sheaf of receipts.)

Here they are.

(SHE walks back toward table.)

JONAH

You have them? This year's?

RACHEL

This year's.

(Drops them on the table.)

You know, you're not very good at this.

JONAH

I'm lousy at it. I hate it. Twenty years I've been buying and selling fish. And I've always hated it.

RACHEL

I forget. You tell me that, and I forget it. Maybe you should tell me more often.

JONAH

I'm not a complainer.

RACHEL

No, and you're not much of a fishmonger either.

(Exit)

JONAH

So I'll practice. Twenty more years, I might be great at it. Doesn't mean I'll hate it any less. I could have been a sailor. I could have been . . .

RAPHAEL

A prophet?

(JONAH does not hear this.)

JONAH

I could have been . . . I . . . I . . . Aye yi yi . . .

(HE picks up a pencil and continues working.)

RAPHAEL

Are we ready yet, Jonah?

(JONAH does not hear this, either.)

JONAH

God, how I'd love to give those Assyrians a piece of my mind!

RAPHAEL

I think we are.

(A brilliant light falls on RAPHAEL.)

Jonah, son of Amit'tai!

JONAH

What was . . . !

RAPHAEL

Jonah, Ben-Amittai! I am The Archangel Raphael, who sits beneath the Throne of the Lord your God!

JONAH

(Sees RAPHAEL)

Ahhh!

(JONAH drops to his knees, hiding his head under his hands.)

RAPHAEL

(To God)

This is the right Jonah? Very well.

(To JONAH)

Fear not, Jonah! I bring you greetings from the Most High.

JONAH

Go away!

RAPHAEL

I beg your pardon?

JONAH

Go away! I don't want any.

RAPHAEL

Do you realize who I am?

JONAH

I'm not stupid! The records were fine!

RAPHAEL

I'm from Heaven, Jonah. What records?

JONAH

Then it's not about the records.

(Pause)

I never touched her...really...that much. We were mostly like friends. I've never done anything wrong! You hear me? I've never sinned! So you can't get me!

RAPHAEL

Jonah, I'm not here to get you. It's all right. You're not in trouble.

JONAH

I'm not?

RAPHAEL

No.

JONAH

Really?

RAPHAEL

Angel's honor. May I come down?

JONAH

(Affecting nonchalance)

Please.

RAPHAEL

Thank you.

(Descends the ladder)

JONAH

Care to sit down?

RAPHAEL

I can't stay long.

JONAH

Keeps you hopping, does He?

RAPHAEL

Well, not hopping exactly. But the fact is, I am here on business.

JONAH

Something to do with me?

RAPHAEL

Yes.

JONAH

Some kind of honor?

RAPHAEL

Definitely.

JONAH

For something I've done?

RAPHAEL

For something you will do.

JONAH

How do you mean?

RAPHAEL

There's something God needs you to do for Him.

JONAH

Is there?

RAPHAEL

(Gestures toward the ladder)

May I? I like to announce these things from, well, on high.

JONAH

Be my guest.

RAPHAEL

(Climbs the ladder)

Jonah Ben-Amittai, thus commands the Lord your God: Go to Nineveh, that wicked city!
Go and denounce her, for her wickedness is become a great stench in My nostrils!

JONAH

Rachel! Rachel!!

RACHEL

(Runs back on stage)

Goodness, Jonah! What a noise! What is . . .

(Sees RAPHAEL)

My heavens, it's an angel.

RAPHAEL

You know me then, Rachel?

RACHEL

No. It's just that our other guests don't hover in quite that fashion. Your clothes are lovely.

JONAH

Send him away, Rachel! Get rid of him!

RACHEL

Rid of him? Such manners you got! Don't be silly.

(To RAPHAEL)

May I ask, please, which angel are you?

RAPHAEL

I am the Archangel Raphael.

RACHEL

Archangel? A biggie! We're very honored.

JONAH

Rachel! He's only here to make trouble.

RACHEL

What is your problem, Jonah? He's a guest. Be nice.

JONAH

He wants me to be a prophet!

RACHEL

A prophet?

(To RAPHAEL)

You want my Jonah to be a prophet? You sure you got the right Jonah?

RAPHAEL

It is the will of the Most High.

RACHEL

(Studies JONAH)

I don't see it. My advice would be to keep shopping around.

RAPHAEL

The Lord has sent forth His Holy Word. Jonah will go forth to Nineveh, that wicked city, and denounce her.

RACHEL

Nineveh!

RAPHAEL

That wicked city.

JONAH

(to RACHEL)

You see what I tell you? Who needs honors like these?

(to RAPHAEL)

How would I even get to Nineveh?

RAPHAEL

Collect what you need and go to Joppa. A ship there will carry you northward to Arvad. From there you will cross the desert to Nineveh. And when you come to Nineveh, that wicked city, you will denounce her!

JONAH

But what am I supposed to say? I am not a quick-witted man.

RAPHAEL

The Lord will give you speech.

JONAH

Will He give me a ride home?

RAPHAEL

You will reach Nineveh safely.

JONAH

Swell. And then?

RAPHAEL

There is no more that I can say.

JONAH

No more that you can . . .? God's not making this very easy!

RAPHAEL

He makes it possible. It is for you to make it happen.

JONAH

What if I refuse?

RAPHAEL

You know how He gets when He's angry.

RACHEL

This is meshugah! My Jonah denounce the Assyrians? They'll have him on toast!

RAPHAEL

Nevertheless, so God commands. Farewell, Jonah, prophet of Galilee!

JONAH

Wait! Do you take messages back?

RAPHAEL

Take messages back? To the Almighty?

JONAH

Him!

RAPHAEL

No.

(Exit RAPHAEL.)

JONAH

Come back here, you! We've got to talk about this!

(JONAH runs about seeking RAPHAEL but can't find him.)

Gone! Perhaps this is all a dream. Here, pinch me.

RACHEL

That won't help. I saw it too.

JONAH

Then it was real.

RACHEL

What are we going to do?

JONAH

This is craziness. Me denounce Nineveh? They'll just laugh at me and then they'll kill me. Or they'll kill me and then they'll laugh at me. Either way, I'm humiliated and dead. And why does He need me! Why, He could go up to Jerusalem, close His eyes, and throw a rock and hit somebody better suited to be a prophet. No. It's out of the question. I'm not going.

RACHEL

What if Raphael comes back?

JONAH

I'd better not be here.

RACHEL

You're right. You'd better take off.

JONAH

At least until this blows over.

RACHEL

Exactly.

JONAH

Where should I go?

RACHEL

Across town to Cousin Yakob's?

JONAH

That blabbermouth? As soon as I got there, he'd thank God for my safe arrival and blow my cover. No, He's probably got the whole town watched. At this moment, Gath-Hepher may be swarming with angels. I'd better get clean out of Galilee.

RACHEL

Must you go?

JONAH

There's money in the chest. You'll be okay.

RACHEL

It's not that. It's just, I miss you when you're gone.

JONAH

You really miss me?

RACHEL

Of course I do. You're my husband.

JONAH

Rachel, Rachel, Rachel. What kind of a God is He anyway to send me away from you like this? Makes us one flesh and then He tears us apart. Go to Nineveh. It's like asking me to throw myself into a live volcano! No! I refuse! So let Him get angry!

RACHEL

Jonah, what if we're wrong? What if He means well?

JONAH

(The Voice of God:)

Throw yourself into this volcano, Jonah! It'll be good for you. You'll see.

(As himself:)

Forget it! Where is the map?

RACHEL

In the chest, I think.

(RACHEL crosses to the chest and pulls out a map.)

JONAH

What a predicament! What a thing to happen. And at my time of life! What did I do to deserve this?

RACHEL

(SHE returns to the table and spreads the map out on it.)

What do you think?

JONAH

What are my choices?

RACHEL

The Negev?

JONAH

Too dry.

RACHEL

Egypt?

JONAH

Too wet. Anyway, it's been done.

RACHEL

Jerusalem?

JONAH

I'd be sitting in His lap! No, I know what I have to do. I have to go ahead and go to Joppa.

RACHEL

You're not going through with this?

JONAH

No, but if He does have His scouts out, where will they be expecting me to go? Across the Sharon to the port of Joppa, right? So I go—look like I'm playing along. And then, when I get to Joppa, I get on a ship and flee for my life!

RACHEL

To Arvad?

JONAH

Of course not to Arvad! Look here. What's the furthest west I can go? Cypress. The Peloponnese. Sicily. What's that say?

RACHEL

Tarshish? I don't know, Jonah. That's a lot of water between Joppa and Tarshish.

JONAH

I think it's that or Nineveh.

RACHEL

Be careful.

JONAH

I'll be back as soon as the dust settles a bit. Not to worry. What can happen?

(BLACK OUT. Immediately there is a crash of thunder and the sounds of a storm at sea.)

End of Act I, Scene 1