

SAVING NINEVEH

Act II

Scene 4

Setting: JONAH'S house in Gath-Hepher.

At Rise: ITHAMAR sits on the sofa, finishing a pastry
RACHEL has served him. RAPHAEL is on his
ladder, watching, not yet manifest.

RACHEL

And that was it then? The last you saw him?

ITHAMAR

I wanted to go in with him. I pleaded with him the whole time we were crossing the desert. I would never have left my master there alone.

RACHEL

I know, I know. He's always been a little stubborn.

ITHAMAR

Jonah of Galilee, prophet of God!

RACHEL

And so he died doing the will of the Lord. And his comfort was, that I would know it. That's a better Jonah than the one I married.

ITHAMAR

You think he's really dead?

RACHEL

He knew it when he went in. What—he's going to denounce Nineveh and be a hero?

ITHAMAR

Yes! Yes! Exactly! God sent Jonah to save Nineveh!

RACHEL

He sent him to denounce it! That's not the way to make friends!

ITHAMAR

But God wants Nineveh to repent! Don't you see? And when they do, they'll be saved!
And Jonah will be a hero!

RACHEL

How can you be so sure?

ITHAMAR

Because He's God! It's in Him to spare people!

RACHEL

It's in Him to spare no one! The Lord kills us all! And He tortures most of us! You're a Jew; you should know this.

ITHAMAR

The Lord is good!

RACHEL

I don't doubt that He's good but— Ithamar, he was my husband.

(Reaching for ITHAMAR'S plate)

Save Nineveh. There's a thought. Are you done with this?

ITHAMAR

Thank you. It was delicious.

RACHEL

(Carries the plate toward the kitchen.)

Ithamar, the Lord's been making widows for centuries.

(Exit)

(A brilliant light falls on RAPHAEL with a trill of harp strings.

ITHAMAR sees RAPHAEL and falls to his knees.)

RACHEL

(Enters)

Is there anything else I could . . . Ithamar?

ITHAMAR

It is he.

RACHEL

(Sees RAPHAEL)

What have you done with my husband!

RAPHAEL

Rachel and Ithamar, I bring greetings from the Most High God.

RACHEL

Do you bring news?

RAPHAEL

The best!

RACHEL

He is alive!

RAPHAEL

His foot is entering the village of Gath-Hepher even as we speak! Prepare him welcome!
His name is written in the stars among the greatest of the prophets of God!

ITHAMAR

Then Nineveh? Did he succeed? Did he turn it? Did he . . .

RAPHAEL

Save it? He did! Nineveh the Wicked is no more. Seek now and you will find 100,000
souls walking in the ways of peace.

ITHAMAR

My master! Among the greatest!

RAPHAEL

And your name too is famous in heaven—kind, loyal, and highly enthusiastic Ithamar.

RACHEL

But he's here, you say? In Gath-Hepher? Right now?

RAPHAEL

He is even now passing the town well.

RACHEL

Oh, this place. It's so . . . My husband is returning home from a very long journey. May I ask you both please to wait for a bit in the kitchen? You are of course welcome to anything you see there.

RAPHAEL

Of course. Come along, my boy.

ITHAMAR

But my master . . .

RAPHAEL

Ithamar, they are man and wife, one flesh. This time belongs to them.

(ITHAMAR allows himself to be led away by RAPHAEL.
RACHEL stands still, facing the door. JONAH enters, sees her,
and stops. THEY exchange a long, and long-awaited, look.)

RACHEL

Welcome home, my beloved.

JONAH

I thought I would never see you again.

RACHEL

But now you do.

JONAH

Rachel! Oh my Rachel!

RACHEL

It has been like death with you gone.

JONAH

I will never leave again. No matter what He says. How good this place looks to me.

RACHEL

The house is a wreck.

JONAH

The house is a palace. Now the palace, that was a wreck.

RACHEL

King Sargon's palace? You saw it?

JONAH

I did. Denounced it, too.

RACHEL

I hear you saw quite a big fish.

JONAH

It looked bigger from the inside. But wait a minute! How do you know about that?

RACHEL

From a very nice young man. Says he's a friend of yours.

JONAH

A friend? Did he say a friend? That was all?

RACHEL

No. He said he was a disciple of yours.

JONAH

(In unison with RACHEL)

A disciple of mine. Right. Is he still here?

RACHEL

In the kitchen.

JONAH

Ithamar!

ITHAMAR

(ITHAMAR runs in to JONAH.)

Jonah! Master! I knew I would see you again. I never doubted.

JONAH

Never doubted? Yeah, well. As you see.

RACHEL

But what happened?

JONAH

(Can barely bring himself to say it)

The bums repented.

ITHAMAR

Then he was right!

JONAH

Who was right!

ITHAMAR

What?

JONAH

You said, "he" was right. Who's "he"? No! Don't tell me! He's here, isn't he? In my house!

RACHEL

Jonah, don't upset yourself. Here, sit down.

JONAH

O Raphae-e-e-l! Come here, my little wingéd friend!

RAPHAEL

(Enters, finishing the last bite of a pastry.)

These are very good.

RACHEL

You like those? I'll send some back with you.

JONAH

Rachel!

RAPHAEL

Jonah! Good to see you again!

JONAH

You monster!

RAPHAEL

Monster?

JONAH

How dare you come here! I don't want anything to do with you, or with your Boss either!

RAPHAEL

Are you so angry?

JONAH

You mocked me! You mocked me! You set me up to be humiliated! You and that namby-pamby, simpering God of yours! I knew this would happen.

RAPHAEL

Oh, you did?

JONAH

Why do you think I headed for Tarshish?

RAPHAEL

I know why you went to Tarshish.

JONAH

It was to keep Him from doing it again, from being taken in by another weepy repentance by another bunch of gangsters! I knew He was "a god gracious and compassionate, long-suffering and ever constant, and always willing to repent of the disaster." Ever-merciful!

RAPHAEL

You have no idea what you've done, do you?

JONAH

Oh, well, I'm the savior of Nineveh, I suppose. Swell!

ITHAMAR

My master! Savior of Thousands!

JONAH

(To ITHAMAR)

You shut up!

(To RAPHAEL)

Well no, thank you! I can't believe you led me on like that! I was ready to die for you! Do you know that?

RAPHAEL

As do all the Host of Heaven.

JONAH

Stoning—that's what I expected! I was going to deliver your Word—Yours! And I was going to keep delivering it to the end. I was ready to go down to the pit of Sheol and never see Rachel or Gath-Hepher or the Temple ever again! And it's hard! It's hard to die! Ah, what would a deathless wonder like you know about it, anyway?

RAPHAEL

The Lord knows all that you have faced and done.

JONAH

Then why does He mock me! For what? To save that pack of wolves? I face death so He can let those vipers off the hook!

RAPHAEL

What is it you want?

JONAH

Justice! Justice! They kill, beat, enslave, rape, steal, destroy, torture! And then, to let them go for a little stupid weepy repentance! Where are their sins, for God's sake!

RAPHAEL

Where He has put them—as far as the east is from the west.

JONAH

But they're not just sins against Him! We're the ones who have our hearts torn out! I want justice!

RAPHAEL

If it means destroying a hundred and twenty thousand of His own children!

JONAH

His children! Then why are they so evil?

RAPHAEL

You saw them. They don't know their right hands from their left.

JONAH

No! I won't have it! They're bloody-handed monsters and have no right to live!

RAPHAEL

I give up. I haven't been this tired in a thousand years. Anyway, why do I care what you think? The city repented, it's out of danger. If you want to spend your life gnashing your teeth over old injuries, that's your business. I could cast down the whole city with less effort than it'd take to convince you to forgive them.

(Jerks his head up and stares at Heaven.)

What!

(Pause)

I can't have heard that right. Could You say that again?

(Pause)

After all that? Begging Your pardon, Lord, but I can't imagine this is what You really want to do.

(Pause)

All right, here we go. Alla-ka-zam!

(Claps his hands. A boom and smoke. SARGON stumbles into the room, a sword in his hand.)

RACHEL

Who?

JONAH

Sargon!

RACHEL

From Nineveh?

ITHAMAR

The King?

SARGON

Where am I?

RAPHAEL

In the home of Jonah the Prophet, in Gath-Hepher of Galilee. Welcome to Israel. Come here.

SARGON

What?

RAPHAEL

You're puzzled, I'm puzzled. Got to be done, though. Come along.

(Takes SARGON'S elbow and pulls him to the stool.)

May I?

(Takes SARGON'S sword and hands it to JONAH.)

For you.

JONAH

I don't need... What is this?

RAPHAEL

By the power vested in me, Raphael, Archangel of the Lord, I hereby authorize you, Jonah, Prophet of Galilee, to execute by beheading him, Sargon, King of Assyria.

SARGON and JONAH

What!

RAPHAEL

Upon completion of which I will cast down the city of Nineveh, brick by brick, until not even the ravens will be able to find it.

RACHEL

You can't mean that!

RAPHAEL

(To JONAH)

You think Nineveh deserves to be punished?

JONAH

A wicked people never lived!

RAPHAEL

(To SARGON)

What about it? Is he right?

SARGON

Who doesn't know what we were? If my death could change the past... But that's hopeless.

RAPHAEL

Nevertheless, down you go.

(RAPHAEL pushes SARGON onto his knees and bends him over the stool, as if on a chopping block. To JONAH)

Have at it.

JONAH

Let me get this straight. I chop off his head and you'll destroy Nineveh? Really level it?

RAPHAEL

Won't be a creature left alive when I'm done.

SARGON

Jonah, you saved us!

JONAH

It was an accident.

(To RAPHAEL)

You think I won't do it.

RAPHAEL

Start with Sargon here. He was the ring leader. The city followed his lead.

SARGON

It did, I admit it. I was the model for Nineveh.

RAPHAEL

For that matter, Sargon ordered executions aplenty in his day. Many without trial. And many of them Jews.

JONAH

Is that true?

SARGON

(In agony but compelled)

Yes, yes.

JONAH

Then you will die!

SARGON

But you changed all that!

JONAH

Me?

SARGON

You! You changed it all! We're not that city anymore!

JONAH

You lie!

RAPHAEL

He's telling the truth. The old Nineveh is dead. You killed her the moment you showed her her true face.

JONAH

You're all against me! I won't be made a fool of again!

(Raises the sword.)

RACHEL and ITHAMAR

Jonah, don't! — No! Stop!

SARGON

Jonah, I have children!

JONAH

Jewish children are dead! And you killed them!

SARGON

Yes. I did. Better I had never been born. But my children still live!

ITHAMAR

Let them live, Jonah!

RACHEL

Jonah, you do this and you'll never come back! It'll twist you like a sheet. You'll spend the rest of your life telling yourself why this was right. And it's not, Jonah. It's not. And it won't bring back any of the children of Israel. It'll only bury them under more.

ITHAMAR

Jonah.

JONAH

What do you want?

ITHAMAR

I forgive you.

JONAH

You forgive me—for what?

ITHAMAR

Nothing.

RAPHAEL

Ithamar. Tell him.

ITHAMAR

Well, I mean...out in the desert...by the miraculous bench...you ran off and let me get killed.

(JONAH lets the sword sink.)

RACHEL

(To ITHAMAR)

You told me he saved your life.

ITHAMAR

Well. No.

(To JONAH)

But it's okay. I mean, you were frightened. They had swords. They were big, mean, ugly. I was scared, too. Who wouldn't have...Anyway, I forgive you.

JONAH

But think what they did to us! How can I live with such people on the earth?

RACHEL

I think we're going to have to.

(JONAH swings the sword aloft with a shout. SARGON faints. ITHAMAR and RACHEL try to throw themselves at JONAH but are stopped by a gesture from RAPHAEL. JONAH holds the sword aloft, his eyes on SARGON. HE wants to strike but can't. After a long moment, the sword starts to sink, as if of its own weight, until it is before JONAH'S eyes. JONAH looks at it as if it has become unfamiliar, strange.)

JONAH

A sword in the hands of Jonah the fishmonger?

(Lowers the point of the sword to the floor. To RAPHAEL)

Angel, I don't really... You don't mind if... It's just—all this killing, you know? I am...sick...of it.

RAPHAEL

So is He, Jonah. So is He.

JONAH

He and I agree on something?

RAPHAEL

You have always been the right Jonah.

JONAH

Well then, behold, my last prophetic deed. Before my retirement.

(To ITHAMAR)

Are you watching, my scribe?

(Drops the sword, straightens up, and stretches his hands over the unconscious SARGON.)

The Lord bless you and keep you, Sargon, King of Nineveh, and all your children, and your children's children, to the end of days.

(To RACHEL)

I have had a very long day and I think I will go lie down.

RACHEL

I think you should.

JONAH

(To RAPHAEL)

Has He ever played a joke like this on anybody before? Ever?

RAPHAEL

No. I think this may be His best.

JONAH

Me, saving Nineveh! Twice! Oy.

(Exit)

ITHAMAR

(Noticing SARGON)

He's coming to.

SARGON

(Awakens, finds his head still attached, the sword on the floor.)

Then, then he didn't...

RACHEL

No. He didn't. In fact, he gave you a very nice blessing. I knew he would. I think I knew he would.

SARGON

Then my city lives! Where did he go?

RACHEL

He went to take a little nap. He's not a young man anymore.

SARGON

Thank him for me, and for my city.

RACHEL

I will.

RAPHAEL

Now, King Sargon, if you're ready, I will return you to Nineveh.

RACHEL

Don't be in such a rush. At least let me fix him a little something first. And anyway,

(To SARGON)

I want to hear about these children of yours.

End of Play