



RABBI SAM

BY CHARLIE VARON



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Dedicated to —
Rabbi Pam Frydman Baugh
Rabbi Dan Goldblatt
Rabbi Katie Mizrahi
Rabbi Dorothy Richman
Huston Smith
David Ford —
Teachers, guides, friends

RABBI SAM received its world premiere at The Marsh (Stephanie Weisman, Artistic Director) in San Francisco, California, on March 7, 2009. It was directed by David Ford; the lighting design was by Patti Meyer, who also served as production stage manager; the original music was by Bruce Barth; all roles were played by Charlie Varon.

RABBI SAM was produced by Teatron Theatre (Ari Weisberg, Artistic Director) in Toronto, Canada, opening on January 3, 2013. It was directed by Ari Weisberg; the lighting design was by Mikael Kangas; the stage manager was Alia Koster. The cast was as follows:

BOB LEW	Bob Cooper
JERRY GOMBERG	Martin Edmonds
HARRIET KAHN	Edith Acker
MARK WARSHAUER	Brian Epstein
MYRON BAUGH	Marion Hirschberg
DAVID RICHMAN	Alejandro Ampudia
PHYLLIS SEIDEL	Leah Charney
RABBI SAM ISAAC	Ron Boyd
LEON GOLDBLATT	Arie Eigner
MIRANDA YEE	Julie Cohn
SARAH SCHIMMEL	Marion Hirschberg
NOAH ISAAC	Julie Cohn

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This play emerged out of three years of conversation, script meetings, workshop performances and rehearsals with my longtime collaborator and director David Ford. In a larger sense, it arose out of our two decades of collaboration and conversation—the most precious artistic relationship of my life.

Stephanie Weisman, artistic director of The Marsh, gave me unconditional support for this project, as she has for all my work onstage since 1991.

My composer, Bruce Barth, collaborated on the play since its early stages. His musical explorations have invigorated me as an artist and helped deepen my understanding of my characters.

Actor Jeri Lynn Cohen provided bedrock artistic support and worked with me to explore scenes and characters.

Special thanks to Patti Meyer, The Marsh's technical director and the lighting designer for the original production.

Many rabbis have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the making of this play. Rabbis Pam Frydman Baugh, Dan Goldblatt and Dorothy Richman have changed the way I understand, and practice, Judaism. All three have generously consulted at various stages in the play's development.

Rabbi Katie Mizrahi, my current rabbi, is a great teacher and an inspiration.

In making the play I also draw on what I've learned from Rabbis Yoel Kahn, Alan Miller, Ethan Seidel, Lewis Warshauer, Peretz Wolf-Prusan, and the late Alan Lew. I draw inspiration from the writings of the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose phrase "spiritual audacity" never left my mind as I worked on the play. I can still hear the voice of the late Morris Kertzer, rabbi of my youth, as he raised his arms and blessed the congregation.

Many of the questions this play explores grew out of my dialogues with Huston Smith, scholar of world religion.

Joe Rubin and Lili Naveh each offered me ideas which have taken root in the play.

I'm deeply grateful to my congregation, Or Shalom, to Ed Reiner, Rabbi SaraLeYa Schley, and to members of Or Shalom's late Torah study group and current news minyan.

For providing work-in-progress venues and audiences: Ari Roth and Theater J in Washington, D.C.; Aaron Davidman and Traveling Jewish Theatre; Joe Landon and Congregation Bet Haverim of Davis; UC Berkeley Hillel; Penny Rosenwasser and Jewish Voice for Peace; and Bob Gavrich, Mindy Myers and Temple Israel of Alameda.

For moral, emotional and logistical support: Judy Blazer, Ben Christopher, Joe Dunn, Marc Fisher and Jody Goodman, Rebecca Fisher, Yael Green, Dan Hoyle, Janis Plotkin, Jim Quesada, Diana Rathbone, Jim Rosenau, Ken Schneider, Howard Shalwitz, Robert Vogel, Ted Weinstein, Liebe Wetzel, Fred Wickham, the Wool Street Gang, the staff of The Marsh, and my students. And above all, my family—my partner, Myra Levy; our sons, Jonah and Jeremy Varon; my sister, Janet Varon, and brother-in-law, Eddie Muñoz; my mother-in-law, Barbara Levy; and my parents, Maurice and Zipporah Varon.

The development of *Rabbi Sam* was funded by the San Francisco Arts Commission, Fleishhacker Foundation, Gaia Foundation, National Foundation for Jewish Culture, and Zellerbach Family Foundation; by Emily Kenyon and David Lipsky, Susan Karp and Paul Haahr, Deborah Gavrin Frangquist/Chosen Futures; and by many, many individual donors.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

Some notes about the play and its characters:

1. Rabbi Sam, fearless political animal.

Rabbi Sam is a spiritual man; he is also a political animal. Above all, he is dangerous. He is comfortable with power, certain that he is right, and confident that he is a step ahead of everyone else. He understands how hard it is to change an institution. He moves quickly and decisively, knowing he will have only one chance. Rabbi Sam's political motto might be "Day Two is too late."

2. Rabbi Sam at the pulpit.

Rabbi Sam's impulse is to create a Judaism that's like jazz—an improvisation on tradition. His sermons should have the feeling of jazz—unscripted, discovered in the moment, developing and improvising on themes, letting the "music" flow through him. He is a soloist who enjoys the range of his "instrument"—high and low notes, fast and slow, loud and pianissimo. But Sam is always aware of his audience. He uses the entire stage when he gives his sermons. Those sermons should feel passionate, alive and dangerous. If he has a hero in the world of jazz, it might be Thelonious Monk.

If you'd like to get a sense of how I performed the sermons, you can look at the video excerpt "Rabbi Sam Isaac" on the *Rabbi Sam* page of my website, www.charlievaron.com.

3. East Coast/West Coast.

The play is set in California but some board members are from the East Coast, and their speech and manner should reflect that. Bob Lew is a loud, gregarious man who, though he has lived in the West for decades, has not lost his accent or tamed his largeness. Sarah Schimmel need not have a broad accent, but she has a raspy smoker's voice, and her fearless, tough manner is rooted in her East Coast youth. Jerry Gomberg may have only a trace of an accent; his reserved but tough manner may bespeak his personality as much as his origins. Rabbi Sam is a New Yorker, but does not speak with New York inflections except when he chooses to, for effect.

4. Comedy.

The play is not a comedy, though it is full of funny moments and lines. Actors should not push for laughs but neither should they be afraid of them. The comedy derives from the characters and

the situations; inhabit these fully and the laughs should take care of themselves.

5. Board members.

The key in playing the board members is to find a balance between the depth of their characters and the comedy which often comes through them. Bob Lew's highest value is community; he wants everyone to be happy; his aim is to avoid conflict at all costs. Harriet Kahn thinks in numbers. Mark Warshauer is a hothead who relishes conflict and is supremely confident of his opinions. David Richman's seriousness verges on humorlessness—imagine a man who barely opens his mouth when he speaks. Phyllis Seidel is a spiritual seeker. The one character who can be played entirely for laughs is Myron Baugh, who has very few lines.

6. “Retrospectives.”

The play alternates between action and characters' reflections on the action. These “retrospectives” are spoken by each character as if to an inquiring listener—though they can range in quality from intimate to quite animated. The closest analogue to the retrospective is the documentary film interview, in which a single subject remembers and reflects on events.

7. Music.

Jazz pianist Bruce Barth composed short musical compositions, which were performed by a trio and recorded. These compositions are played before and between scenes, as noted in the script.

8. Hebrew and Yiddish words and phrases.

Notes on these can be found at the end of the play.

10. Note to producers and directors.

If you're doing a production of *Rabbi Sam*, please get in touch with me! Don't be shy—I'm happy to answer questions about the play and help you think about your production. You can email me at charlie@charlievaron.com. You can also download a live audio recording of the entire play as I performed it at cdbaby.com.

9. Note to solo performers.

During the three years I spent writing the play, I went back and forth between wanting to premiere it as a solo performance, with me playing all the parts, and wishing that it would have its first expression as an ensemble play. I opted for solo performance, mostly

out of impatience. I felt a momentum with the project, and I wanted to mount the play before that momentum had ebbed.

I've been doing multiple-character solo plays since 1991. As with most of my other shows, I did this one without costume changes and with virtually no props. *Rabbi Sam* was among the most difficult things I've ever attempted onstage. I performed for five months at The Marsh in 2009, though never more than three nights a week. The first act ran 65 minutes, the second 50 to 55. Every performance felt like climbing a mountain. And I had the advantage of having conceived the characters and lived with them for three years before opening the play. If you do choose to perform the play solo, please take care of your body, soul, and voice.

—*Charlie Varon*

CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

BOB LEW, president and chairman of the board, Congregation B'nai Am—in his sixties

JERRY GOMBERG, member of the board—seventies

HARRIET KAHN, member of the board—forties or fifties

MARK WARSHAUER, member of the board—forties

DAVID RICHMAN, member of the board—forties or fifties

MYRON BAUGH, member of the board—sixties

PHYLLIS SEIDEL, member of the board—fifties

RABBI SAM ISAAC

LEON GOLDBLATT, member of the board—eighties

MIRANDA YEE, restaurateur

SARAH SCHIMMEL, widow of Steve Schimmel, founder of Congregation B'nai Am

NOAH ISAAC, son of Rabbi Sam

PLACE

The fictional town of Semanitas, California

TIME

The early 2010s

RABBI SAM

ACT ONE

Scene 1

*Opening montage of retrospectives, plus Rabbi Sam on the pulpit:
“Jews three thousand years from now.”*

Music #1: Overture.

BOB. I had a stack of resumes as thick as a brisket. I talked to thirty rabbis on the telephone. This one guy says: “How ’bout we meet tomorrow?” The guy is 3000 miles away! How ’bout tomorrow! See, before he was a rabbi, he was a hotshot tax attorney.

JERRY. I felt like I was being sold something. You’re gonna experience Judaism like never before. And part of me thought, If this is what it takes to get membership up, maybe it’s worth it. But there was a disquiet inside of me: What was so negative about what we’d *been* doing?

HARRIET. A synagogue is a business. We can get all lovey-dovey spiritual, but membership numbers do not lie.

MARK. Okay. So. The old rabbi retires—who cares, right? But then: The founder and president of the congregation, Steve Schimmel, who everybody except me *loved*—he *dies*. Everybody’s “Oy gevalt, what are we gonna do?” But me? As a personality type, I am not afraid of change.

DAVID. I wanted my children to have opportunities to meet other Jewish young people. Because the fact is, in our community, the ocean that our kids swim in, *is* an ocean of Gentiles.

MYRON. (*Scratching his neck.*) The kids. (*Pause.*) The kids. (*Pause. Shaking his head vigorously back and forth.*) The kids.

PHYLLIS. It is not an easy time to be a young person. I know this as a mother. I know this professionally. So I wanted a rabbi strong enough to create for our kids an island of (*Nods.*) Jewish sanity. We knew he was different. (*Pause.*) I don't think any of us knew just *how* different until that first service, at Rosh Hashanah. (*Lighting change.*)

RABBI SAM. Jews three thousand years from now: What do they want from us? We have been trained to think about religion in the past tense. We can imagine Moses three thousand years ago, but Jews three thousand years *from* now—go ahead, imagine it. You can't. I can't. Geshher. Geshher. We're the bridge. Last Sunday I went and checked out the (*Mischievous.*) competition. I went to three different churches in this community. Do you know which service was the most grab-your-kishkes? A Baptist fundamentalist church—this was a white church, by the way... I'll give you the upshot of that service: You and I are going to roast in Hell. The fundamentalists have put the car in reverse; they're going 80 miles an hour back to the year 1900. Or further. But they are on *fire!* Synagogues in America—also stuck in the past. Gutless, going through the motions—you know what I'm talking about—museum Judaism. And you know what the worst is? When they throw in just a pinch of that shtetl kitsch. (*Mocking.*) Oh, it's almost Shabbos and the hard-working papa has *almost* enough money to buy a chicken for the Shabbos meal, but it's getting dark, the sun is going down... I promise: I will never indulge in nostalgia. Tevye is not going to save us. (*Lighting change.*)

HARRIET. (*Retrospective.*) It took a minute to sink in. Does our new rabbi *not* like *Fiddler on the Roof*? And I thought: We board members are gonna hear about *this*. But then the next thing the rabbi says seems perfectly normal. And I look around, and people are smiling and nodding. (*Lighting change.*)

RABBI SAM. Moses at the burning bush. Moses asks God: By what name shall I call you?

And what does God say? "*Ehiyeh asher ehiyeh.*"—"I will be—as I am—becoming." (*Quiet.*) Yeah, this is the moment that terrifies the fundamentalists. This is not a *melech-ha-olam-b'shamayim*: not a God-on-his-throne-in-Heaven moment! Not a ruler of the universe moment! *Melech ha olam* says: You will do *as I say you will do!* (*Bossy.*) because I'm up here and you're down there! *Ehiyeh asher ehiyeh*... Feel the transcendence. Feel the mystery. The acceptance of the unknowability of the future. The river flows—see, this is a water moment. The giving of the law on Sinai, the Ten Commandments—that's a rock

moment! Stone tablets. *Ehiyeh asher ehiyeh*: I will be—And we don't know. We think we know, but we do not know. Ten years ago, if you had told me that I'd be up here (*Looks around.*) wearing this (*Points to yarmulke.*) and this (*Points to tallit.*) ... instead of a five-thousand-dollar Armani suit, having lunch at the Four Seasons with Leona Helmsley, advising her about her tax problems, how to keep her out of jail—she didn't take my advice... (*Pause. Shift.*) *Ehiyeh asher ehiyeh*. I am becoming what I am becoming. You are becoming what you are becoming. Together *we* are becoming what we are becoming. Each of our lives—is a river. Flowing toward the ocean. And yeah, the ocean is death. All we have, *chaverim*, all we have is *Ehiyeh asher ehiyeh*, becoming that which we cannot yet imagine. And you know how light dances on a river at sunset? God watching us. One night Thomas Jefferson took a scissors to his Bible. Do you all know this? Jefferson went through and he literally cut out of the Bible everything that made no sense to him. He cut out the virgin birth of Jesus. We must have the courage of Jefferson, but instead of a scissors... See, Jefferson did not have a personal computer, did not have... what's it called when you change the size of the type? Fonts! Scalable fonts! We need a Torah with scalable fonts. (*Hands indicate big.*)—*Ehiyeh asher ehiyeh* in—50,000-point type. And then in teensy weensy little two-point type: "*Zot ha b'heyama asher tocheylu*"—"These are the animals you may eat." We don't cut those words out of Torah. Why? Our river did not start with us. We need to know the longer river that we are part of. But we also need to let the river flow forward. *Ehiyeh asher ehiyeh*. Judaism: first civilization to believe that human beings shape history! Yeah. Take a minute with that. In 1776, the Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia to design, to conceive, to imagine, to invent!—Their question: What is a nation? The essential creative act of our country was a Jewish act! Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln: freeing the slaves: a Jewish act! Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony: giving women the vote: Jewish! America's greatness: acts of stepping out of the confines of what had seemed immutable. Which makes America what? (*Pause.*) A Jewish nation. They do not yet teach this in the public schools. One day they will. And I, for one, think Judaism can hold its own in the marketplace of ideas. Beloved, do you see the lineage we stand in? As Jews. As Americans. As *American Jews*! The Great Seal of the United States: the bald eagle. You know, that's not what Ben Franklin wanted. You know

what Franklin wanted on the Great Seal? *Moses!* Moses with his arm outstretched and the Egyptian army drowning in the sea! Not the Crucifixion, not the Resurrection, not Jesus: Moses. America is a Jewish nation: Somebody needs to tell Pat Robertson. Is there something we can sue him for? Copyright infringement? America—I'm gonna get in trouble for this—America (*Quietly.*) is the *most* Jewish nation. *Ehiyeh asher ehiyeh.* Water. Water, beloved, water. Can we be like water? (*Lighting change.*)

DAVID. The man had no congregational experience. He'd been a rabbi for all of three years. In the interview he talked a pretty good game. I listened. He seemed (*Pause.*) volatile. And we had interviewed another candidate, about the same age, but soft-spoken. And I thought he was our guy. Someone who could unify the different factions in the congregation. But I was in the minority. And Jerry, who often sees things the way I do, was in the hospital, having prostate surgery.

PHYLLIS. "Active parent." In the interview Rabbi Sam said, "I am an active parent." And of course the subtext is he had lost his wife. He said, "Noah is the reason I'm a rabbi. Because I never got what I'm giving my son." He said, "My son is ten years old, and he says the Sh'ma with me and when he does, there is a light in his eyes." And he said, "That's the light I want to give to every child in this congregation." And that made me cry. Our congregation—you know, suburban, lox-and-bagels Jews. Services somewhat lacking in passion. I went and heard the Dalai Lama. And when I did, I felt (*Beat.*) a little like I was having an affair. Cheating on Judaism. But now: the possibility of getting all of my spiritual needs met—okay, *within* the marriage. (*Looks and nods.*)

MARK. Some people don't like the way Rabbi Sam stirs things up. But I'm like— (*He makes a bulldog face and barks three times.*)

HARRIET. I am a businesswoman. And in this day and age, Judaism needs to be—and I know nobody wants to hear this word—marketed. But does the rabbi *have* to keep talking about Jesus? And then I had another—qualm. "You don't have to be Jewish to be Jewish," he said. And—you don't convert people like that. You don't wave your arms and say "You're Jewish now." (*Lighting change.*)

RABBI SAM. If you are the partner or the spouse of one of our Jewish congregants, I hereby make you Jewish today. You're Jewish. You're Jewish. You're Jewish. Does anybody have a problem with that? (*Pause. He surveys the audience.*) You should. You should. That's a good problem to have. You with me? Okay.

RABBI SAM

by Charlie Varon

1M or 8M, 4W (flexible casting)

RABBI SAM tells the story of a zealot who wants to reinvent Judaism and who will stop at nothing to do it. Sam Isaac, a high-powered New York tax attorney-turned-rabbi, takes up his first pulpit at a suburban congregation in northern California. Some people are thrilled by his vision of a 21st-century American Judaism. Others don't trust him, and a power struggle ensues, splitting the congregation. Rabbi Sam is both a fiercely spiritual man and a fearless political animal working overtime to round up the votes that he hopes will save his job. Suspenseful, moving, and funny, RABBI SAM bursts with ideas about religion, science, and how human institutions deal with change.

"Wildly entertaining... Varon skillfully blends hilarity with serious food for thought... The sermons are tours de force... Sam is a terrifically seductive and repellent figure, a tax attorney who's rededicated his life to creating the Judaism of the 21st century. Rejecting 'museum Judaism' and 'shtetl kitsch' ('Tevye is not going to save us'), he preaches an American form of the faith that claims Thomas Jefferson, Harriet Tubman and Abraham Lincoln as prophets with a combination of Hebraic scholarship, stand-up comic skill and televangelist zeal."

—The San Francisco Chronicle

"Visionary... leaves audiences rapt... Rabbi Sam is a lone artist practicing his craft in the unusual medium of religion. His services are as strange and beautiful as they are controversial."

—SF Weekly

Also by Charlie Varon
THE PEOPLE'S VIOLIN
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ISBN 978-0-8222-3015-1



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