

TRAYF

BY LINDSAY JOELLE

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For my friend Joseph Piekarski—this play's lamplighter.

TRAYF was originally produced by Theater J, a program of the Edlavitch DC JCC (Adam Immerwahr, Artistic Director; Rebecca Ende Lichtenberg, Managing Director) in Washington, D.C., on May 30, 2018. It was directed by Derek Goldman, the scenic design was by Paige Hathaway, the costume design was by Kelsey Hunt, the lighting design was by Harold F. Burgess II, the sound design was by Justin Schmitz, and the production stage manager was Karen Currie. The cast was as follows:

ZALMY Tyler Herman
SHMUEL Josh Adams
JONATHAN Drew Kopas
LEAH Madeline Joey Rose

TRAYF had its West Coast premiere at the Geffen Playhouse (Matt Shakman, Artistic Director; Gil Cates, Jr., Executive Director) in Los Angeles, California, on March 10, 2022. It was directed by Maggie Burrows, the scenic design was by Tim Mackabee, the costume design was by Denitsa Bliznakova, the lighting design was by Lap Chi Chu, the sound design was by Everett Elton Bradman, the choreography was by KC Monnie, and the production stage manager was Leia S. Crawford. The cast was as follows:

ZALMY Ilan Eskenazi
SHMUEL Ben Hirschhorn
JONATHAN Garrett Young
LEAH Louisa Jacobson

TRAYF was developed and presented at the Penguin Rep Theatre (Joe Brancato, Artistic Director; Andrew M. Horn, Executive Director) in Stony Point, New York, from May 19, 2017 to June 11, 2017.

CHARACTERS

ZALMY—18. Chasidic Jew. Brave and curious, Zalmy has an immediate and driving need to drink deep of life and experience all it has to offer, including knowledge of music, women, and secular customs outside the accepted traditions of his orthodox community. He loves his best friend Shmuel, but is not above keeping secrets if he must.

SHMUEL—18. Chasidic Jew. The orthodox version of a lovable band geek, Shmuel's loyalty and unrelenting optimism inspire people to be the best version of themselves. The poster child for the Chabad lifestyle, he wants nothing more than to ride around New York with his best friend Zalmy, performing good deeds and sharing his passion for Judaism.

JONATHAN—20s. Potential convert. A former bad-boy musician, Jonathan is on a spiritual quest to find meaning. Charismatic and impulsive, moderation is not a concept in his repertoire. Upon discovering his late father's Jewish roots, he's eager to find acceptance in the orthodox community, no matter what.

LEAH—20s. (LAY-ah). Secular Jew living in Manhattan. Leah and Jonathan once shared a life of fun, passion, and adventure. She was his rock, nurturing him through dark times. But now that he's become obsessed with orthodoxy, she needs to know if she can win back her soulmate or if he's already gone.

TIME & PLACE

Manhattan and Brooklyn. Winter and spring, 1991.

Design choices should strongly reinforce New York City in the early nineties. It's gritty. Information is not as accessible; most household computers do not have the internet. Cell phones are large. Mixtapes are dubbed on cassettes. Within the orthodox Jewish sect of Chabad, it is the height of messianic fervor, with followers believing that their spiritual leader, the Rebbe, would be imminently revealed as the Moshiach.

The “Mitzvah Tank” — a small white Hertz rental RV

The Tank is the mobile temple that Zalmy and Shmuel drive into the secular world. It doubles as their clubhouse. The Tank may be as literal or abstract as necessary. At minimum, it must have two seats, a steering wheel, and a tape deck.

NOTES

Zalmy and Shmuel are not caricatures. As with most teenagers, the stakes of *everything*—music, dates, friendships, etc.—are incredibly real and exceptionally high. They are overwhelmingly earnest, un-jaded, and throw their full hearts into everything they do. They do not have Yiddish or Hebrew accents. They sound like us. They are us.

Definitions for Yiddish and Hebrew words appear in the glossary at the back of the script.

For TRAYF dramaturgy and design research: Lindsayjoelle.com/trayf.html

TRAYF: *adj.* Yiddish. Not in accordance with Jewish dietary laws. From the Hebrew “Terefah,” meaning torn.

TRAYF

Scene 1

In the darkness, something like the ramp-up to “Hinay Kail” by Mordechai Ben David, the king of Jewish music. It’s epic.*

Lights rise on a small Hertz RV parked somewhere in Brooklyn.

In the passenger seat, Zalmy is enraptured by a cassette tape recording of the Lubavitcher Rebbe delivering a sermon. In Yiddish.

He mouths along to the parts he knows, gesticulating, as if the eighty-seven-year-old Rebbe were Bono playing Madison Square Garden. It’s that good.

In the driver’s seat, Shmuel gleefully watches his best friend.

The Rebbe concludes his sermon and the congregation joins in song. Zalmy turns off the tape and looks at Shmuel in elation.

SHMUEL. Yeah?

ZALMY. Wow.

SHMUEL. Yeah!

ZALMY. I can’t believe you have this one.

SHMUEL. Guess how many Rebbe tapes I have now.

ZALMY. How many?

SHMUEL. Guess.

ZALMY. A hundred.

SHMUEL. A *hundred*? Whoa. That would be a LOT of Rebbe tapes...

Shmuel smiles playfully.

* See note on songs/recordings at the back of this volume.

Guess again.

ZALMY. Two hundred.

SHMUEL. *Two hundred? That would really be a staggering collection of Rebbe tapes for one Jew. One lone Chasid.*

ZALMY. Shmuely.

SHMUEL. Guess!

ZALMY. A thousand.

SHMUEL. Three hundred and forty-two.

Zalmy whistles in admiration.

I can't have my DJ pulling from a subpar tape collection!

ZALMY. Oooo do you have the pre-Passover farbrengen?

Zalmy unzips the black padded cassette case, searching.

SHMUEL. The one in honor of his eightieth birthday?

ZALMY. Yeah.

SHMUEL. Have it.

ZALMY. No no no wait—Do you have the one, his call to fix education?

SHMUEL. When he said all kids should be raised knowing a higher power—

ZALMY. “The Eye that sees and the Ear that hears.”

SHMUEL. Have it.

ZALMY. I can't believe you have that one! That is *such* a good one.

SHMUEL. You can borrow it sometime.

ZALMY. Really?

SHMUEL. As long as you return it.

I mean, you better.

I know where you live. Twizzler?

Shmuel holds out the bag and Zalmy grabs a red vine.

ZALMY. *(Quickly reciting the appropriate prayer for eating Twizzlers.)*

*Ba-RUCH a-TAH a-do-NOI,
elo-HEY-nu ME-lech ha-o-LAM,
She-ha-KOL ni-h'YAH bid'va-RO.*

Zalmy takes a bite.

SHMUEL. Hey, Zalmy?

ZALMY. Hey, Shmuely?

SHMUEL. We got the Truck.

ZALMY. WE GOT THE TANK!

SHMUEL. THE TANK!

ZALMY. The Mitzvah Tank!

Shmuel hovers his hand over the key in the ignition.

SHMUEL. Ready?

ZALMY. Wait.

Zalmy adjusts in his seat to something slouchier. Cooler.

SHMUEL. Ready?

ZALMY. Wait.

Zalmy burps.

Ready.

SHMUEL. (*Scandalized.*) Did you just burp in the Tank?

ZALMY. There's no burping in the Tank?

SHMUEL. This is a holy space!

ZALMY. Is there farting allowed?

SHMUEL. Zalmy!

ZALMY. I just wanna know the rules ahead of time.

SHMUEL. Would you fart in shul?

ZALMY. You've never farted in shul?

SHMUEL. With the whole congregation in the room?

ZALMY. You're telling me you can hold a fart all shabbos?

SHMUEL. I step outside.

ZALMY. I always wondered where you were going! That explains so much.

SHMUEL. New Mitzvah Tank rule: If you have to fart, step outside.

ZALMY. I'll try. Sometimes I can't control my digestion; it has a mind of its own.

SHMUEL. Try. Anything else?

ZALMY. We've got the tapes—

SHMUEL. (*Echoing to confirm.*) (Tapes.)

ZALMY. We've got the snacks—

SHMUEL. (Snacks.)

ZALMY. I'm the DJ, and no tooting in the Tank. I think that about covers it.

Shmuel turns the key in the ignition. The engine roars to life.

They cheer.

You hear that, New York? Here we come in the Mitzvah Tank!

Shmuel drives. When the moment feels right:

SHMUEL. How was your shabbos last weekend?

ZALMY. I was in L.A.

SHMUEL. Yeah I know.

ZALMY. With my cousin Moishe.

SHMUEL. Moishe Hershenbaum.

ZALMY. Shpigelman.

SHMUEL. Moishe *Shpigelman*?

ZALMY. My mother's cousin.

SHMUEL. I thought her cousin was Hershenbaum.

ZALMY. Hershenbaum married in, but he's in South Africa. The Rebbe sent him to start a chabad on one of the campuses.

SHMUEL. No kidding. You know Yankel's in South Africa?

ZALMY. Yankel from yeshiva?

SHMUEL. He and his wife are expecting, Baruch ha'Shem. So who's Moishe Shpigelman?

ZALMY. (*Like I said.*) My mother's cousin.

SHMUEL. Wait, the Shpigelmans run the shul in Melrose?

ZALMY. Yeah, yeah, yeah. The father. A big congregation.

SHMUEL. I think my sister knows the sister.

ZALMY. Devorah.

SHMUEL. The other sister. A little...zoftig?

ZALMY. Chava.

SHMUEL. Chava. Right. (*Fondly.*) Chava.

ZALMY. Get this. You know where I went after shabbos?

SHMUEL. Where?

ZALMY. The Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel.

SHMUEL. Why?

ZALMY. To take a look.

SHMUEL. (*Uneasy.*) To rub shoulders with the goyim?

ZALMY. I wasn't *goy-watching*.

SHMUEL. Then why?

ZALMY. I was staying nearby, it was convenient.

SHMUEL. You weren't staying with Moishe?

ZALMY. One of his kids was sick. I didn't want to intrude.

SHMUEL. Intrude? With your cousin it would be an intrusion?

ZALMY. His wife's having a hard time with the new baby. It was fine, I stayed in a nice motel. Anyway, there I am, at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, by the pool—

SHMUEL. (*A bad thing.*) Mixed swimming?

ZALMY. Do you wanna hear this or no?

SHMUEL. I just wanna know if it was mixed swimming.

ZALMY. Yes, there were females, no it was not mixed swimming. It was night. It was a party.

SHMUEL. Go on.

ZALMY. And all of a sudden I look over, and I recognize someone.

SHMUEL. Who?

ZALMY. One of the men sitting on one of the couches. And it's L.A., everyone's famous...

SHMUEL. Sure.

ZALMY. But for me to recognize someone?

SHMUEL. Is he Jewish?

ZALMY. You're not gonna guess.

SHMUEL. Maybe I will.

ZALMY. You won't.

SHMUEL. Is he Jewish?

ZALMY. No.

SHMUEL. (*Triumphant.*) Vice President Dan Quayle!

ZALMY. At the pool of the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel?

SHMUEL. (*With gleeful anticipation.*) Is it?

ZALMY. No!

SHMUEL. Then I don't know.

ZALMY. I *know* you don't know. I *told* you, you don't know.

SHMUEL. I thought you wanted me to guess.

ZALMY. I don't.

SHMUEL. Because if you want me to guess, you have to give me more clues.

ZALMY. I don't want you to guess, I'm trying to tell you a story. Forget it.

Shmuel looks at Zalmy, still totally invested in the game.

SHMUEL. You can't bring it up, and make me guess—

ZALMY. *I never wanted you to guess!!!*

SHMUEL. Are you going to tell me, or...?

ZALMY. Elton John.

A beat.

SHMUEL. Who?

ZALMY. Elton John!

SHMUEL. Is he Jewish?

ZALMY. He's a singer.

SHMUEL. What kind of singer?

ZALMY. A rock and roll singer.

SHMUEL. You've heard his music?

ZALMY. He's a very big deal. Very famous.

Shmuel tugs on a clump of beard hair, concerned.

SHMUEL. Your father knows you're listening to secular music?

ZALMY. I'm not *listening* to secular music. I've just heard it. You've never heard secular music?

SHMUEL. No.

ZALMY. Never? Not even passing a store where it's playing inside?
SHMUEL. I close my ears.

ZALMY. Like with your fingers? Like this?

Zalmy sticks a finger in each ear.

SHMUEL. I don't want it to affect me.

ZALMY. Like this?

SHMUEL. The Alter Rebbe says a song is the pen of the soul. It's sacred.

ZALMY. I see your lips moving, but I can't hear you.

SHMUEL. When you hear music, the soul of the author is in the room.

Zalmy unplugs his ears.

ZALMY. So?

SHMUEL. So I don't want a goyishe songwriter should be entering my soul and traifing up the place!

ZALMY. Shmuely. You can tell me. Like, maybe the things we talk about here in the Mitzvah Tank, maybe they could be just between us.

SHMUEL. HaShem is always listening.

ZALMY. Whatever you've done or haven't done, HaShem already knows. Come on, you've never, not once, listened to a secular song out of curiosity? Just to know?

Shmuel spots a potential parking space.

SHMUEL. Do you think there's enough room to park there? I'm going to try.

He puts on his turn signal.

ZALMY. That space is a fire hydrant.

SHMUEL. Don't worry about it. We're on the Rebbe's mission, the Rebbe will watch over us. We won't get a ticket.

Shmuel starts to parallel park. It takes a lot of concentration. He's not a great driver.

ZALMY. You've never scanned through the radio and heard secular music? On accident? Like, between the news and the classical?

SHMUEL. Do I have space behind me? I can't see.

ZALMY. You've never stopped at a light and heard the car next to you blasting rap? Country? Top 40?

SHMUEL. Get out and tell me how much space I have.

ZALMY. Which song was it? I just want to know which song.

Shmuel steps on the brake.

SHMUEL. NO! I've NEVER listened to secular music, not ever, not even by accident. We're Chasids; it's beneath us. We're on the Rebbe's mission, does that even mean anything to you? Like, *Does it???*

ZALMY. (*Genuine.*) Yes.

They're quiet as Shmuel finishes the parking job. Finally, he cuts the engine and looks over at his best friend.

SHMUEL. I'm sorry I raised my voice at you.

Zalmy smiles. It's easy to forgive his old pal.

ZALMY. It's forgotten.

Let's go do a mitzvah!

In tandem, Zalmy and Shmuel don their large-brimmed black fedoras.

Zalmy exits the Tank first.

He tapes a homemade banner to the outside of the Tank. It reads:

ZALMY & SHMUELY'S MITZVAHS ON THE SP

Shmuel arrives with the other end.

OT FOR PEOPLE ON THE GO!

They tape the message together, then step back to admire their work. It's sweetly amateur. They think it's rad.

We're gonna get so many Jews to do mitzvahs today.

SHMUEL. Yeah!

ZALMY. Incoming.

Shmuel spots a pedestrian with promise.

SHMUEL. Excuse me, are you Jewish?

He's ignored. It doesn't phase him.

ZALMY. *(To someone else.)* Excuse me, are you Jewish?

No dice.

SHMUEL. Excuse me—

Nope.

ZALMY. *(To someone else.)* Excuse me, are you—?

SHMUEL. *(To someone else.)* Are you Jewish?

ZALMY. *(To someone else.)* Jewish?

SHMUEL. *(To someone else.)* Are you Jewish?

Scene 2

The following week. The Mitzvah Tank is stopped at a gas station.

Zalmy leans against the Tank, eating a bag of kosher Bamba snacks.

ZALMY. You know where we should go today? *Wall Street.*

SHMUEL. Wall Street?

ZALMY. There are a lot of Jews on Wall Street.

SHMUEL. But... Do you think we're ready for Wall Street?

ZALMY. Please. Is Wall Street ready for us!

SHMUEL. Yesterday we only passed out five pamphlets and said one bracha. And that was on the Upper West Side where everyone's Jewish.

ZALMY. I wanna see the bankers in their pinstripe suits. I want to stand in front of the stock exchange, grab that golden bull by his golden shnutz.

SHMUEL. Zalmy!

ZALMY. They say it's good luck.

SHMUEL. We're the Rebbe's soldiers going into battle. You want us to steer straight into the storm? Straight into the biggest den of sin in the busiest city in America?

Zalmy gets an idea.

ZALMY. You know the Rebbe story about the lamplighters?

SHMUEL. Of course I know it.

ZALMY. It's a good one.

SHMUEL. Good one? It's a great one. But what does that have to do—

ZALMY. Tell it.

SHMUEL. Now?

ZALMY. Tell it for courage. For Wall Street.

SHMUEL. You tell it. You tell it better.

ZALMY. Every time I tell a story, you interrupt.

SHMUEL. I won't.

Zalmy looks at Shmuel doubtfully.

I promise!

ZALMY. *(Theatrically.) In the old town in Russia, the streetlamps burned on kerosene.*

SHMUEL. (It's so good. So good.)

Zalmy throws a look at Shmuel, who indicates he'll behave.

ZALMY. *At night, the men would walk down the streets with long poles, and they'd reach up and light the lamps so the streets would be lit at dark.*

SHMUEL. And they were called lamplighters!

ZALMY. So you tell it.

SHMUEL. No no no. Tell it! Tell it.

ZALMY. *(Launching back in.) After the War, the Rebbe came to New York.*

He looked around Manhattan.

He looked around Brooklyn.

He saw all Jewish people had a Jewish soul—The Jewish spark.

SHMUEL. The pintelevid.

ZALMY. *But their soul was extinguished. Or hidden.*

SHMUEL. *(Dramatically.) Burning low—*

A warning look from Zalmy.

ZALMY. *Or they were running away from their Jewishness because of the Holocaust. They said:*

Shmuel mouths along.

“How could God let that happen? Why wasn’t He around?” And the Rebbe said:

SHMUEL. *(Unable to contain himself.)* WE HAVE TO BE LAMP-LIGHTERS!

We have to light the souls of the Jewish people!
We’ll go out into the streets and stop people and inspire them. We’ll go to every country in the world! Every town in the world! We’ll make the Jews fall in love with being Jewish!

Zalmy smiles. He’s not mad. He knew this would happen.

ZALMY. Wall Street?

SHMUEL. To Wall Street! Here we come in the Mitzvah Tank!

Celebratory honking from the street.

JONATHAN. *(From offstage.)* SAMMY!

Shmuel’s face says “yikes.” His mouth says:

SHMUEL. Oy.

ZALMY. Who’s that?

Jonathan runs in—Edgy. Cool. Secular.

JONATHAN. Samuel!

SHMUEL. Shmuel.

JONATHAN. I saw the Tank. I was in a cab, I threw some cash at the driver and bailed...might’ve stiffed him on the tip.

The cabbie leans on the horn.

Yeah up yours.

(To the boys.) Sorry about that.

Zalmy extends his hand.

ZALMY. I’m Zalmy.

JONATHAN. *(Shaking.)* Jonathan.

ZALMY. And you know Shmuel.

JONATHAN. We met last week, on my way to work.

Shmuel’s still looking mighty cagey.

ZALMY. Where do you work?

JONATHAN. J&R Music World.

ZALMY. You work at J&R Music World? *The J&R Music World?*

JONATHAN. I'm a clerk.

ZALMY. So you're around all that music, all day? That's your job?

JONATHAN. I can alphabetize CDs like nothing you've ever seen.

ZALMY. Wow. Shmuel and me, we love music.

SHMUEL. (*Clarifying.*) Jewish music.

JONATHAN. Like... "Hava Nagila"?

ZALMY. No! Jewish pop. Jewish rock and roll. You should see our tape collection, we've got all the greats.

SHMUEL. Except, we're actually on our way to Wall Street right now, so. Another time.

JONATHAN. Right on. I just wanted to say—that prayer you gave me for my dad...the prayer for mourners?

SHMUEL. The Mourner's Kaddish.

JONATHAN. Well I got my buddies together—ten, like you said—and we gave him a proper send off. And then my girlfriend knew some extra, like an extended version?

ZALMY. Extended version?

Zalmy looks at Shmuel, totally confused.

SHMUEL. Well, we should go. Lotta mitzvahs to do.

Shmuel grabs Zalmy's arm and makes a beeline to the Tank.

ZALMY. Let go. Ow! Wait.

Zalmy breaks free.

(*Pitching the best idea ever.*) Jonathan. Have you laid tefillin today?

JONATHAN. What's that?

ZALMY. Don't tell me you've never laid tefillin.

JONATHAN. I'm a tefillin laying virgin.

SHMUEL. (*Warning.*) Zalmy...

ZALMY. Laying tefillin is a huge mitzvah. You know what a mitzvah is?

The play doesn't end here...

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