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Dramatic Publishing



TO LIFE!
Growing Up Jewish in America

By
SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER

Commissioned by the Omaha Theater Company
for Young People



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(TO LIFE! Growing Up Jewish in America)

ISBN: 978-1-58342-577-0

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Most of the material in this script is adapted from poems, stories, monologues and interviews written through a series of life-story workshops with teenagers and adults directed by the playwright. It is used by permission of the participants.

For their support of the workshops and the development of the script, the playwright extends heartfelt thanks to Temple Israel, Omaha, Neb.; the Jewish Federation of Omaha; the Omaha Theater Company for Young People; Congregation Shaarai Shomayim, Lancaster, Pa.; the Jewish Community Center of York, York, Pa.; Temple Israel, Springfield, Mo.; and the Association for Jewish Theatre.

The workshop material is augmented by historical fact, the playwright's own experiences growing up Jewish and brief passages from a previous script *From Memory to Hope* commissioned by Temple Israel (formerly United Hebrew Congregations), Springfield, Mo., which was also based on life stories and is also used here by permission.

Special thanks to Ann Leisowitz for her musical expertise, Rabbi Jack Paskoff and Shaarai Shomayim's 2004 confirmation class for the generous sharing of their stories and to Rabbi Paskoff and Rachel Rosenzweig for making time in their busy schedules to read earlier drafts of the manuscript and offer suggestions.

TO LIFE!

Growing Up Jewish in America

CHARACTERS:

An ensemble of PLAYERS, male and female, creates a variety of roles. All actors may be in their teens, except for one adult male and one adult female. The casting can be very flexible. The stage directions throughout the script are arranged for a total of 14 actors, including the two adults, but the lines and roles may be reassigned for a smaller cast or a much larger one.

RABBI, female

FATHER

CAMPERS, six or more

DANCERS, six or more

All of the following roles may be doublecast with those above:

First group of STUDENTS, six or more

First MOM

TEEN

GIRLFRIENDS, two

PLAYERS, ten or more (joined by GIRLFRIENDS to become TWELVE DANCERS)

POETS, four

Second group of STUDENTS, six or more (become LEAH, TANYA, and others)

FRIEND

BOY

GIRL

CONGREGANTS, four or more

MAMA

SON

OLDER SIBLING

YOUNGER SIBLING

Second MOM

TIME and PLACE: The United States of America, here and there, then and now. A campsite downstage may be separated from the rest of the playing area by a curtain or scrim; or may simply be a small area lighted for the opening scene, with the rest of the stage in darkness. Upstage, there is an array of well-worn steamer trunks, suitcases, duffle bags, barrels and cloth sacks. These become all of the set pieces needed for the play and also contain all the additional costume pieces and props needed in each scene. Changes in location are indicated by lighting, minimal set pieces, movement and music. Scenes flow into one another without interruption.

NOTE: A glossary of Hebrew, Yiddish and other foreign words is included at the end of the script. **The transliterations of Hebrew prayers and song lyrics are traditional and not always readily understood by those not familiar with Hebrew pronunciation. The advice of an expert is strongly advised.**

TO LIFE!

Growing Up Jewish in America

BEFORE RISE: *A curtain or scrim or darkness hides most of the upstage area. Downstage there is a campsite. It's summertime, shortly after Friday evening services. RABBI is seated, playing a Jewish melody* on a guitar or other easily held instrument. As she plays, SIX CAMPERS enter, one and two at a time, and sit on the ground around her. She greets them with smiles, but continues playing, and adds the sung syllables of a "niggun"—a wordless melody. CAMPERS join her in singing. It should not be obvious at this point, but ALL are dressed in white—white shirt, white slacks or shorts, white sandals or sneakers. In this scene, ALL are wearing colorful summer shirts, sweaters, or sweatshirts over the basic white. The mood is relaxed, reflective. When ALL CAMPERS are seated, RABBI takes a few more bars to finish her melody. CAMPERS applaud; RABBI laughs good-naturedly, as this was hardly a formal concert.*

* See Suggested Music List at the back of the script for all MUSIC cues.

RABBI

Shabbat shalom, campers!

CAMPERS

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi!

FOURTH CAMPER

The Shabbat service was beautiful, Rabbi.

RABBI

I'm glad you enjoyed it. Thank you all for your help.

FOURTH CAMPER

I wish we could have our services outdoors all year round.

FIFTH CAMPER

I wish we could stay at camp all year round!

THIRD CAMPER

Yeah, and they could just send us our homework assignments from school.

SECOND CAMPER

And we could vote on whether or not to do them!

RABBI

I'll be sure to bring all of those suggestions up at the next district conference.

SIXTH CAMPER

(with mock eagerness, playing along with the joke)

Really? Would you?

RABBI

Absolutely. They'll get a kick out of it. Especially the part where you take a vote on doing your homework!

(SIXTH CAMPER exaggerates a moan of disappointment. RABBI laughs, gives her guitar a loud strum to bring that topic to a close and the meeting to order.)

Okay, so, what's on our minds this evening? Seriously. Anyone want to start?

FIRST CAMPER

Yeah, I do. I have a question. In fact, I have a lot of questions. And no answers.

RABBI

(with a gentle laugh)

Me, too.

THIRD CAMPER

But you're supposed to have answers, Rabbi.

SECOND CAMPER

(teasing)

It's in your job description, isn't it? In your contract?

RABBI

Nope. Services, religious school, life-cycle events—nothing about answers.

FIRST CAMPER

That's the trouble with being Jewish. There are all these questions and no answers!

RABBI

What do you mean?

FIRST CAMPER

Like a friend of mine who isn't Jewish asked me if we believe in heaven and hell. And I said, well, some of us do—

THIRD CAMPER

And some of us don't.

FOURTH CAMPER

My mother believes that our bodies return to dust and ashes, but our spirits return to God.

FIFTH CAMPER

I've heard that.

FIRST CAMPER

Me, too. So that's one simple question and three different answers: Do Jews believe in heaven and hell? Yes, no, and sort of.

RABBI

Then we do have answers.

FIRST CAMPER

Yeah, but too many! That's the same as none at all!

SECOND CAMPER

Isn't there a saying: "Ask two Jews and you'll get three opinions"?

THIRD CAMPER

At least! A friend of mine asked if my family kept *kosher*. I said, which part of my family? And what do you mean by "*kosher*"?

SECOND CAMPER

That's another saying: "A Jew always answers a question with another question."

(as if doing a comedy routine)

"So, Izzy, how are you feeling?" "How am I feeling? How should I be feeling?"

THIRD CAMPER

(as all laugh)

Very funny. But here's the thing: My grandparents on my mom's side are East European Jews and they keep *kosher*—separate dishes for meat and dairy, and even more separate dishes for Passover meals. But my grandparents on my dad's side are Sephardic Jews. Their background is Spanish, and they eat rice, beans, and corn—

things my mom's parents say aren't *kosher* for Passover. And my mom and dad don't keep any kind of kosher at all.

FOURTH CAMPER

I think keeping *kosher* just means paying attention to food, because everything in life is holy, even what we eat.

THIRD CAMPER

Oh, we pay attention to food, all right. In my family, we eat anything that can't bite back!

SIXTH CAMPER

That's not *kosher*!

THIRD CAMPER

Okay, well, how about this: My uncle, who doesn't believe in keeping *kosher*, is a vegan, so everything he eats actually is *kosher*.

SIXTH CAMPER

That's not keeping *kosher*, though. Is it? If he's doing it for some other reason? Rabbi?

RABBI

(enjoying the conversation)

Hmmmm, yes and no.

THIRD CAMPER

Oh, great. Yes AND no.

(to the other CAMPERS)

So you figure it out: Does my family keep *kosher*?

FIFTH CAMPER

Some do, some don't.

FIRST CAMPER

And is that the answer to everything Jewish? "Some do, some don't?"

FOURTH CAMPER

Sounds like it.

THIRD CAMPER

But what kind of answer is that?

SECOND CAMPER

Open-ended?

FIRST CAMPER

Vague!

SIXTH CAMPER

Rabbi? Help?

RABBI
(*teasing*)

Sorry—what was the question again?
(*ALL laugh.*)

FIFTH CAMPER

Come on. No kidding: Why don't we have any single, simple answers?

RABBI

Well, for one thing—

FIRST CAMPER

You're going to give us a bunch of answers, aren't you?

RABBI

Can't be helped. We Jews have been around a very long time and we've lived in dozens and dozens of countries all over the world. Wherever we've lived, we've had to adjust to the local culture. Customs change; beliefs change.

FIRST CAMPER

But we're talking about one country—the United States. If I ask one question about Jews in the United States of America, why can't I get one answer?

SECOND CAMPER

(*in comedy routine mode again*)

Why can't you get one answer? Why should you get one answer?

FIRST CAMPER

(*laughing—but still insisting*)

Come on!

RABBI

(laughing, but gently, to FIRST CAMPER—)

Oh, but it's more true in the United States than anywhere else! Because Jews from many of those other countries eventually ended up here. In a place with more freedom than we've ever known before—which means more choices.

(RABBI plays a few chords to accompany the following lines, which she speaks rather than sings, emphasizing her thoughts with occasional strums on the guitar.)

This is a voyage...a journey...into the past...and toward the future...across hope...to memory...through memory...to hope.

(a beat, RABBI stands and plays a longer refrain on the guitar, and then—)

So many voices...like streams rushing toward the river...so many stories...like rivers pouring into the sea...faster than we can follow...still, we set sail...

(MUSIC, softly at first. RABBI plays along on guitar through the following dance. Curtain or scrim lifts. CAMPERS also stand and move aside with RABBI as LIGHTS come up on full stage, bare except for a number of well-worn steamer trunks, suitcases, and cloth bags of various sizes. These hold all of the cast's props and costumes and will become tables, chairs, and other set pieces.)

“And God said unto Abraham, you will leave the land you know, the place of your birth, your ancestral home, and go to a land that I will show you.”

(FATHER and SIX DANCERS enter, possibly from the audience, in a grape-vine dance. They are dressed in Old World attire, according to the characters they will speak for in the following dialogue: two 18th century Sephardic Jewish immigrants, two 19th century German Jewish immigrants, two early 20th century East European Jewish immigrants.

Their dance takes them onto and across the stage, twining into and out of circles and spirals. Toward its conclusion, FATHER and DANCERS draw CAMPERS into the dance with them, so that it ends with ALL except RABBI divided into three groups at right [Sephardic], left [East European], and center [German]. MUSIC ends. DANCERS and CAMPERS speak the following dialogue to one another in each of their groups while unpacking and rearranging trunks, etc.)

FIRST DANCER

Our family came from the old country—

SECOND DANCER

Bavaria—

THIRD DANCER

Portugal—

FOURTH DANCER

Austria-Hungary—not far from Vienna.

FIFTH DANCER

Russia.

SIXTH DANCER

Brazil.

FIRST DANCER

A little town called Grossoff. G-R-O-S-O-F-F.

FATHER

The Old Country.

FIRST CAMPER

(helping Sephardic group unpack and donning bits of Spanish-influenced costume)
Spain. And The Netherlands. By way of Argentina.

SECOND CAMPER

(helping East European group and donning bits of East European-influenced costume)
Poland. Right outside of Warsaw.

THIRD CAMPER

(same business as FIRST CAMPER)

Italy. Then Mexico.

FOURTH CAMPER

(helping German group and donning bits of German-influenced costume)
Baden.

FIFTH CAMPER

(same business as SECOND CAMPER)

Vilna. V-I-L-N-A. It was Russia-Poland at that time, and has since been Lithuania and back and Russia-controlled and back—

SIXTH CAMPER

(same business as FOURTH CAMPER)

Berlin.

RABBI

The Old Country.

(Throughout the following dialogue, DANCERS and CAMPERS continue to open and use trunks, suitcases, barrels and bags and create their distinct spaces: at left, the dining area of a home; at center, the bimah of a synagogue; at right, a schoolroom. The “tables” are carefully spread with cloths. One is set with Shabbat candlesticks and challah. A Torah is unpacked and laid on the second. Books are piled on the third. FATHER and RABBI assist with the unpacking and enter scenes as needed.)

On April 20, 1492, as Christopher Columbus received permission to equip his fleet for what he thought would be a voyage to the East Indies, King Ferdinand announced the expulsion of all Jews from Spain and the immediate confiscation of their belongings. It’s quite possible that among Columbus’ men were a number of *marranos*—

THIRD DANCER

(steps forward and speaks to the audience in role as early Sephardic immigrant)
Secret Jews who had accepted baptism to escape the wrath of the Inquisition.

RABBI

Over the years, thousands of *Sephardim*—Jews of Spanish origin—made their way to America.

THIRD DANCER

They took everything from us, everything my father and mother had worked for—and finally, they threatened to take our lives. My cousins, *marranos* like us, still practicing their Judaism in secret, were caught and burned at the stake. Either we became true *conversos*—Christians in thought as well as deed—or we must escape. We left the only world we knew—family, neighbors, friends—and carried away with us nothing but our faith.

(She returns to the safety of her group.)

RABBI

The Sephardic Jews arrived first and were followed by wave upon wave of immigration from Central and Eastern Europe. In every century, we came to America, driven by war, revolution, persecution—and hope.

FOURTH CAMPER

(steps forward with FOURTH DANCER and they speak to the audience in role as German immigrants)

In Baden, where my family lived, a Jewish man could not marry unless he purchased a “*matrikal*,” a permission to do so.

FOURTH DANCER

For a thousand *gulden*!

FOURTH CAMPER

And even then, he would not be approved for marriage unless he had a good job.

FOURTH DANCER

A good job, yes. But no Jew could find decent work without another document, a “letter of protection” from the government.

FOURTH CAMPER

Protection from what, you ask? From the very government that required such documents!

FOURTH DANCER

Where was the money to come from? It was impossible. They knew it, and we knew it.

FOURTH CAMPER

Then the letters came, from our relatives in America—

SECOND DANCER

(calling, with outstretched arms)

A land of freedom!

SIXTH CAMPER

(calling, also with arms outstretched)

A land of opportunity!

FOURTH CAMPER

(to audience)

The “golden land,” it was called.

FOURTH DANCER

So we took what we could from Baden, and to everything else said, “*Auf weidersehn!*”

(They join the rest of their group, who greet them with enthusiastic waves, hugs and handshakes.)

RABBI

Some of the immigrants were well-off, merchants and professionals. Others were poor and uneducated, but still they came—

FIFTH DANCER

(steps forward with FIFTH CAMPER, both in role as East European immigrants)
We spoke *Yiddish* mostly.

FIFTH CAMPER

We knew Russian. My father, he learned to speak Russian to trade with the people there.

FIFTH DANCER

We didn't go to the public school. We paid for private tutors. When we could afford it.

FIFTH CAMPER

We got here, I was 12 years old and they put me in the first grade. But I kept jumping! Two years later, I was in junior high. I'm not bragging, but I was ahead of the class!

FIFTH DANCER

The *cossacks*—

(points to scar on FIFTH CAMPER's cheek, nods toward audience)

Tell them.

FIFTH CAMPER

Oh, sure, the *cossacks*.

(touches scar, shrugs, reluctant to talk about it)

FIFTH DANCER

(bitterly, to audience)

Any time they felt like it, the soldiers over there, they'd get drunk and the first thing they'd do would be to attack the Jews—for amusement!

(nudges FIFTH DANCER again)

Tell them!

FIFTH CAMPER

(remembering, quietly)

When I was a little kid—it was 1918, right after the revolution—we had a bunch of *cossacks* come through our town. They had horses, so of course, we little ones went to see what was going on. And one of them—I was just standing there—he took his whip and hit me right across my face.

(traces the scar on his/her cheek, still unbelieving—)

For no reason in the world...

FIFTH DANCER

Oh, we were glad to get out of there!

(A beat, then they return to be comforted by their group.)

RABBI

To the golden land! To life!

FATHER

(not in role, reading from a letter)

“For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support. May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants, while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig-tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.”

RABBI

George Washington.

FATHER

(as himself)

My great-grandfather told a story of how, as a teenager, he arrived at Ellis Island on the Fourth of July.

FIRST DANCER

(steps forward in role as early Eastern European immigrant)

I loved history and so I knew all about the Fourth of July. We landed, and that evening, we were on Ellis Island and here came these fireworks.

SECOND CAMPER

(steps forward in role as early Eastern European immigrant)

Vas iss das?

FIRST DANCER

Fireworks!

SECOND CAMPER

Fireworks?

FIRST DANCER

Oh, America is such a great country! Whenever another boatload of immigrants comes, they celebrate!

(FIRST DANCER smiles at his own joke, then is surprised when SECOND CAMPER hurries back to OTHERS in his group.)

SECOND CAMPER

Heshie! Faygela! They are welcoming us to America!

End of excerpt. Glossary and suggested music list follows.

GLOSSARY

Adon Olam (*ah-DOHN oh-LAHM*) “Eternal Lord.” The words to the first verse of the song mean “Eternal Lord, who ruled before anything was created, who brought forth all creation at His will. He was, He is, He shall continue in glory.”

auf weidersehn (*owff VEE-der-zah-een*) German for “goodbye.”

Baal (*BAH-ahl*) Any of a number of ancient Canaanite and Phoenician deities.

Bar Mitzvah (*BAHR Mit-ZVAH*) Literally, “son of the commandment.” A ceremony celebrating a Jewish boy’s coming of age, traditionally at age 13.

Bat Mitzvah (*BAHT Mit-ZVAH*) “Daughter of the commandment.” A ceremony celebrating a Jewish girl’s coming of age, usually at age 13.

bimah (*BEE-mah*) The altar area of a synagogue, essentially a closed ark (cabinet with doors) containing one or more Torah scrolls, an Eternal Light above it, and a podium or table to hold the open Torah for reading. There may also be chairs for the rabbi and other participants in the service.

Blessings over the *Torah* mean

“Praised be the Lord to whom our praise is due.

Praised be the Lord to whom our praise is due now and forever.

Blessed art Thou, Oh Lord, our God, who has chosen us from all peoples by giving us the Torah.”

“Blessed art Thou, Oh Lord, our God, King of the universe,
who has given us a Torah of truth, implanting within us eternal life.
Blessed art Thou, O Lord, giver of the Torah.”

b’nai (*beh-NAY*) Children. Sons and daughters.

challah (*CHAH-lah*, “*ch*” should be guttural but may be pronounced as “*h*”) Braided bread prepared for Shabbat and other special occasions.

Chanukah (*Chah-noo-KAH*, “*ch*” may be guttural or pronounced as “*h*”) The Festival of Lights, celebrating an ancient battle for Jewish religious freedom.

chutzpah (*CHUHTZ-pah*, “*ch*” is guttural) Nerve, daring.

converso (*cahn-VER-soh*) a Spanish Jew who converted to Christianity during the Inquisition.

cossacks (KAH-zacks) Special forces in the tsar of Russia's army.

Ess, mamaleh (Ehss, MAH-meh-leh) "Eat, little mother" (affectionate term for a girl).

Ess, tataleh (Ehss, TAH-teh-leh) "Eat, little father" (affectionate term for a boy).

Faygela (FAY-geh-lah) Yiddish female nickname.

gefilte (geh-FILL-teh) fish A ball or patty made from fish and spices.

groggers (GRAH-gers) Noisemakers.

gulden (GOOL-den) German currency.

"*Hakshivu Na.*" (*Hahk-shee-VOO Nah*) Pay attention!

hamantaschen (huh-men-TAH-shen) Triangular cookies, often with fruit filling.

Heshie (HESH-ee) Yiddish male nickname.

Hine Ma Tov (he-NAY mah tohv) Traditional song meaning "How good and pleasant it is when brethren dwell together in unity."

klutz (kluhtz) A clumsy person.

kosher, "keeping kosher" (CO' sher) Observing dietary laws governing permissible foods and the preparation of certain foods.

kugel (KUG-el) A baked pudding, often made with potatoes or noodles.

kvell (kvell, rhymes with "well") Rejoice, swell with pride.

kvetching (KVEH-ching) Complaining.

Ladino (Lah-DEEN-oh) Traditional language spoken by Jews of Spanish origin.

latke (LAHT-keh) Pancake, often made from shredded potato and onion.

L'chaim (leh-CHAH-yem) Hebrew for "To life," often used as a toast. "Ch" should be guttural or pronounced "h."

"*L'Shanah tovah u'metukah!*" (*Leh shah-NAH toe-VAH oo-meh-too-KAH*) A New Year's greeting wishing a sweet new year.

marrano (*mah-RAH-noh*) Spanish Jews who were forced to hide their religious practices on risk of death or expulsion during the Inquisition.

matrikal (*mah-tree-KAHL*) Document required at one time for marriage.

matzo (*MAH-tzah*) Unleavened bread.

Mazel tov! (*MAH-zel TOF*) Congratulations! Literally, “good luck.”

Megillah (*Meh-geel-AH; also Meh-GILL-ah*) The Book of Esther.

meshugah (*meh-SHOO-gah*) Crazy.

naches (*NAH-chiss; “ch” is guttural*) Joy.

niggun (*neh-GOON*) Traditional Jewish melody without words, sung only with melodic syllables.

Oy! (*OY, rhymes with “boy”*) Oh!

Oy vay iss mer (*Oy VAY ehss meer*) Oh, my goodness! More literally, “I’m in pain!”

Purim (*Poor-EEM, also POOR-em*) Holiday celebrating events in the Book of Esther.

Rosh Hashanah (*ROEsh Hah-shah-NAH*) Literally, “head of the year.” Jewish New Year. “The Birthday of the World.”

schlemazel (*shleh-MAH-zuhl*) A loser. One who has no “mazel”—no luck.

schlemiel (*shleh-MEEL*) A fool.

schvitzing (*SHVITT-zing*) Sweating.

seder (*SAY-der*) A family dinner at Passover during which the story of Exodus is told.

Sephardim (*seff-ahr-DEEM*) Jews of Spanish origin.

Shabbat (*Shah-BAHT*) The seventh day of the week, the day of rest, observed from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday.

shalom (*shah-LOHM*) Peace. “*Shalom*” can be used as “hello” and “goodbye.” “*Shabbat shalom,*” is a greeting wishing Sabbath peace.

Sh'ma, Yisrael, Adonoi Elohaynu, Adonoi Echod. (Sheh-MAH Yis-rah-EL, Ah-doh-NOY, El-oh-HAY-noo, Ah-doh-NOY Eh-chahd. "Ch" should be guttural.) "Hear, O Israel, the Lord, thy God, the Lord is One."

Sukkah (Soo-KAH) A boothlike structure erected for the celebration of *Sukkot*.

Sukkot (Soo-KOTE) A holiday celebrating the harvest.

Torah (toe-RAH or TOR-ah) The first five books of the Bible, or "Five Books of Moses," inscribed in specially created scrolls.

Vas iss das? (Vahss ehss DAHSS?) Yiddish for "What is this?"

Vu den? (voo DENN?) Yiddish for "What else?"

Yiddish (YIDD-esh) A language spoken mainly by East European Jews.

Yis-m'hu (yiss meh CHU, ch is guttural) Traditional song meaning "May they who observe the Sabbath and call it a delight rejoice in Thy Kingdom."

Yisrael (Yiss-rah-AYL) Israel.

Yom Kippur (Yohm Kee-POOR) The Day of Atonement, one of the High Holy Days.

SUGGESTED MUSIC LIST

All of these suggestions are taken from three sources:

HEBREW SONGS FOR THE YOUNG PIANIST, Eric Steiner, Mills Music, NY, 1950

THE NEW JEWISH SONG BOOK, Harry Coopersmith, Behrman House, NY, 1965

SHABBAT ANTHOLOGY VOLUME 1, J. Mark Dunn & Joel N. Eglash,
Transcontinental Music Publications, NY, 2003 (includes a CD of the music)

Use of any of this material is entirely optional and the responsibility for permissions rests with each producer of the script.

Pages 5 - 12. SHABBAT ANTHOLOGY VOLUME 1 offers 6 traditional *niggun* melodies on pp. 93-97. Any of these could be used, or they could be used in combination.

Pages 25 - 30. See suggestion for Pages 5 - 12 above. Also, HEBREW SONGS FOR THE YOUNG PIANIST offers holiday folk songs that could also be used.

Page 34. *Adon Olam* is available on p. 100 of THE NEW JEWISH SONG BOOK and many other sources.

Page 38. See suggestion for Pages 5 - 12 above.

Page 45 - 48. The Bar Mitzvah scene may be underscored by any traditional *Shabbat* melodies, such as “Eitz Chayim Hi.”

Page 49. “Yis-m’hu” is available on p. 101 of THE NEW JEWISH SONG BOOK.

Page 50. Rabbi may be singing a *niggun* as suggested above for Pages 5 - 12, or a traditional *Shabbat* melody.

Pages 52 - 53. “Hine Ma Tov” is available on p. 20 of HEBREW SONGS FOR THE YOUNG PIANIST, and on P. 81 of THE NEW JEWISH SONG BOOK.

Pages 56 and 57. Rabbi should return to the *niggun* used for Pages 5 - 12.