

Tony Kushner's "Angels in America"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/tony-kushners-angels-america>.

Introduction

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* is an iconic, two-part play that many scholars and critics consider one of the most important American plays of the twentieth century. Its two parts, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, earned the 1993 and 1994 Tony Awards for Best Play, and *Millennium Approaches* received the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. *Angels in America* includes many Jewish characters and themes, including the relationship of Jewish identity to queer identity, the place of Judaism and other religious traditions in modern life, and a modern take on biblical topics like Jacob wrestling with the Angel. This kit provides resources to help teachers tell the story of this play and its depiction of and relationship to American Jewry.

Cover image: Cover of the 2013 revised edition of the play, published by the Theatre Communications Group.

Subjects

Anti-Semitism, New York, Performance, Religion, Sexuality, Social Commentary, Theater, United States

Reading and Background

- The revised and complete edition of *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* by Tony Kushner was published by the Theatre Communications Group in 2013.
- "*Angels in America: The Complete Oral History*" draws from oral history interviews conducted with the creative team behind the original production, as well as Kushner's inner circle, to provide a detailed account of how *Angels in America* was developed, how it was initially received by audiences, and why it remains an iconic American play 25 years later.
- "*Angels in America: 20 Years Later*" is a 34-minute episode of NPR's *Talk of the Nation* about the legacy of Kushner's play. It includes the playwright's reflections on the play, then and now.
- *Wrestling with Angels* is a PBS documentary about the life and work of Tony Kushner. The trailer and assorted clips can be watched for free on this webpage, which also includes a link to buy the DVD for classroom use.
- There are several other *Angels in America* teaching tools online. The UK's National AIDS Trust, together with the British touring company Headlong Theatre and Glasgow's Citizens Theatre, has put together a *Teacher's Resource Pack* including a synopsis, character lists, themes, information about people portrayed in the play, and activities and quizzes. The City Lights Theater Company of San Jose's *guide to Perestroika* includes a timeline and quizzes about part two of the play.

Resources

1: Video excerpt, Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz's monologue, Act 1, Scene 1, of "Angels in America," performed by Meryl Streep, 2003.

The opening of Kushner's nearly eight-hour magnum opus is unusual because it does not introduce us to any of the play's main characters. It does, however, introduce many of the major themes of the play, such as stasis versus change, the place of religion (and Judaism in particular) in modern life, and assimilation versus cultural specificity. Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz gives a eulogy at a funeral that we later find out is for Louis's grandmother. But when we first encounter this monologue at the opening of the play, its purpose is intentionally unclear.

This excerpt is from the 2003 HBO miniseries based on Kushner's play. The series was directed by Mike Nichols, and the rabbi in



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this scene is played by Meryl Streep.

Suggested Activity: Without providing any contextual information, and before assigning the entire play, ask students to read Act 1, Scene 1, to themselves. Then, ask them to read the same monologue aloud in small groups. Encourage students to guess what the play's themes are based on their reading of this monologue alone. Discuss: why does this monologue appear at the beginning of the play? What purpose does it serve and what ideas does it raise? What questions does it leave the reader with, whether about the character of the rabbi, the play, or the world it depicts?

Next, watch the video as a class. Ask students to consider how the monologue is presented in the video. How is the rabbi characterized? How is the congregation portrayed? What visual and audio details are used to bring the scene to life? Which parts of the text are left out? Ask students how this portrayal compares to what they had pictured in their own imaginations when they read the scene.

For a more in-depth study of the scene, ask students to think about how they might perform the monologue differently from the way Meryl Streep performs it. What choices might they make to convey the meaning of the text to an audience? Once students have made notes about these choices, they can perform the scene for one another in small groups.

Source: Harrison Bleiberg, "Meryl Streep's eulogy from the opening of *Angels in America*," Jul. 12 2015, video, 3:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXJ3PjeQ1NI>.

3: Biblical excerpt, Genesis 32:22-31, Jacob and the Angel, Hebrew with English translation.

In Act 2, Scene 2, of *Part One: Millennium Approaches*, Harper and Joe discuss their struggles in life and what they pray for. Joe talks about reading a book of biblical stories when he was a child, and how he was captivated by a picture of Jacob wrestling with the angel from Genesis 32:22-31, when, after spending a night alone while journeying home to Canaan, Jacob encounters an angel who wrestles with him until dawn and who gives him the name "Israel." Joe says he still dreams about that picture, imagining himself wrestling an angel.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to read the biblical passage about Jacob wrestling with the angel. Then, ask them to read Act 2, Scene 2, out loud. Discuss: why did Kushner include this biblical imagery in his play? What elements of the Torah story does he include in his play? What does he exclude? In the play, Joe Pitt is talking about struggling with both his religious identity as a Mormon and his homosexuality. How does the metaphor of wrestling with an angel speak to each of these struggles?

Source: Genesis 32:22-31, source sheet compiled by Josh Lambert using sefaria.org, 2019.

4: Images, depictions of Jacob wrestling the angel from the Gutenberg Bible, 1558; Rembrandt, 1659; Alexandre-Louis Leloir, 1865; and Gustav Moreau, 1878.

The biblical episode of Jacob wrestling with the Angel, from Genesis 32:22-31, has inspired artists for centuries. It is also referenced several times in *Angels in America*. Prior is repeatedly visited by angels and wrestles with one of them. Joe tells Harper how he was fascinated with the story as a child; he sees the story as a metaphor for his own struggle with his homosexuality and his Mormon faith.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to compare and contrast the four images of Jacob wrestling with the angel from Gutenberg, Rembrandt, Leloir, and Moreau. Have students discuss in small groups: what are the similarities and differences between these artistic works? How do these images relate to the themes of the play? Why might a painting of Jacob and the angel have had such a strong impact on Joe?

Sources: *Jacob struggles with the angel*, from the Gutenberg Bible, woodcut print, 1558, Wikipedia.

Rembrandt, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, oil on canvas, 1659, Wikipedia.

Alexander Louis Leloir, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, oil on canvas, 1865, Wikipedia.

Gustav Moreau, *Jacob and the Angel*, 1878, Wikipedia.

5: Article excerpts, Tony Kushner's "The Secret of Angels," 1994.

In this 1994 *New York Times* article, drawn from conversations Tony Kushner had with writer William Harris, Kushner answers some key questions about *Angels in America*. These three excerpts focus on why Kushner chose to include the Yiddish folk song "Tumbalalaika," why he made several of his main characters Mormon, and how we should understand the appearances of Prior Walter's two ancestors.

Suggested Activity: Have students break into small groups. Each group should read and discuss one of the three article excerpts. Ask students to consider how Kushner's explanations and reflections do or don't help them understand the play. In each specific excerpt, what is Kushner expressing about his intentions? Do students understand the play differently, after learning about these intentions? Bring the whole class back together and have groups report to each other about the excerpt they read and discussed.

Source: Tony Kushner in conversation with William Harris, "The Secret of Angels" (*The New York Times*, March 27, 1994), *The New York Times Archives*, accessed January 24, 2019.

6: Image, illustration by Suzette Phelps, "Moment" magazine, 1977.

In his monologue at the opening of *Part One: Millenium Approaches*, Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz eulogizes Louis's grandmother, Sarah Ironson. In doing so, he lists the names of Sarah's family members:

"We are here this morning to pay respects at the passing of Sarah Ironson, devoted wife of Benjamin Ironson, also deceased, loving and caring mother of her sons Morris, Abraham, and Samuel, and her daughters Esther and Rachel; beloved grandmother of Max, Mark, Louis, Lisa, Maria... uh... Lesley, Angela, Doris, Luke and Eric. Eric? This is a Jewish name? Eric."

This illustration from a 1977 issue of *Moment* provides a concise visual representation of the trends in Jewish names that seem to confound Rabbi Chemelwitz.

Suggested Activity: After reading the opening scene of *Part One: Millenium Approaches*, ask students to look at the illustration in small groups. Invite students to discuss: how does this image relate to Rabbi Chemelwitz's comment about Eric's name? What kinds of historical events might impact how Jewish parents choose to name their children? To what extent does this image reflect naming traditions that you have observed in your own community? What, if anything, makes a name Jewish?

Source: Suzette Phelps, cover image, *Moment*, October 1977.

7: Excerpt (with transliteration and English translation) and cover illustration, William Shakespeare's "King Lear," translated into Yiddish by A. Asen, 1947.

Towards the beginning of Part One of *Angels in America*, Louis gets into a conversation with the rabbi who has just eulogized his grandmother. He tells Rabbi Chemelwitz that he has not visited his grandmother in years, and the rabbi replies in Yiddish, "*Sharfer vi di tson fun a shlang is an umdankver kind.*" Louis doesn't speak Yiddish and asks the rabbi to translate, and Rabbi Chemelwitz replies: "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child. Source: Shakespeare, *King Lear*."

As scholar Joel Berkowitz has written in his book *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage* (University of Iowa Press, 2002), Shakespeare's plays in Yiddish translation "became embedded in the consciousness of America's Yiddish-speaking Jews, for they helped audiences come to terms with the challenges of immigrant life" (209). In addition to direct translations of Shakespearean plays, like the Yiddish version of *King Lear* that Rabbi Chemelwitz is quoting, there were also dozens of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays (like *The Jewish King Lear*) that put the characters and plots of his plays into an American Jewish immigrant context.

Suggested Activity: Show students the image and excerpt from *King Lear* in Yiddish. You might ask them to compare the given English translation to the same line from the original Shakespeare. What, if anything, is different?

Then, ask students to discuss the following questions in small groups: what might have been Asen's intent in publishing this translation? Why do you think plays like *King Lear* in Yiddish were so popular among newly-arrived American immigrant audiences? What is the function of Rabbi Chemelwitz referencing *King Lear* in *Angels in America* – and specifically, of him referencing it in Yiddish?

Source: William Shakespeare, *King Lear (Kenig lir)*, trans. A. Asen (New York: A. Asen, 1947), 3, 64.

8: Text and translation, Jewish prayers, the Kaddish and El Maleh Rachamim.

Angels in America includes two prayers that are important features of Jewish ritual for mourning the dead.

The Mourner's Kaddish is an Aramaic prayer that is traditionally recited publicly after the death of a child, parent, spouse, sibling, or close relative. The Kaddish does not overtly mention death; instead, the language of the prayer praises God and magnifies his name. The Kaddish is also recited in other contexts, but is referred to as the Mourner's Kaddish when it is recited in mourning. One of *Angels in America*'s most famous scenes is when the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg helps Louis (who does not know the words) say the Mourner's Kaddish for Roy Cohn after his death – even though Cohn was largely responsible for her death.

El Maleh Rachamim ("God Full of Compassion") is a prayer recited at the end of a funeral service, upon visiting the graves of relatives, and when a person is called up to the Torah on the anniversary of a close relative's death. In some communities, it is also recited during the Yizkor service for memorializing the dead on Yom Kippur. El Maleh Rachamim asks God to grant peace to the soul of the deceased. The worshipper also pledges to contribute to charity in remembrance of the departed person. In Act 3 of *Millennium Approaches*, Prior thinks he hears Nurse Emily reciting this prayer for him in Hebrew, interrupting her delivery of an optimistic prognosis that he may live for years in spite of his AIDS.

Suggested Activity: Read the translations of the Kaddish and El Maleh Rachamim as a class and discuss the meaning of the prayers. Discuss in small groups: how do these prayers function in *Angels in America*? How would the play be different if they weren't included?

Ask students what makes the Kaddish scene in particular powerful. Why is it significant that the Kaddish is recited in this scene? What does it tell us about Louis's character? About Ethel Rosenberg's?

Sources: *Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem* (Daily Prayer Book), trans. Philip Birnbaum (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1949), 137-38.

Yizkor 12, trans. Francis Nataf, [Sefaria](#), accessed February 2020.