

the Spirit of Klezmer  
a one act play by Jim Hickcox

[Two old men sit in chairs on a porch in the light of the setting sun. They sip iced tea and speak gently to one another while staring out into the road in front of them. No eye contact is made. It is the present day.]

Zamir - So, Gersham...

Gersham - Yes, Zamir?

Zamir - How did you like that kugel my Ofra made this evening?

Gersham - You know, Zamir, when we get together for dinner, your Ofra's kugel is always exactly the same. I appreciate its stability.

Zamir - Don't kid, Gersham, I know how bored you must be of eating the same thing every week, it's really the only explanation for the instability of the carrot tzimmes your Segula made.

[Ofra and Segula step out of a door on the house and join the men on the porch, along with Gersham and Segula's granddaughters, Chaya and Tehora.]

Segula - What are you old clowns talking about?

Zamir - Hey, Ofra, how many dishes would you say we have?

Ofra - I'm not sure, Zamir, not a lot; we have enough to get by.

Zamir - Well, old Gersham here was just saying that he's only ever seen one of them.

Ofra - Is that right, Gersham?

Gersham - Oh, I was merely impressed with the structural practicality of your dish.

Zamir - It does sit pretty heavily.

Segula - What *are* you boys rambling on about?

[Segula and Ofra sit on a porch swing, while Chaya and Tahora sit on the floor in front of them.]

Chaya - Bubbie, make Zayde stop being crazy and tell us a fun story.

Tehora - Yes! A fun story about our history!

Ofra - Oh, the children these days do love to hear about their history.

Gersham - What do you want to hear about, kids?

Zamir - Ooh, we should tell them about baby Moses floating in a basket down the river?

Gersham - Nothing is what you should tell them about! They want to hear something interesting, they do.

None of your ancient day shmutz. Let's go more recent.

Segula - If you tell anything that will give these girls nightmares they'll be taking your spot in my bed, I'll have you know, Gersham.

Gersham - Oh, well, the story begins with my mother, which may cause nightmares for some, but we'll move beyond her in a moment.

Ofra - You're terrible, Gersham.

Zamir - Not when it comes to telling stories, certainly.

Gersham - I remember, I was a young child, like you two are now, and I was perched at the top of the stairs watching my mother and her assistant relaxing in the den.

[The lights fade on the porch, and come up on the other half of the stage, where one woman sits in an easy chair in a living room and another stands behind and to the left of her. Both women face the audience.]

Uziela - Bat-Yam, will you please put a record on for me?

Bat-Yam - Yes, Ma'am.

[Bat-Yam moves over to a shelf of records next to a record player]

Uziela - I'd like to hear some klezmer, Bat-Yam, will you put on some klezmer for me?

Bat-Yam - Yes, Ma'am.

Uziela - How about Dave Tarras? I just picked up his new record, and I'd like to give it a listen.

Bat-Yam - Yes, Ma'am.

[She pulls a record out of the cabinet and puts it on the record player. She presses play, and presumably it begins playing, though the audience doesn't hear any music. Bat-Yam walks back to her original position and faces the audience again.]

Uziela - Do you like this, Bat-Yam? It's very good.

Bat-Yam - Yes, Ma'am.

Uziela - That Dave Tarras, he certainly has his sensibilities about him. He knows what klezmer music is all about. I was talking to Ilana the other day, do you remember Ilana, Bat-Yam?

Bat-Yam - Yes, Ma'am.

Uziela - Well, I was talking to her the other day, and she was saying that she likes to listen to this Naftule Brandwein. Have you ever heard Naftule Brandwein, Bat-Yam?

Bat-Yam - No, Ma'am.

Uziela - Well you're missing nothing that's not worth missing, I tell you. The man claims to play klezmer music, but it's nothing of the sort. All kinds of crazy jazz is what he's playing.

[The lights fade back down in the den and back up on the porch.]

Gersham - And for once she was right, she was; this crazy mother of mine.

Zamir - What are you talking about, Gersham?

Segula - I happen to know that you very much enjoy listening to Naftule Brandwein, Gersham.

Gersham - This is true. But what she was right about is that he's a jazz musician, he is. No klezmer coming out of him. Why, real klezmer music should be played on a violin, not on a clarinet at all.

Chaya - Is that true, Bubbie?

Segula - Of course not, Chaya, darling. Your Zayde has no idea what he's talking about.

Tehora - Well, what's klezmer music, then?

the Spirit of Klezmer - Klezmer music is any music played by a klezmer.

[All characters look around, shocked by the booming, disembodied voice.]

Gersham - It's a dybbuk, it is! Cover your noses! Call the rabbi!

the Spirit of Klezmer - I am not a dybbuk, as you say. I am the Spirit of Klezmer.

Zamir - Why would you want to possess someone?

the Spirit of Klezmer - I do not wish to possess anyone. I come only to educate. [beat] You may stop pinching your nostrils.

Segula - Do as it says, girls.

Tehora - You said that klezmer music is music played by a klezmer, Spirit, but... what's a klezmer?

the Spirit of Klezmer - Well, my child, "klezmer" is an old Yiddish word that means "musician", so in the loosest sense, a klezmer is just any musician.

Chaya - So klezmer music is all music?

Zamir - Including Naftule!

the Spirit of Klezmer - Only in the loosest sense. Over the years it has evolved into a more specific word. It has become a term for Jewish music, and the people who play it.

Chaya - What do you mean, Jewish music?

Ofra - Oh, Zamir, do you remember the klezmer band we had at our wedding?

Zamir - Oh yeah, Klezter Dent. They were pretty fun.

Chaya - Did they play Jewish music?

Zamir - Well, sort of. They played Hava Nagila.

Ofra - They played a few traditionals. They played Khosn Kale Mazeltov and Yoshke, Yoshke.

Zamir - Yeah, but they also played Mein Yiddeshe Maydele, which isn't so traditional. Oh, and Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy, which isn't even Jewish at all.

the Spirit of Klezmer - Yes, but this is what true klezmerim originally were. Players of the popular music of the day.

Tehora - That's not very Jewish.

the Spirit of Klezmer - That wasn't the point. Klezmerim were just the entertainers for parties and weddings. They played what the people wanted to hear.

Segula - And the people don't just want to hear traditional musics.

Ofra - I know we didn't. We danced all night long, and we had a lot of big band jazz played alongside the more traditional songs.

the Spirit of Klezmer - Indeed, klezmer has often been blended with jazz, as they both tend to express similar emotions.

Gersham - There's dancin' jazz and dancin' klezmer, and there's weepin' jazz and weepin' klezmer.

Tehora - I have a friend at school who listens to klezmer a lot.

Chaya - He's her boyfriend!

Tehora - He is not!

Segula - Boyfriend? A nice little Jewish boy, I hope?

Tehora - No. But he's not my boyfriend. Just a friend. Who's a boy.

Gersham - Good.

Chaya - I saw them kissing.

Tehora - Shut up!

Gersham - Kissing him? You were kissing a goyish boy? Well, you might as well get his name tattooed into your flesh, you might! Hell is where you'll be going!

Segula - Gersham!

Gersham - Kissing a goy!

Segula - Gersham, shut your knish-hole! She's just a girl. She'll grow up and mature and learn the value of only dating good Jewish boys.

Tehora - I'm not dating him, Zayde, and we weren't kissing. Chaya just said that.

Gersham - Well shame on you, Chaya, for getting your old Zayde all excited over nothing.

Chaya - I'm sorry.

[They all sit for a moment in silence.]

the Spirit of Klezmer - [clears its throat] I... I believe the girl was telling a story...

Tehora - Oh, I wasn't telling a story. I was just saying that my friend listens to klezmer, because he likes to go to punk concerts, and sometimes klezmer bands play at the same clubs, and he goes, because he says they have the same kind of energy.

the Spirit of Klezmer - Indeed, in more recent days some people have blended klezmer with various other kinds of music. People have combined klezmer with popular musics, like punk or reggae, and some people have taken klezmer further down the routes of jazz and made it experimental.

Gersham - I've heard some of that crap, it's not klezmer at all.

Zamir - Well, it depends on how you look at it. After all, didn't we just learn that klezmer music can technically be anything?

Gersham - We learned that klezmer music is Jewish music, and there's nothing Jewish about that avant-garde shmutz.

Ofra - But by Jewishness do you mean a base in Jewish traditions, or relating to Jewish religion?

the Spirit of Klezmer - You can define it however you want, really.

Chaya - You're pretty vague, Spirit.

the Spirit of Klezmer - Yes, well, such is the nature of klezmer. In fact, some people have been making a move away from the term. Some people who play what would typically be defined as klezmer want their music to be called "New Jewish Music", so that they can feel more free straying from Hasidic melodies. They don't want to have a concert with an audience of people like Gersham here. Everyone would go home unfulfilled.

Gersham - I think that sounds like a good compromise.

Segula - That's because it's not actually a compromise.

Gersham - What, I like to get what I want; is that so wrong?

Zamir - It is when you want ridiculous things.

Gersham - I don't want ridiculous things, I just like to stick with what I learned from my mother, and my mother obviously had a stricter view of what klezmer music is than you do. And certainly stricter than that of Tehora's little friend.

the Spirit of Klezmer - And we may never know who's correct.

Gersham - I know who's correct.

[Lights fade out on the porch, and back up in the den where Uziela is still sitting in her chair. Bat-Yam is not on stage. After Uziela gazes emotionlessly into the audience for a few moments, Bat-Yam walks on stage with a cup of tea on a saucer, which she hands to Uziela. She then returns to her position behind and to the left of Uziela and stands facing the audience.]

Uziela - Thank you, Bat-Yam.

Bat-Yam - Yes, Ma'am.

Uziela - I'd like to tell you what makes klezmer music klezmer music, Bat-Yam.

Bat-Yam - Yes, Ma'am.

Uziela - Klezmer music features the violin. Recently there have been some clarinetists taking over the scene, but that's just because they record better. Violins are what makes klezmer music klezmer music.

Bat-Yam - Yes, Ma'am.

Uziela - And klezmer music has no drummer. If you put a drummer in a klezmer band, you have a jazz band that features Jewish music.

Bat-Yam - Yes, Ma'am.

Uziela - The harmonic minor scale is prominently featured, also. If you want klezmer, you need to play the first fourth and fifth modes of the harmonic minor scale. Mostly the fourth. That's how you make the music klezmer music.

Bat-Yam - Yes, Ma'am.

Uziela - Are you getting this, Bat-Yam? If you want klezmer, it's violin, no drum, fourth mode of the harmonic minor. That's where the klezmer comes from.

[Lights go back down in the den and come back up on the porch, Chaya and Tehora are asleep.]

the spirit of Klezmer - Well sure, that and the soul.

Gersham - They had a lovely relationship, my mother and Bat-Yam.

Segula - Wait, Spirit, are you saying that Gersham's mother, and by extension, Gersham, is correct about all of that?

the Spirit of Klezmer - I'm saying that she is correct, and Zamir is correct, and everyone is correct.

Klezmer is whatever you need it to be. Klezmer is a way of living. Klezmer is a feeling that is beyond definition. Why do you think I have no body?

Segula - I see.

[Everyone is silent for a brief moment.]

Ofra - Well, now that we've bored these poor girls to death, let's play a game that will be fun for all of us.

Gersham - Okay; I have an idea, I do. Let's have a debate about languages. I'll represent Hebrew, and you can represent Yiddish, Zamir.

Zamir - Okay, this could be fun.

Ofra - Wake up, girls, we're going to have a debate.

[Gersham grabs his left arm and gasps in pain.]

Segula - Gersham!

Zamir - Are you okay, Gersham?

[Zamir grabs his left arm and gasps in pain.]

Ofra - Zamir!

[Both Gersham and Zamir fall to the ground, twitch for a moment, then stop moving.]

Segula - I... I think they've both died.

the Spirit of Klezmer - [laughs menacingly]

[All lights fade out; curtain is drawn.]