

# America, a place

## part V, The Blessing

### Scene I. Abraham's Deathbed

Total darkness. Before the first light, a soft mystical chant can be heard, a whisper, a murmur, performed by those in the room, but as if from afar. repeat as necessary:

“Why, oh why did the soul plunge  
From the upmost heights  
To the lowest depths?  
Is the seed of redemption  
Contained in the fall?”  
(from the Dybbuk by S. Ansky)

Abraham lays on a large, mahogany divan, deeply carved, with scrolled and ornamented legs, covered in a gold and burgundy brocaded tapestry typically found on a Turkish carpet, but in this case, the bed a Rebbe lies upon in preparation for his final breath. At each end are thick bolsters covered in the same material. Abraham's head rests on one, his feet on the other. He is surrounded by his closest male descendants: Isaac, his son; Isaac's twin boys, Lincoln and Bush, Abraham's grandchildren; another grandchild, Jacob, the son of his banished first son Flannel; Jack, his son in law; Ayho, his great grandchild; and Eliezar, his longtime secretary. Sitting in a corner is Abraham's personal Rabbi. Noticeably absent is Flannel, Abraham's first born; and the women in Abraham's life. Isaac is obviously in charge, moving between those present and upright, and his father, too weak to rise. Isaac occasionally bends over to say something, or to simply listen to his frail voice. Abraham is one hundred and twenty years old. He has lived through many, many changes. For quite some time Isaac has directed the empire Abraham created, though it was always clear, Isaac's judgements were subject to Abraham's approval. Isaac too is very old, too old to inherit the empire. His twin children Lincoln and Bush, and everyone else, anxiously await Abraham's final words, his Blessing: Who will carry on in Abraham's footsteps?

Death hangs about the room. It's presence is palpable. Tension foment—between Death's unmistakable presence, and the expectation of the Blessing—coloring the atmosphere of the room. Will Abraham survive long enough to utter the anticipated Blessing, or will Death claim him first? Whose Will is stronger? Death is present as a feeling, but it is also a sound, the sound which evokes a pending death, gripping those nearby, at the nape of the neck in an attempt to pull us into its nether world. The sound of Death has a particular vibratory frequency. Ironically, or not, this frequency is borne by the combined sound of those in the room whispering amongst themselves, those who have come to witness Abraham's passing. Strangely, they are Death's consort. The Blessing has not been forthcoming, and the vibratory tension begins to build between the sound of Death and the sound of those who have come to bear witness to Abraham's death. However, it ebbs and flows, and when it feels as though Abraham is about to be claimed, those in the room utter something vocally—a random response really within the natural flow of

their conversation—which has the immediate effect of preventing Death from taking Abraham pre-maturely.

Outside Abraham's study, in the antechamber, are the others who have gathered: Abraham's daughter Leah Alma; Lincoln's wife Jill; their daughter Rollo, Abrahams's granddaughter; Barbara E., Jack and Jill's sister; and Bush's cronies, Dick Cheney and Karl Rove; and, unannounced and quite unexpectedly, one very special guest, the man in the Flannel Shirt, Abraham's first born, who keeps to the shadows. From time to time those inside the Death Chamber take themselves to the antechamber where food and drink are served and lively debate fills the air. The antechamber scenes are in contrast to the sombre, mysterious atmosphere where Abraham lays, and are filled with conviviality, humor, politiking, and sexual innuendo. There is no sense of Time within this room.

Fade lights up slowly...a mystical atmosphere pervades the room; we hear the chant; shadows lurk, then, just before the light reaches full, we hear Abraham from his deathbed. His speech is labored and bone weary. is it the blessing?

“the tides rise...they fall. there is nothing i can do to prevent this. it is as it has been foretold: one generation follows...i wish to gather my children and my children's children around me...(breathy) **oh how i am haunted by my final breath!**”

—**Silence**...followed by the sound associated with Death (felt at the nape of the neck). an indistinguishable whispering follows amongst those present, countering the sound of Death... back and forth the tension as the lights fade up. we hear small talk, barely audible, and then...

**Ayho** “he sure doesn't look like the most influential man in the western world.”

**Jack** “not at this moment he doesn't.”

**Ayho** “whatya think he's thinkin' about?”

**Jack** “he could be thinkin' about anything. don't underestimate him.”

**Ayho** “why's he taking so long?”

**Jack** “i don't know. i suppose he's calculating something. his is the slow and easy. he built an empire from a few seeds. walked across the continent buyin' land and layin' rail, spreadin' himself across the landscape. don't ever forget how shrewd a dude he is.”

**Ayho** (imitates his grandfather) “i can't wait to hear him speak.”

—smiles all around. Isaac near his father's deathbed, turns, displeased. the others are a few paces away. the sound of Death diminishes...Jack and Ayho continue—

**Ayho** “why'd he call everyone together if he won't talk, dad?”

**Jack** “i don't know. i guess he wants us to talk amongst ourselves. i guess he figures we'll work something out on our own, or he hopes we will.”

**Ayho** “like what? there's a big difference...between us...(uses eyes to indicate Bush).”

**Jack** “the old man would like to see us bridge the gap. we're family, so he thinks there should be...unity. harmony. it's probably unrealistic...”

**Ayho** “seems he's a control freak even while he's layin' on his deathbed.”

**Jack** “shh, a kinder tongue please.”

**Ayho** “sorry...daddy, what is death like?...ya know, sometimes at nite in bed when it's really, really quiet, and i close my eyes...is death like the darkness? is it nothingness?”

**Jack** “i don't know Ayho. i don't know how to answer you. i don't know what death feels like, and i ain't ready to find out.”

**Ayho** “daddy, sometimes when i do that, close my eyes and get real quiet and just stare into the blackness, i get scared. i wonder what it would be like if i didn't exist...then i try and imagine that, but, well, when i start to try too hard i lose my focus. and i usually fall asleep.”

—the sound of Death begins to grow, overlapping the following conversations—

**Jack** “i don't think you need to be afraid—nothing bad can happen. maybe next time don't try so hard.”

—as Lincoln and Jacob speak, they play with their mnemonic devices—

**Lincoln**, to Jacob “it's important not to get enmeshed in the past. it can become a trap, and thwart any personal expression. i'm struggling to navigate a course into the future.”

**Jacob** (slight accent) “isn't it amazing how the guys been born and re-born, so many times into perpetuity, it's phenomenal. what, 3,000, 4,000 years, and millions, many millions, millions and millions of great and great grand somethin' or other children.”

—Isaac clutches Abraham's bedpan—

**Isaac**, to Bush “controlling the future from the grave gives our lives, and those generations to come, a sense of purpose, and a deep connection to the past.”

**Bush** “one thing's fer sure pop, i can use a sense of structure and purpose. otherwise you'd find me sittin' on a stool down at Prescott's.”

**Jacob** (points to the divan) “i don't wanna sound mean, or god forbid, blasphemous...”

**Lincoln** “i know, i know, you don't have to mince your words with me Jacob. he's been quite the autocrat.”

**Jacob** “i think the world'll be better off without his long arm pointing its' index finger.”

**Isaac** “i think it's time to change his bedpan.”

**Lincoln** (forcefully, to Isaac, but, as if speaking to Death) “i'd like to speak with him.”

(sound of Death is momentarily silenced) “i'd like to tell him ‘die in peace already. the blessing, it's not necessary.’ (turns back to Jacob) father won't have it. he won't let anyone near him. as always, he's caught up protecting his father.”

**Ayho** “can he even give a blessing at this point?”

—Jacob pulls Lincoln aside. they speak in whispers. the sound of Death resumes—

**Jacob** “do you think he's tryin' to hold on through the election?”

**Lincoln** (breath) “i guess it's possible. but what does he gain? i mean, not giving his blessing plays right into the hands of the neo cons. he may as well give it to Bush and be done with it.”

**Jacob** “i'm not so sure. no blessing...allows for a cleaner race, no? think about it. as long as he's alive, he can give his blessing any time—to either of you. this way he can sort of... control the election from his deathbed.”

**Lincoln** “i see your point, but i'm...”

**Jacob** “let’s face the facts. we know he has no use for these neocons. we know he thinks they’ve taken their conservative agenda too damn far. sure, he placates them, but he’s had no choice, and we all know how he likes to get along with everyone. right now, from his deathbed, i think he thinks, he has a choice.”

**Lincoln** “maybe you’re on to something. withholding his blessing certainly tempers our position. we can’t become too extreme either.”

**Jacob** “exactly! that’s what he’s after—middle of the road.”

**Lincoln** (checks compass) “i need to find my way out of here. i need a breather.”

—as Lincoln leaves the room, up *King of the Road* by Nat King Cole (music only). lights dim; the talking, and Death’s vocalization grow softer. in the dim light we see Isaac walk toward Bush and whisper into his ear. Bush shrugs, shakes head from side to side, rolls eyes, grimaces, raises eyebrows, then moves head slowly, up and down. when Isaac is finished Bush stands still. Isaac moves to another part of the room. (Beat) Bush moves to exit. **Blackout**—