



SHALOM VIETNAM

by Dennis Danziger

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SHALOM VIETNAM

Time: May 1970

Place: a storefront office converted into a classroom. A rotary phone, metal in/out box and stacks of papers and books clutter the top of an old wooden teacher's desk. Near the desk are a used file cabinet and a small, upright, stand-alone closet. There is an ark, large enough to hold one Torah. Scattered around the room are eight or ten old style, one-to-a-seat school desks. Additionally, there are several two-to-a-desk style tables. On one table there are stacks and stacks of prayer books (used). Additional folding chairs lean against the walls. The walls are decorated with posters of Israel, framed pictures of holy men, as well the Wailing Wall and other images of Orthodox Judaic life. The entrance into the classroom is downstage left.

RABBI SHOLOMO WASSERMAN, late 40s, wears a worn and unfashionable black sport coat with matching slacks, socks and shoes and a less than crisp, white dress shirt, no tie, and stands center stage prayer book in hand gently rocking as he prays softly in Hebrew. He wears a black skullcap (*yarmulke*). He speaks English with a slight European accent.

Knock at the door. Rabbi Wasserman continues praying.

Enter CHEESE WILLIAMS, early 20s, a clean-cut African-American dressed in preppy attire, neatly pressed slacks, long-sleeved dress shirt, tie and wing tips. He carries an expensive attaché case. As he enters, he slips on a white *yarmulke* and bobby pins it into his hair.

The rabbi nods to Cheese, finishes his prayer, kisses his prayer book, puts it down.

1.

RABBI WASSERMAN

Ba-rooch Ha-shem, Blessed be His Name. Cheese Williams, A pleasure to see you.

CHEESE WILLIAMS

Ba-rooch Ha-shem. Blessed be His Name. Rabbi Wasserman. How are you?

Rabbi embraces Cheese; they hug. Then the Rabbi opens a book on his desk.

RABBI WASSERMAN (CONT.)

And such a surprise. I don't see you in my appointment. How can I be of service?

CHEESE WILLIAMS

Rabbi, I'm so thankful that you have been accepted into this house of study, that I dropped by to give you my check for the summer session as well as my deposit for the fall.

Cheese Williams hands a check to the rabbi.

RABBI WASSERMAN

Cheese, please, we talked. You can pay month-to-month. You are such a *mensch*. You know *mensch*?

Cheese shakes his head.

RABBI WASSERMAN

A good man. Moral, ethical. Someone who cares as much, maybe even more about others, than about himself. That is you, my friend, a *mensch*.

CHEESE WILLIAS

And rabbi, when my check clears, maybe you'll find time to sign off on my Selective Service papers?

RABBI WASSERMAN

As Hillel said, "If not now, when? If not me, who?" The papers?

Cheese takes papers from his attaché case and hands them to the rabbi who peruses them.

2.

RABBI WASSERMAN

So official, so important. But the pen, *Ba-rooch Ha-shem*, is mightier than the sword.

Enter, without knocking, DANNY FRIEDMAN, early 20s, a middle-class college kid wearing a t-shirt, blue jeans (possibly bellbottoms) and tennis shoes. He wears his hair long or unkempt. The backpack slung over his shoulder is decorated with political buttons. He carries an open container of Chinese take-out and using his chopsticks, scoops out bites of food.

DANNY

My man, is this the Flatbush Avenue Yeshiva?

RABBI WASSERMAN

I'll be with you momentarily. Have a seat.

Danny sits and eats his Chinese food.

RABBI WASSERMAN

Young man, what are you eating?

DANNY FRIEDMAN

Chow fun. Want some?

RABBI WASSERMAN

What's in it?

DANNY

Fun. Noodles. Bean sprouts. Little pieces of pork.

RABBI WASSERMAN

Feh. Get it out of this holy place.

DANNY

I'm kidding. I'm vegetarian. Don't believe in killing animals. Except in self-defense.

RABBI

Such a pious young man. I will be with you shortly.

Rabbi Wasserman Cheese's
papers, signs.

CHEESE WILLIAMS

Thank you, rabbi. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

RABBI WASSERMAN

What's to thank? You'll be a wonderful student. This calls for a celebration.

Rabbi reaches into a drawer, pulls out a
bottle of schnapps and two plastic cups. He
pours a few sips into each cup. Hands one to
Cheese.

DANNY

Hey, can I get in on this?

Rabbi ignores him. Raises his cup, as does
Cheese.

RABBI WASSERMAN

La'chaim.

CHEESE WILLIAMS

La'chaim.

They clink cups and drink. Then Rabbi
Wasserman pulls out a reel to reel tape
recorder, sets it on his desk.

CHEESE WILLIAMS

What's that?

4.

RABBI WASSERMAN

Shh!

Rabbi Wasserman presses the button and the tape plays, “*Siman Tov U Mazel Tov*,” which means “Good sign, good luck” and expresses congratulations on a meaningful occasion. It is an upbeat Hebrew song.

RABBI WASSERMAN (CONT.)

(sings and claps his hands)

Siman tov u mazel tov, u mazel tov en siman tov. Siman tov u mazel tov...

With Cheese’s draft board papers in hand, Rabbi Wasserman sings and dances along with the song. He nods to Cheese to join in. But Cheese is clueless. But after a few beats, Danny joins in.

RABBI WASSERMAN and DANNY

(sing)

...u mazel tov en siman tov. Yuh’hey-lanu.

The rabbi stops singing. But Danny, showing off his knowledge, rocks out, singing and dancing. Maybe he does a traditional Russian squat kick dance or does the bottle dance from *Fiddler on the Roof*, substituting the Chinese take-out box for the bottle.

DANNY

(sings)

...yuh’hey-lah-nu, u'l'khol Yis'ra'iel. Yuh’hey-lah-nu. Yuh’hey....

5.

Rabbi Wasserman cuts off the music.

RABBI WASSERMAN

Enough celebrating for one day.

DANNY

...yuh'hey'lah-nu...la-la-la-la-la-la-la. Love that song. It's always been in my Top 10.

Danny retreats, maybe dances his way back to his chair and eats.

CHEESE WILLIAMS

Rabbi, as you know, Judaism teaches, he who saves one life, it is as if he has saved the world. You have saved my life, rabbi. You have saved my life.

Cheese kisses the rabbi's hand.

RABBI WASSERMAN

Please, we were put on earth to help one another. To do good deeds, *mitzvot*. Come, let me show you something before you go.

Rabbi goes to the ark, opens it, takes out the Torah.

RABBI WASSERMAN (CONT.)

(to Cheese)

Please, close the *Aron Hakodesh*. The Holy Ark.

Cheese closes the ark.

RABBI WASSERMAN (CONT.)

This arrived yesterday. From Jerusalem. The *Sefer Torah*. One day, this will be more than a school. Now I have a Torah; the first I have ever owned. And one day, *Ba-rooch Ha-shem*, from this modest classroom, a synagogue will grow. A community bound together in prayer, in study, and in acts of loving kindness. In *mitzvot*. Cheese, please lift the covering.

Cheese removes the
Torah's covering as the
rabbi silently instructs him.
The rabbi unhooks the tie
that binds the scroll and un-
scrolls the Torah.

RABBI WASSERMAN

Have you ever seen a thing of such beauty? Fifty-seven hundred and thirty-one years. That is how old Judaism is. The Jewish people, as you well know, have been scattered, in the Diaspora, for thousands of years. We have been persecuted, fled from countries on almost every continent, avoided annihilation since the day Moses received the commandments on Mt. Sinai. But what has kept us alive? What has given the Jewish people the strength to persevere, to overcome all that we have endured?

The Rabbi touches the
Torah.

RABBI WASSERMAN

The *Torah*. The Five Books of Moses. Our history. Our truth. Our laws. Our light. . Without this scroll, the Jewish people would cease to exist. But with it. With the divine word of *Ha'shem*, we live, we learn, we pray, we rejoice in the beauty of The Almighty, in the gift of life, and who knows, maybe in the world to come. And I will share the truth of the *Torah* with you and all of my students. Beginning Monday at 8 a.m. sharp, Torah study. Conversational Hebrew at eleven. I will see you then.

CHEESE WILLIAMS

Rabbi, how can I ever repay you?

RABBI WASSERMAN

You'll study hard. And occasionally, you'll bring me a cherry Danish. *La-heat-ra-oat*.

CHEESE WILLIAMS

(stumbling over the Hebrew)

La-heat-rah-oat. And now, if you'll excuse me.

Cheese waves his papers the rabbi signed.

CHEESE WILLIAMS (CONT.)

I have to go break up with my draft board.

Cheese hugs the rabbi.

7.

CHEESE WILLIAMS (CONT.)

Thank you, rabbi. Thank you, thank you. You are a great man.

RABBI WASSERMAN

Live and be well.

As Cheese passes Danny on his way out.

DANNY

Yo, Cheese.

(pointing to Cheese's head)

Might not want to wear that in Brooklyn.

Cheese removes his yarmulke as he exits.

Rabbi Wasserman dresses the Torah and returns it to the ark.

RABBI WASSERMAN

Do I know you?

DANNY

I'm your one o'clock. Danny Friedman. I saw your ad in the *Village Voice*. And my cousin Herbie called you. About me.

RABBI WASSERMAN

I don't know a Herbie.

DANNY

Now, he goes by Avram.

RABBI WASSERMAN

I know ten Avrams.

DANNY

Avram Friedman.

9.