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The Goldman Project

by Staci Swedeen

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



**SAMUEL
FRENCH**

FOUNDED 1830

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THE GOLDMAN PROJECT was originally presented by the Penguin Repertory Company with Joe Brancato, artistic director and Andrew M. Horn, executive director, in October 2006. It was directed by Joe Brancato with sets by James Dardenne, costumes by Patricia E. Doherty, lighting design by Jeffery Nellis, and sound design by Dimitri Tisseyre. The production stage manager was Jack D. McDowell. The cast was as follows:

TONY MARKS Sam Guncler
AVIVA LEVINE Bernadette Quigley
NAOMI GOLDMAN Anita Keal

THE GOLDMAN PROJECT was presented in an Off Broadway co-production by the Abingdon Theatre Company (Jan Buttram, artistic director, Samuel J. Bellinger, managing director, and Kim T. Sharp, associate artistic director) and the Penguin Repertory Company in October 2007. It was directed by Joe Brancato with sets by Ken Larson, costumes by Patricia E. Doherty, lighting design by Matthew McCarthy, and sound design by Dimitri Tisseyre. The production manager was Ian Grunes. The production stage manager was Jack D. McDowell. The cast was as follows:

TONY MARKS Sam Guncler
AVIVA LEVINE Bernadette Quigley
NAOMI GOLDMAN Anita Keal

A New York State Council for the Arts grant assisted in the early writing of this play.

CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

TONY MARKS - Naomi's adult son, a singer.

AVIVA LEVINE - Tony's college girlfriend, an artist.

NAOMI GOLDMAN - Mother of Tony, widow, survivor of Auschwitz. She speaks with a pronounced Rumanian (Hungarian) accent. Well dressed, wears a wig.

TIME

1994

PLACE

Naomi Goldman's small apartment near 186th Street in the Inwood section of upper Manhattan. An entry hall leads to the small but comfortable living room. Off the living room is an exit to the kitchen. Another exit to a hallway and bedrooms. There are bookshelves, a television set and photos on many surfaces. It has the look of an elderly woman's apartment. There are also numerous boxes scattered about containing items Naomi has been ordering from shopping shows.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The inspiration for *The Goldman Project* came from meeting Gertie Wurtzburger, a spunky, vivacious Rumanian woman I first encountered when my husband and I purchased a cabin in the Catskills. In 2003 I interviewed her about her experiences during World War II. Portions of her testimony have been incorporated into this play.

But a playwright's job is to imagine, explore, question, and consider. While *The Goldman Project* is a work of fiction, it delves into real issues of family, loss, guilt and the poisonous nature of secrets kept silent.

Elie Wiesel said that "I have learned two lessons in my life: first, there are no sufficient literary, psychological or historical answers to human tragedy, only moral ones. Second, just as despair can come to one another only from other human beings, hope, too, can be given to one only by other human beings."

Many people have offered me hope and support in the journey of this play. Thanks to Joe Brancato and Andrew Horn of Penguin Repertory Theatre, the Abingdon Theatre Company and the generosity of my original cast and crew. I also want to thank Arthur and Madelaine Warren, Mara Mills, Luly Kaufman, and my husband Chris Skelly.

This play is dedicated to Florence Swedeen and Gertie Wurtzburger with love and respect.

Scene One

(The sound of a television blaring away. Lights up. Sound of keys, a door opening and closing. TONY and AVIVA enter. TONY puts his gym bag in the corner and calls out over the television.)

TELEVISION NEWSCASTER. Richard M. Nixon died last night at Cornell Medical Center after slipping into a coma. President Clinton has declared a national day of mourning. Meanwhile, in the mass tribal killings in Rwanda, the International Red Cross estimates that tens, perhaps hundreds, or thousands of people, mainly Tutsis, have been massacred. When asked if this is a genocide, State Department spokeswoman Christine Shelley had this to say –

TONY. *(overlapping over the announcer until he turns off the television.)* Ma!? Ma?!!

(He briefly looks in the other rooms, returns.)

TONY. Guess she's not here. You wanna wait or...?

AVIVA. Sure.

TONY. So?

AVIVA. So...I was nervous about contacting you.

TONY. I don't remember you ever being nervous – about anything.

AVIVA. I still owe you an apology.

TONY. For what?

AVIVA. The way I broke up with you.

TONY. Water over the dam.

AVIVA. Under the bridge.

TONY. Whatever.

AVIVA. Not that any of that matters now.

TONY. No. Ancient history.

AVIVA. Right.

(Pause. They both laugh nervously. AVIVA looks around the apartment)

Oh my god.

TONY. What? What?!

AVIVA. This apartment is like a time capsule. Everything looks just the way it did when we were – you know –

TONY. Younger?

AVIVA. Yeah.

(looking around)

How long have your folks lived here now?

TONY. Forever. My mother's never going to leave. They'll have to carry her out in her sequins and heels.

AVIVA. I remember she loved to get dressed up.

TONY. Wholesale. My father was in the business.

AVIVA. That's right, that's right. So he's retired now...?

TONY. As retired as you can get.

AVIVA. *(off his expression)* Oh god, Tony –

TONY. Heart attack.

AVIVA. I'm sorry.

TONY. Almost a year ago. But I don't want to talk about him; I want to talk about you – and what you're doing here. I mean, here you are, in the flesh –

AVIVA. A little more flesh than when you knew me.

TONY. You look good.

AVIVA. Liar.

TONY. I mean it. You do.

AVIVA. Thanks.

TONY. I wondered if you'd, I don't know, moved out of New York.

AVIVA. Yeah, I did.

TONY. You moved? You're kidding. Where?

AVIVA. New Jersey. And don't make a joke about it.

TONY. You said you'd *never* leave the city.

AVIVA. Life can take us to some pretty unexpected places, huh?

TONY. Speaking of the unexpected – how’d you find me, anyway?

AVIVA. Ever hear of a phone book?

TONY. The concept sounds familiar.

AVIVA. Actually, I was looking to see if your parents still lived at the same address. I thought about contacting them without contacting you –

TONY. You *did*? I would have felt –

AVIVA. I know, I know...I *wanted* to know how you are but –

TONY. But what?

AVIVA. I’m glad your wife gave you the message. She sounded very nice.

TONY. She does. She can be, sometimes. Nice.

AVIVA. I was really glad you called me back. I wasn’t sure if you would.

TONY. Of course I’d call you back. I mean, you want a picture, right?

AVIVA. Yes, well, it’s a *little* more complicated than that.

TONY. Intriguing. Can I get you something to drink?

AVIVA. Water would be great. Thanks.

(TONY *exits to the kitchen.*)

AVIVA. Oh look! I always loved this picture of you from your bar mitzvah!

TONY. You break it, you buy it.

AVIVA. No sale! Look at you! That hair!

TONY. (*re-entering with glass of water*) I was a style prodigy.

AVIVA. And those clothes!

TONY. Wholesale, remember. Here’s your water.

AVIVA. Thanks. God! Everything looks exactly just the way I remember it.

TONY. Do you remember this couch?

AVIVA. Sure.

TONY. No – I mean do you “*remember*” this couch, one very special night on this – ?

(*There is the sound of a door opening.*)

NAOMI. Hello? Is someone here?

TONY. Ma! It's me!

NAOMI. Me who?

TONY. (*calling out loudly*) Me who do you think?

NAOMI. Tony, is that you?

TONY. Yes, Ma. With company.

NAOMI. Company?

TONY. (*to AVIVA*) I keep trying to get her to wear her damn hearing aid. I have to yell and repeat things. She can really drive me crazy.

(*NAOMI enters. She is a small, energetic older woman. She wears a stylish wig and dresses very well. She is carrying a recent purchase.*)

Ma, do you remember Aviva? My, uh – friend – from college?

NAOMI. Aviva! Of course I remember Aviva!

(*a pause as she looks at AVIVA*)

Is *this* Aviva? She looks different.

AVIVA. I'm older.

NAOMI. You don't know from old.

AVIVA. Don't you remember – Tony used to bring me here for dinner?

NAOMI. Aviva! I remember now. I once made you my stuffed chicken with the whole skin and the vings. Oh! Elaine tells me I shouldn't say vings. I should say "wings."

AVIVA. Elaine.

NAOMI. My daughter-in-law Elaine. You're Jewish, right?

AVIVA. Yes.

NAOMI. (*to TONY*) Elaine isn't. (*to AVIVA*) You know her?

TONY. Ma, come on. They never met (*muttering*) and probably never will.

NAOMI. Vat did you say?

TONY. What's in the package?

NAOMI. Nothing, Mr. Snoopy.

TONY. (to AVIVA) My mother buys so much stuff from QVC that the UPS man thinks she's sick if he doesn't stop by here everyday.

NAOMI. What else should I do with my money? Spend it on my grandchildren?

TONY. Ouch.

NAOMI. Have you eaten? Are you hungry?

TONY. We just got here.

NAOMI. Let me put on some coffee, then. Maybe a few sandwiches...

(*She exits to the kitchen.*)

AVIVA. She looks great.

TONY. Hear that, Ma? You look great!

NAOMI. (*from off*) What?

TONY. (*loudly for NAOMI's benefit*) You're gonna live to be a hundred.

NAOMI. (*from off*) Who wants to live to be a hundred?

TONY. (to AVIVA) She's like that energizer bunny. Just keeps going. Mahjong, JCC, tenants association and listening to the news – at full volume.

AVIVA. She really looks good.

TONY. Well, since Dad died her blood pressure's gone through the roof, and she sees the Doctor for a few other ailments, but otherwise...So how is *your* mother? Still okay?

(*AVIVA makes a face.*)

Oh, god. I'm sorry. Did your mother die?

AVIVA. No. But I may have to kill her.

TONY. (*laughing*) I remember you two were always going at it.

AVIVA. I'm glad you find it so amusing.

(*TONY looks at her fondly.*)

What are you looking at?

TONY. You. If someone would have said to me that I'd be standing in this apartment with you after all these years –

AVIVA. Well, after you got married it didn't seem very appropriate to stay in touch.

TONY. When was the last time *you* worried about appropriate?

AVIVA. What do you mean?!

TONY. I'll never forget that photo exhibition you did in college – and once people actually figured out what they were looking at –

AVIVA. Orifices –

TONY. Orifices...assholes! Man! That was some show.

AVIVA. (*laughing*) And weren't some of the pictures of your ass?

TONY. (*overlapping*) The best ones! Didn't you get a grant for that, some big fellowship?

AVIVA. Yeah.

TONY. Are you still involved with all that arty stuff?

AVIVA. Yeah – though I'm branching out in some other areas.

TONY. (*Bogart impression*) "Of all the gin joints in all the world." You know, I've thought of you over the years. Often.

So what are you doing now?

(*NAOMI enters with a tray piled with food.*)

AVIVA. How lovely, Mrs. Goldman! Did you just throw that together?

NAOMI. I was remembering you, Aviva – when Tony would bring you here for dinner. You were very passionate, very political. A regular socialist.

AVIVA. Yes, I guess you could say that.

NAOMI. Are you still saving the world?

AVIVA. Trying.

NAOMI. Good.

AVIVA. It seems to keep getting into trouble.

TONY. At least there was some good news recently. Nixon died.

AVIVA. Aren't you curious to hear what's on those hours of secret tapes? Can you even imagine?

NAOMI. Aviva, you're not eating. You don't like?

AVIVA. (*dutifully taking a sandwich*) Oh, thank you. Anyway, I'm currently working on this project, Mrs. Goldman –

NAOMI. What did you say?

AVIVA. (*louder*) A new project I'm working on –

NAOMI. (*to TONY*) See, she doesn't mumble, I can *hear her*.

(*to AVIVA*)

Tony got me a hearing aid last month. What do I need a hearing aid for?

TONY. Are you serious?!

NAOMI. Thirteen hundred dollars. He says I need it because he has to repeat himself.

TONY. Mother! You don't hear half of what I say!

NAOMI. Besides, who has to hear everything? I can't hear so good, I can't see so good, I'm old.

AVIVA. You're not old.

NAOMI. Then I'm *young* and I don't see or hear so good.

TONY. Fine. You're ancient.

NAOMI. I am not! I get out, I go, I do. Was I here when you came? No. I go to the store. I go shopping. (*to AVIVA*) For Rosh Hashana, I went to my synagogue 'cause I bought a ticket and went.

TONY. How much are they charging now?

NAOMI. Why, you wanted to come?

TONY. No, I want to know what's the going rate for prayer.

NAOMI. 125 dollars a ticket, 25 for a donation.

TONY. So 150?

NAOMI. I gave an extra 25 to say a prayer for your father.

TONY. (*under his breath*) Man. That's some racket.

NAOMI. It's not a racket, it's synagogue.

TONY. How come every time I *don't* want you to hear me you do?

NAOMI. So I shouldn't say a prayer for your father?

TONY. I didn't say that.

NAOMI. Say what?

AVIVA. I'm so sorry to hear about your husband, Mrs. Goldman.

NAOMI. I married the best man in the whole world. Every night he brought me flowers. We lived together for 49 years like honeymooners. (to TONY) Your father was a wonderful guy. I had a special life with him.

TONY. (*overlapping*) How can you say that!

NAOMI. Say what?

TONY. I mean, talk about someone who could be a *real* asshole.

NAOMI. Derkheritz! ("*Respect!*") Now that he's dead you say these things?

TONY. There was certainly no talking to him while he was alive.

NAOMI. Drey mire nisht meyn kop! ("*Don't make me crazy.*")

TONY. Du dreyst meyn kop! The way you are always standing up for him. Farvos makhst im oys gut? ("*Why do you make him out to be good?*")

NAOMI. He was good to me.

TONY. Okay, okay.

NAOMI. And he was better to you than you'll ever know!

TONY. Let's drop it.

NAOMI. He was there for you when –

TONY. Let's drop it! Let's talk about how altruistic the synagogue is and why you have to fork over money to walk in the door.

NAOMI. I am more fortunate than many. Without donations how else can the doors stay open? So I pay.

TONY. (to AVIVA) There goes my inheritance.

NAOMI. What inheritance?

(to AVIVA)

See! There's nothing wrong with my hearing.

AVIVA. Mrs. Goldman, this project that I'm working on, it's kind of a big deal. Really big.

NAOMI. What?

TONY. (*loudly*) Aviva's visiting today because she's – because why?

AVIVA. It's pretty straightforward, actually. I'm doing these interviews with a camcorder –

TONY. Oh, you're taking camcorders into orifices now? You've become a proctologist?!

NAOMI. You're a doctor?

AVIVA. No, no, I'm not a doctor.

TONY. With you, I figure it *has* to be something interesting. What are you poking into now? Is this a subject you can mention in front of my mother?

NAOMI. I don't know what the two of you are talking about. What subject? What poking?

AVIVA. It's a subject your mother really knows something about.

TONY. Stuffed chicken?

AVIVA. The war.

NAOMI. Yes, I see, every night on the TV there is a war...

AVIVA. No, I mean World War II.

TONY. (*overlapping*) Aviva.

AVIVA. I'm involved with a project on the Shoah, Mrs. Goldman.

TONY. Aviva!

AVIVA. I've been interviewing survivors. When I was doing some research at the Holocaust Museum –

TONY. Oh, great.

AVIVA. This was started by Steven Spielberg? Schindler's List?

NAOMI. I haven't seen.

AVIVA. It's very...(powerful.)

NAOMI. I heard. He made I.T.

TONY. E.T., Mother, not I.T.

NAOMI. Okay. It was cute.

AVIVA. Yes, but this isn't that. While making the film Schindler's List, he was inspired to start this foundation. We're taping oral and visual histories which will be archived so that these stories are preserved. We're racing against

the clock because it won't be long before everyone is...I mean, these stories will be lost. No one will know what so many people – like you – went through.

(**NAOMI** *exits down the hall.*)

Oh shit.

TONY. *This* is why you called me after all these years?

AVIVA. Not the only reason, but –

TONY. Are you nuts?

AVIVA. I didn't lead into it the right way. I wanted to spend a little time together first, talk about other things, catch up with you and – I didn't set this up correctly.

(*going towards the hallway, calling out*)

Mrs. Goldman? Mrs. Goldman?

TONY. Could it be more obvious? She doesn't *want* to talk about it.

AVIVA. Let me apologize, see if –

TONY. Leave her alone.

AVIVA. Tony – come on. Once she understands –

TONY. Understands what?

AVIVA. How important this is! That there is this narrow window of opportunity to –

TONY. You know, you've got real balls.

AVIVA. Ovaries – and listen –

TONY. I mean, for you, this subject is at a nice distance.

AVIVA. Meaning?

TONY. Were *your* parents in the camps?

AVIVA. You know they weren't, but –

TONY. There's no "but" about it. You don't get it and you won't ever really get it so what's the point of going on about it? Just to keep making everyone feel bad?

AVIVA. Tony, when I used to ask you *anything* about your parents you always deflected, told a joke, said it was no big deal but it was obvious that –

TONY. What? That I was fucked up?

AVIVA. I didn't say that.

TONY. You know how I survived this family? By not getting sucked into that Holocaust shit. Not everyone feels the need to go around talking about it. My father didn't want to talk about it. If it came up, he'd leave the room – like she just did.

AVIVA. I remember your father as a very sweet man, very old world and protective of your mother.

TONY. He was a control freak...

AVIVA. And you're still mad at him, aren't you?

TONY. Look, Freud, when you've straightened out things in your own family, then you can talk.

When I was five she made some kind of a casserole with onions. I hated onions! I refused to eat it. It was like World War III. I locked myself in the bathroom. He busted the door down. But he never hit me so she had to get the belt out and she beat the crap out of me "for not listening to him and to learn a lesson to respect the meal." Here's the lesson I learned – lay low, keep out of their way and never expect that anything I ever do would be good enough.

AVIVA. How often did things like that happen?

TONY. Change the subject.

AVIVA. Okay. Here's why I think it's so critical your mother tell her story – because although *you* may think she's going to live to be a hundred, she –

TONY. *That's* changing the subject? It's the same subject!

AVIVA. How is it the same subject? Look, basically I'm talking about knowing who our parents really are as human beings with their own complicated –

TONY. This from someone who left home at sixteen?!

AVIVA. Okay, you're right.

TONY. You know, it's a good thing we didn't get married.

AVIVA. As if that would ever have happened.

TONY. It could have.

AVIVA. No it couldn't.

TONY. At one time?

AVIVA. There's no way that you would ever have married a Jewish girl and you know it. You're a WASH.

TONY. A wash?

AVIVA. A White Anglo Saxon Hebrew. In fact, you've done everything you could to pretend you're not Jewish, from changing your last name...

TONY. For professional reasons.

AVIVA. (*sarcastically*) Oh. Right. I forgot. Tony "Marks." It's not that you're pretending *not* to be Jewish.

TONY. I'm not trying to hide it.

AVIVA. It's simply that there are no actors or singers with Jewish names.

TONY. (*sarcastically*) Who wouldn't *want* to be Jewish?! Haven't you heard we run the banks, the government, labor, *and* industry?

AVIVA. Let me ask you this. Have the two of you ever talked about it privately? What she went through in the camps?

TONY. Did you *see* her leave the room? Just another happy trip down memory lane sitting around and talking about the good old days in the ghetto?

AVIVA. Be serious.

TONY. I am being serious! This was like a fucking nightmare that hung over our house. Plus now? She's just getting over the fact that Dad died.

AVIVA. How has she been dealing with it?

TONY. (*referring to one of the many boxes in the room*) Retail therapy.

AVIVA. (*sighing*) I mean – really.

TONY. My mother's motto is "don't dwell on what's past. We gotta worry about tomorrow." Even when she...

AVIVA. What?

TONY. Never mind.

AVIVA. Even when she...what Tony?

TONY. Look, I'm aware – now – that things were a little different in this house. My parents were immigrants. They spoke Rumanian, Hungarian and Yiddish. We were the family with the funny accents. When you're a kid you just accept it as normal. You try to fit in. You don't know that your parents are meshuga. Then you

get married and your wife tells you – in great detail – just how screwed up your family *really* is. What got you onto this Holocaust thing?

(AVIVA starts searching for something in her bag.)

AVIVA. A couple years ago I was hired as a guest artist in the high school system. My class was “gang members and the druggies.”

TONY. Sounds like a fun job.

AVIVA. Initially, it was – they’re so young and raw and beautiful at that age and none of them know it. The only thing they *do* know is that they hate and distrust anyone who is not like them.

But I could relate to their anger, because I was like that as a teenager, too. But I’d found a way to express myself – through my photography – and I *know* that changed my life. So I was really trying to figure out a way to get them excited about life, to get into their heads.

TONY. I bet *they* would have really appreciated the asshole photos.

AVIVA. It’s funny you mention that because on the day I was actually going to show them some of my more *recent* stuff, I arrived at school and there spray painted on the door to my classroom, was this HUGE swastika.

TONY. What?!!

AVIVA. I stood there for a moment – I couldn’t believe my eyes. So I went in and asked – who did this? Which one of you did this? And of course they were all staring at me, no one speaking and I was shaking so much that I...I mean is that all these kids saw me as? I started screaming at them – “Yes, I’m a Jew! I know what this symbol represents! How many of you have ever been picked on, or beaten, or shot at because of your race or religion or ethnic group or sexuality?” Don’t you get it? If we can’t – oh my god, if we don’t start – changing things somehow, getting people to understand that if we keep attacking each other, if we – if we keep *denying* or – I went ballistic. I couldn’t keep teaching until...Until I learned more myself. About the history. Our history, Tony.

TONY. Where's the completely assimilated Aviva? You never cared about any of this stuff when we were younger.

AVIVA. That's the point. We were younger. And stupider.

TONY. So explain this to me. You've had a religious conversion?

AVIVA. Not exactly.

TONY. Not exactly?

AVIVA. Well, sort of.

TONY. Sort of?

AVIVA. Yes.

TONY. Next you'll be going to synagogue.

AVIVA. Actually I am.

TONY. You're kidding! You're going to synagogue now?!

AVIVA. I'm still Jewish – whether or not I go to synagogue.

TONY. Not according to some Jews.

AVIVA. Look Tony, during the Holocaust it didn't matter *who* you were – you could be religious, you could be an atheist, you could be assimilated – if you were a Jew you were dead. And now to actually have some people say it never happened?

(She hands him the manila envelope and he removes a photo from it.)

This is what I wanted to show you. Did you ever see it?

TONY. Shit. Where did you get that?

AVIVA. I was doing research through the museum and Yad Vashem and there it was. Then I saw your mother's name.

TONY. You have no idea what went on in this house when that photo appeared in the paper.

AVIVA. She's seen it too?

TONY. No. Dad didn't want her to see it. But that didn't keep him from calling Washington and telling them that this was a picture of his wife and the least they could do was give her a name.

AVIVA. Which is exactly what I'm trying to –

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