

Scene One



SCENE ONE

Midafternoon, Bethlehem, thirty-third year of the reign of Herod the Great. The home of Benjamin and Judith Avrim.

(If the first song is used, all the actors can come on stage to sing.)

Opening Song:

Welcome to Our Little Town

Welcome to our little town,
a place you think you know so well.
Just have a seat and listen close
to the story we are here to tell.

Welcome to our little town;
we're so excited that you're here!
We love to tell the story;
we tell it ev'ry day of the year.

Welcome to our little town;
welcome to this holy place.
As we open up our doors, please open up your hearts
to welcome in the greatest gift of grace.

(The stage is lit for the opening song. It is then darkened. A spotlight comes up for the narrator. The narrator should be dressed in a full-length robe. He/she enters, unrolls a scroll and reads from it. If the narrator chooses to memorize and recite the text, then naturally no scroll is necessary.)

NARRATOR: The Avrim family is at home in Bethlehem.
But the city of David's birth is not at peace.
The Roman authorities have ordered a census.
They claim that Caesar has decreed it
for the entire empire.

But who knows? The Roman governor in Damascus cannot be trusted.

Herod, Rome's vassal king, is always willing to cooperate with the occupation.

For Avrim and his neighbors, a census forebodes trouble—deep trouble.

Bethlehem remembers that the great King David was punished for taking a census.¹

The question is, What's it all about?

Does it mean that Rome will demand more taxes?

Or does it have to do with forced labor for the occupying Roman army?

No one can tell.

In any case, it will not benefit the inhabitants of Bethlehem.

Rome's orders never do.

Everyone must register in the town of his or her family's origins.

The little village is too small to support an inn, so the inhabitants of Bethlehem are preparing for the inevitable influx of relatives.

Avrim and his family are busy readying the house for guests.

Some families don't seem to mind the extra people.

Others respond differently.

(The spotlight on the narrator dims and the lights come up for the entire stage.)

(The scene opens with Benjamin seated on a bench in the street,

¹2 Samuel 24:1-17.

chatting with his next door neighbor, Jacob [downstage right]. Or the two of them can enter through the audience down an aisle.)

JACOB: *(Irritated and already half-mad)*
I tell you, Benjamin, this town isn't big enough
to handle the overflow!
We are simply *not equipped* to deal with crowds
of overnight guests.

BENJAMIN: I see your point, Jacob.
It's too bad we don't have an inn in the village.

JACOB: An inn?! That's another problem!
For years I have told the elders in the gate
that we need
some kind of a large community room
with its own cistern.
Strangers could get the key from the mayor's guards,
pay a small fee
and take care of themselves.

BENJAMIN: *(Taken back, he replies forcefully)*
Strangers?
What are you talking about, neighbor?!
These people who are coming are *not strangers*.
They are not *Greek merchants*.
Our own *families* are returning to town.
They are all our relatives!!

JACOB: *(With increased irritation)*
That's part of the problem.
I don't mind making space for my brother.
But my cousins?
Good grief! They go on forever!

I am not a rich man, you know!
And I have debts to pay.

BENJAMIN: *(Rolls his eyes and nods his head knowingly)*
Yes, I know.

JACOB: *(Continuing)*
I can't feed half the province for a month!
It's ridiculous!
You have *no* idea how many cousins I have.

BENJAMIN: *(Trying to be patient)*
But Jacob, my dear friend,
Judith and I are of the *house of David*.
Have you forgotten?
We go back more than a thousand years.
Our relatives are scattered from Dan to Beersheba.
You *couldn't* have as many distant cousins as we do!
And they all have to come *here to register!*

(Benjamin and Jacob continue discussing the matter quietly.)

(Judith enters from the guest room door, walks to center stage, stops at the open door and calls to her children.)

JUDITH: *(Flustered and under pressure, she calls to stage left)*
Leah, David!
Come here at once!

(Leah and David enter on the street level from downstage left.)

DAVID: *(Whining)*
Um-ma'
(“Mom” in Aramaic; pronounced: Umm-ma’)
You have interrupted our game!
It's not fair!

LEAH: —and we just got started!

JUDITH: Hush, both of you!
(Somewhat frazzled)
Can't you see I need help?
We'll *never* get this house presentable before sundown.
Your Uncle Levi and Aunt Hannah will arrive
any minute now!

DAVID: But Um-ma', why are they coming now?
It's not festival time.

(Benjamin and Jacob turn to listen.)

JUDITH: *(Puts a finger across her mouth and speaks in a stage whisper)*
Hush now!
It has something to do with the Romans.
We have to go to the barracks up in the square
and sign papers!
I don't know what it's about.
(Notices Benjamin)
Here's your father.
(Pointing to him)
You can ask him.
But be sure to keep quiet about whatever he tells you.
(In a normal voice)
But not now!
Go and fetch the blankets sunning on the wall in
back of the courtyard.
Bring them into the guest room and make the beds.

DAVID: *(Reluctantly)*
Alllllll - right! If we have to.

(Leah and David enter the door of the house [center stage] from the street and start to exit upstage right but wait, listening to their father.)

BENJAMIN: Thanks for dropping by, Jacob.
I see your point. But regarding guests—
don't forget Abraham.

JACOB: *(Guarded)*
What about Abraham?

BENJAMIN: He received guests who turned out to be *angels*.²
(Half joking and poking him in the chest with one finger)
One of your guests might turn out to be an angel.

JACOB: *(Irritated and with a full head of steam)*
Now, you listen to me, Benjamin!
That happened *once*, two thousand years ago.
What's more—they came to *Abraham*,
not to the village *baker* and
(Shouting angrily out of control)
Abraham wasn't living under Roman occupation!!

BENJAMIN: *(Slightly alarmed, and looking around quickly)*
Lower your voice, Jacob!
(Continuing a bit nervously)
What does the occupation have to do with it?

JACOB: Everything! We are supposed to be a holy people.
Right?

BENJAMIN: Right.

JACOB: *(Confident that his argument is totally convincing)*

²Genesis 18:1-15.

But we *can't be* with all these defiling Romans around us.

So, God isn't going to visit and redeem his people as long as they are here! Impossible!!

A divine visitation is about as likely as a snowfall in July!

Judah the Galilean is right! We have to drive them out—*all of them!*

Out, I tell you.

Only then will God bless us!

BENJAMIN: (*Refusing to be intimidated, he tries slowly to take Jacob seriously without being confrontational.*)

Yes—well—we've heard all of that before, Jacob. But in the meantime life goes on.

(*Even more slowly and deliberately with exasperation*)

And it seems to me that the only way to manage is to do the best we can with what we have *today*.

Right now—for me—that means getting ready for guests.

That's *all* I am trying to say.

(*Trying to lighten the conversation a bit more*)

And if an angel visits us, we'll be sure to invite you over.

JACOB: (*Still grouchy, he must have the last word*)

You do that! But remember, Benjamin—the angels who visited Abraham didn't stick around for a month and eat up all his food!

They stayed for one meal *and left!*

Goodbye, Abu David.

(Jacob exits down the street, below downstage right, still irritated.)

BENJAMIN: *(Shaking his head)*
Goodbye, Jacob, my friend.

(Benjamin shrugs his shoulders, turns to his wife and lifts up his hands with a “What’s-the-use?” gesture.)

BENJAMIN: It seems as if everybody in our neighborhood
is uptight today!
What is the problem, Judith?

JUDITH: I am *just* trying to get ready for Levi and Hannah.
(Slightly irritated and in a panic)
Someone has to do the work around here!

BENJAMIN: *(Pleading)*
Judith, my dear! These are our *cousins*,
not strangers.
The house doesn’t have to be *perfect*.
The whole town is crowded because of the census.
Levi and Hannah aren’t expecting our little home
to look like Herod’s palace!

JUDITH: *(Softening and relaxing a bit)*
The butcher! Hmm —
Well thank God for that!
We’ve only got two rooms with space
for the animals at night—
but I feel very secure here in our little family room
built onto our cave.
And we have lots of love.

BENJAMIN: We do indeed!
(He swings her around and gives her a kiss)

Herod doesn't have any of that, now does he?

(Turning serious)

Poor man!

JUDITH: It's his own fault.

He killed his favorite wife, didn't he?!

And her brother, and two of his own sons!

After that, there's nobody he won't kill

if he wants to—*nobody!*

BENJAMIN: *(Suddenly sobered, he shakes his head)*

Such times we live in!

(Gazes over the audience with a troubled look)

JUDITH: *(Bringing them back to the task before them)*

Now that's enough stalling.

Granted, this is not a palace. But still—

(She purses her lips)

our two rooms can *at least* be clean and tidy.

(Lightheartedly)

You men are all the same—

you *never* notice *anything!*

BENJAMIN: Of course, my dear. Ah, ah, ah—

Leah! Help your mother.

Run along now and do what she says.

LEAH: All right—if I have to!

We *never* get to play anymore!

(Leah retreats to the exit upstage right and pauses to listen.)

BENJAMIN: *(Turning back to Judith)*

If you don't mind, Judith,

I need David to sweep out the animal stall.

It will be dark soon
and then it will be too late.

JUDITH: Why don't you leave the animals outside tonight?

BENJAMIN: I could. But I'd rather not. It's a bit chilly now.
If I bring them in they will help warm the house.
Besides, the town is full of strangers.
The animals are safer in the house.

JUDITH: *(Looking at David)*
That's true enough. Very well,
go along, David.
Do as your father says.
Leah, hurry up with those blankets.
I don't want any dew on them.

LEAH: *(As she exits upstage right, whining)*
I'm going, I'm going.

(Judith disappears into the guest room upstage left.)

BENJAMIN: *(Giving a broom to David)*
Get on with it, David.
(Calling to Judith)
Judith, I'll bring in some hay and fill the mangers.
Levi's donkeys are sure to be hungry on arrival.

JUDITH: *(Sticking her head out of the door of the guest room)*
All right.
But be sure it's fresh!
Fresh hay will sweeten the house.
Anything damp and rotting will just stink the place up!

BENJAMIN: *(Calling to her as he starts out)*
Don't worry!

The donkey load that's out there was cut yesterday.
Still—I'll be careful.

(Benjamin exits downstage right.)

(David takes his broom and starts to sweep upstage right.)

DAVID: *(Talking to himself)*
They always give me the dirty work! *(Sigh)*
It's tough being a kid!

(Leah reappears carrying blankets. She walks to center stage inside the front door and calls to her mother.)

LEAH: Um-ma'! Here they are!
Do I have to make the beds?

JUDITH: *(Enters from the guest room door and says)*
Yes, you do. It'll only take a minute.
Then come and get the fire ready for supper.
I think it's gone out.
Take the fire bowl and bring fire from Jacob's house.

(Judith moves downstage left [behind the table] and starts breaking some small sticks to start a fire.)

(Benjamin enters and pantomimes piling a double armload of hay in the animal stall. After "dumping" hay in the corner, upstage right, he slowly turns to Judith, who sings to him and to herself. Benjamin and the children join her in the chorus.)

JUDITH SINGS:

Everything Is Ready
Ev'rything is ready;
all the beds are made.
It's been so long since

the cousins came and stayed.

[chorus] What little we can offer
is gifted from above.
And what we have to offer,
we offer it with love.

I'm sure they will be hungry;
their feet will be so sore,
but family is fam'ly.
There's always room for more.

[chorus]

Oh, ev'rything is ready;
the table, it is set.
The food, it is prepared;
we never will forget.

[chorus]

Yes, family is fam'ly,
the greatest gift of all.
With open hearts we wait
for those who come to call.

For those who come to call,
for those who come to call.
For those who come to call,
for those who come to call.

(The lights dim. Everyone moves to his/her appropriate place for scene two.)

End of Scene One