

TRAYF

by Lindsay Joelle | Directed By Elyse Edelman

SEPTEMBER 16 - OCTOBER 4, 2026

ENRICHMENT GUIDE

Table of Contents



Welcome	1
About the Playwright.....	2
Trayf	2
The Rebbe.....	3
Hasidic Judaism.....	3
Playwright Interview.....	4
Mitzvah Tanks	5
Glossary of Terms.....	7

Please note that this guide contains not only important background and context, but also discussion of plot elements that could be considered "spoilers."

WELCOME

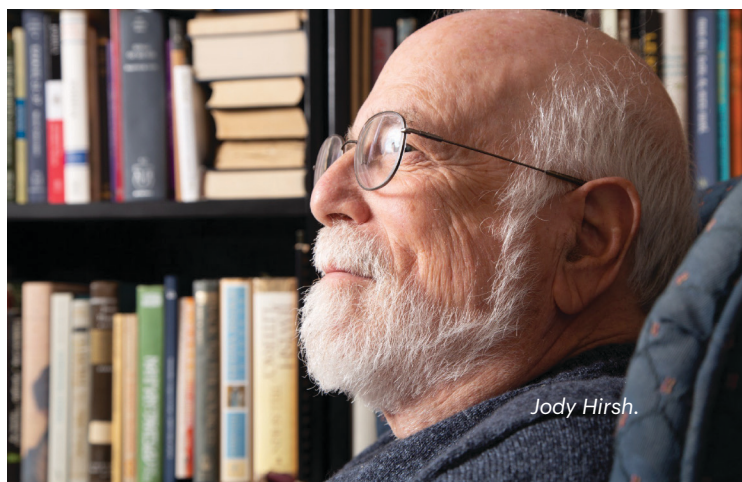
From Cultural Consultant Jody Hirsh

Welcome to *TRAYF* at Next Act Theatre. We are excited to share this complex and heartfelt production with you. It is a play which is a window into an unfamiliar community that most of us, if we are familiar with them at all, have only seen from the outside. Shmuel and Zalmy are two young Hasidic Jews who have always lived a life bound by Mitzvot – the Biblical commandments. Traditional Jewish Law requires strict observance limiting diet, behavior, Sabbath and holiday observance, attire, traditional modesty, and so much more. Shmuel and Zalmy, devoted followers of the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rabbi), travel the streets of New York City in a rented van, their "Mitzvah Tank," finding Jews, and encouraging them to embrace a traditional religious life. For them it is a messianic project. They are the Rebbe's Army. What happens when Jonathan, one of their prospective converts, creates a conflict which threatens their life-long friendship, and their perception of their own community verses the outside secular world?

This is a comedy. It would be easy to turn it into a lampoon full of Jewish stereotypes and cheap laughs. However, director Elyse Edelman and our production team have taken great care NOT take that easy way out. We have done everything to create an authentic and empathetic portrayal of a world that is unfamiliar to most of us. Every aspect of this show – costumes, props, sound design, language, and so much more, has been carefully researched and prepared to present an authentic world, embedding members of our own Milwaukee Hasidic community in the decision-making and world-building process. Rather than a play about an obscure and isolated community, it is a universal exploration about friendship, tradition, community, values, society, and coming of age.

The struggle of the characters to find their place in the world is a universal struggle. All of us have struggled to balance the comfort of the familiar – family, community, religion, profession, upbringing – and the draw of the unfamiliar which surrounds us. It's part of growing up. It's part of the human condition. This play reflects that struggle. And, in our world today which is so divided, and in which the distrust of "the other" is profound and present, this story so full of empathy for outsiders in American life in 1990's New York is a story for the current moment.

1 | *TRAYF* Enrichment Guide



Jody Hirsh.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Lindsay Joelle.

Lindsay Joelle, playwright of *TRAYF*, says on her website: “I write big-hearted comedies about the collision of different worldviews. My plays throw together people from different cultures, classes, and faiths into tight spaces to watch them collide and connect. To center the rituals, routines, and humor of insular communities, I cultivate a research process that requires stepping out from behind the screen to ask questions, build trust, and search for common ground.”

Her published plays include *TRAYF* (Theater J, Geffen Playhouse, LA Drama Critics Circle nomination for best writing) and *THE GARBOLOGISTS* (Philadelphia Theatre Company, City Theatre, Northlight Theatre, Theater Alliance, among others). She is the recipient of the Goldberg Award for Graduate Playwriting, Desert Theater League Award for Best Original Writing, and commissions from E.S.T./Sloan Foundation and Audible’s Emerging Playwrights Fund. Lindsay is a proud National New Play Network (NNPN), Playwrights Foundation, New Georges, and American Theatre Wing affiliated artist, former Playwright-in-Residence at Curious Theatre, and an alumna of Nashville Rep’s Ingram New Works Lab, Florida Rep’s PlayLab, PlayPenn New Play Conference, Great Plains Theatre Conference, the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theater Workshop, Columbia University (BA), and Hunter College (MFA).

Information sourced from www.lindsayjoelle.com.

“TRAYF”

Trayf is a Hebrew word that literally means “torn from an animal’s body.” It technically refers to meat that isn’t from a kosher¹ source (including pork), as well as anything that hasn’t been ritually slaughtered. However, the term has come to mean generally non-Kosher, forbidden foods. More generally, it can mean anything that is not Jewish or that’s forbidden. In our play, Zalmy’s fascination with non-Jewish or secular culture would be considered “trayf” by his community.

¹“The Hebrew word “kosher” means fit or proper as it relates to Jewish dietary law. Kosher foods are permitted to be eaten, and can be used as ingredients in the production of additional food items. The basic laws are of Biblical origin (Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 17).” Food products must be kosher to be consumed (for instance, pork and shellfish are prohibited), and they must also be prepared using kosher equipment and kosher food preparation practices. *Information sourced from oukosh.org/the-kosher-primer/*



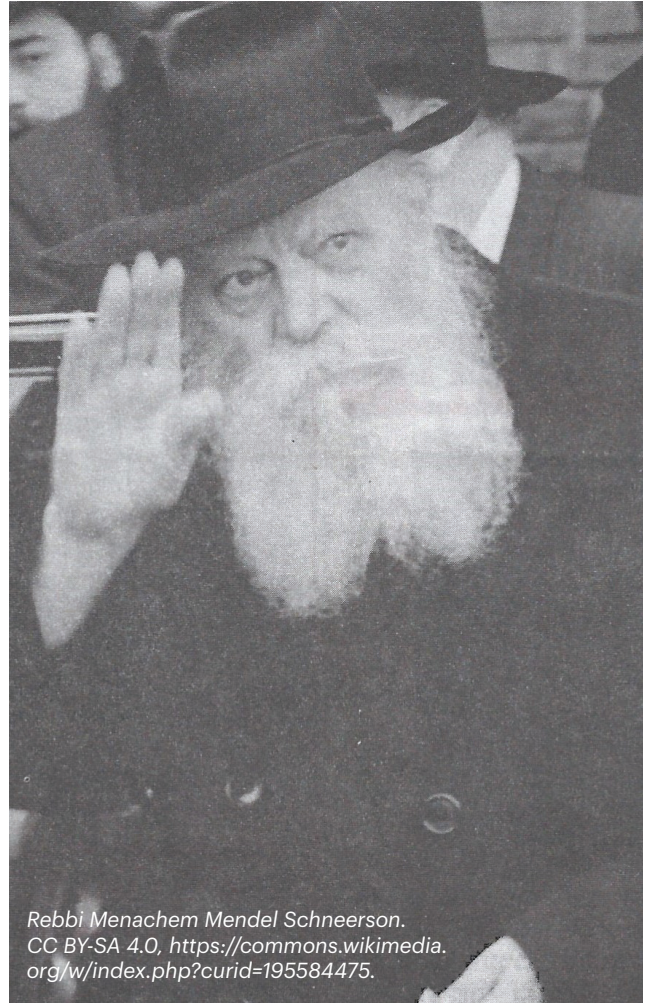
*Bamba is a kosher snack food.
By NIAID - Peanut Snack, CC BY 2.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=62609601>.*

THE REBBE

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (April 18, 1902 – June 12, 1994), known to many as the Lubavitcher Rebbe or simply as the Rebbe, was a Russian Empire-born American Orthodox Jewish rabbi and the last rebbe of the Lubavitcher Hasidic¹ dynasty. (note: A “rabbi” is a teacher or mentor. A “Rebbe” is the spiritual leader of a Hasidic dynasty.)

As leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, the Rebbe took an insular Hasidic group that almost came to an end with the Holocaust and transformed it into an international network of over 3,000 educational and social centers. He oversaw the building of schools, community centers, drug-rehabilitation centers, care-homes for the disabled and synagogues and created a global network of emissaries, known as Shluchim. Today there are Shluchim in all of the 50 US states, in over 100 countries, and 1,000 cities around the world.

Educated in mechanical engineering and mathematics in Paris, Schneerson escaped the Nazis in 1941, immigrating to Brooklyn with his wife Chaya Mushka. The Crown Heights neighborhood where he lived with the Chabad community is partially where the play takes place. He took over the position of Chabad rebbe after the death of his father in law. During his decades of leadership, Schneerson worked over 18 hours a day, meeting with visitors seeking mentorship late into the night, and never took a day of vacation. In 1991, returning from a visit to his father in law’s grave, a car accompanying Schneerson’s motorcade ran a yellow light and accidentally struck two Guyanese-American children. One child was killed. The incident elevated existing racial tensions in the Jewish/Afro-Caribbean neighborhood and triggered the Crown Heights riot.



Rebbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.
CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=195584475>.

Schneerson spoke passionately about the coming of the Messiah and launched the Mitzvah Tank campaign to help elevate the world through acts of charity and kindness. In the Chabad community, performing “Mitzvot” (Biblical commandments) is actually a tool to help bring about the Messiah. Chabad’s outreach to non-observant Jews is part of the effort to pave the way for the coming of the Messiah. During the Rebbe’s life, many of his admirers hoped that he would be revealed as the Messiah, like Zalmy and Shmuel do in the play. They pointed to traditional Jewish theology which teaches that in every generation there is one person who is worthy of being the Messiah, and if God deems the times right, he will be revealed by God as such. Although Schneerson constantly objected to any talk that he himself could be the Messiah, this notion sparked controversy among the other Hasidic sects, all lead by their own rebbe. Schneerson is considered one of the major Jewish thinkers of the 20th Century.

HASIDIC JUDAISM

¹There are many different parts of the Jewish community and many ways which Jews follow their Jewish practice. Among these in the United States are the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox paths. Hasidism is a specific subset of Orthodox Judaism.

Hasidic Jews are members of an Orthodox Jewish movement that centers on “prayer, meditation, closeness to God, and kabbalistic [or mystic] teachings.” This movement originated in the 18th century by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, better known as the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name). There are many sects of Hasidic Jews with different practices - Chabad is just one. *Information sourced from aish.com/what-is-hasidic-judaism.*

The Satmars are yet another Hasidic group with communities both in New York City and across the globe. They often disagree with Chabad outreach practices, such as the use of Mitzvah Tanks. As such, there are sometimes tensions between these communities, as explained by Zalmy in the play.

PLAYWRIGHT INTERVIEW

A Conversation with Lindsay Joelle

What was the inspiration for *TRAYF*? How did the play come to be?

When I moved to New York City in 2001, one of the first friends I made was a former [Orthodox Jewish] Chabad-Lubavitcher from Crown Heights who left the community in his 20s to start a new, secular life. He's a wonderful storyteller, and I was always interested in his tales of dipping his toe into the secular world — a covert trip to Blockbuster as a kid or the thrill of trying on a forbidden pair of blue jeans. It made me see with fresh eyes parts of my own world I took for granted. I'm interested in insular communities; learning about their rituals and routines and bringing those stories to the stage. Zalmy and Shmuel in their Mitzvah Tank are fictional characters, but I knew I wanted to tell a story of friendship — of two friends growing up and apart, and the love between them that proves stronger than ideology.

What research did it take to write this play?

Most of my early research was through my friend's anecdotes, which add up to more than eighteen years of weekend brunches. I also met with rabbis in Crown Heights, talked fedora fashion with a Chasidic milliner, learned proper wrapping technique in a *tefillin* shop, wandered around Judaica bookstores looking for [tapes of Rebbe speeches], sat in the women's balcony at 770 (the main synagogue) and boarded a Mitzvah Tank. Though I made it clear that my motive was to write a play, not to increase my level of observance, it seemed I always had a standing invitation to *shabbos* dinner!

What was easy and what was hard about writing characters whose identities are similar to yours (Jewish), but also different (Chabad)?

When I wrote *TRAYF* for my MFA thesis, the play culminated in the 1991 Crown Heights Race Riots between the Jewish and Afro-Caribbean communities and the destruction of the Mitzvah Tank. An important realization in the rehearsal process

for the World Premiere at Theater J was that the play, which at its core is about a friendship, didn't need a riot to feel theatrical. The stakes of growing apart from a childhood friend are vital enough and universal. The moments when Shmuel and Zalmy are goofing off and having fun with each other in the Mitzvah Tank when no one's watching were the best parts to write, and the guys' jokes and banter came the most easily.

Leah and Jonathan were harder. Leah, because she has so much heavy lifting to do in her one short scene, and probably also because her experiences overlap most with my own; Jonathan because he's the character I know least — I wanted to honor his discovery of his Jewish roots and the way that pulls him toward the community and structure of organized religion, but those aren't motivations I've experienced in my own life.

Did the staged reading of *TRAYF* at Next Act affect your feelings about our fully-staged production?

I think Cody's secret plan for bringing me to Milwaukee for the reading was so that I could mind-meld with Elyse (the director and Associate Artistic Director of Next Act), since I live in Tucson and wouldn't be present for most of the rehearsal process. It was super easy and joyful to work with Elyse. She had an intuitive understanding of the play, and she's such an earnest and generous person herself that I knew she'd be able to hone in on that *menschy* quality within the play. I also had a lot of fun reading stage directions. I come from an acting background,

Lucas Prizant, A.J. Magoon and Alex Mitchell in rehearsal for *TRAYF*.
Photo: Caroline Norton



but I'm not usually asked to take an active part in readings of my plays. I really enjoyed experiencing the momentum and energy of the play from on stage with the cast.

Between *TRAYF* and another of your plays, *THE GARBOLOGISTS*, you have several plays that call for large vehicles on stage. What interests you about putting these vehicles in your plays?

Two things, really: first, I like the fly-on-the-wall quality of listening in on private conversations in intimate spaces. There's something about conversations on the road that can make it easier to get into the good stuff when you're watching the scenery go by or listening to the radio, and in both the plays you mentioned, a truck is the liminal space between the public-facing moments on the job. I'm interested in what people talk about behind the scenes, in the break room, or in transit.

Especially in *THE GARBOLOGISTS*, which follows two sanitation workers from different backgrounds on a garbage route, I was also thinking of the truck as a space of forced proximity, where they are required to interact in a way that they wouldn't do voluntarily in the outside world.

PLAYWRIGHT INTERVIEW (CONT.)

What do you think *TRAYF* says to an audience right now?

In my research, I was particularly moved by the Chabad belief that love is an action; that the world is imperfect, and it's not by divine intervention, but through dedicated and systematic acts of love toward ourselves and each other that we will repair it. I think that's a message for all of us right now — that we can't afford to be complacent, whether it's the destruction of our shared natural resources or the abuse of the rights and freedoms belonging to those inside and outside our own communities. We activate our love by living our values.

In terms of the way in which writing *TRAYF* was my own act of love, I'd say this: Zalmy and Shmuel are just like any 19-year-old best friends. They drive a cool truck, talk about girls,

obsess over music — even though their truck is a Mitzvah Tank, their dates are arranged by a matchmaker, and their music is chanted in Yiddish by a 90-year-old Rebbe. If at first their suits and beards make them appear different and strange, and then in the next 90 minutes we ride with them, experiencing the world as they do, when we leave the theater maybe we're a little changed. A little more primed to focus on what we have in common instead of what divides us. And wouldn't that be a mitzvah?

Director Elyse Edelman in rehearsal for *TRAYF*.
Photo: Caroline Norton



MITZVAH TANKS

An excerpt from “Mobilizing the Mitzvah Tanks: The Untold Story of the ‘Are You Jewish?’ Guys” By Mordechai Lightstone

June 7, 2017 | www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/3698889/jewish/Mobilizing-the-Mitzvah-Tanks-The-Untold-Story-of-the-Are-You-Jewish-Guys.htm

Hailing a yellow cab, grabbing a slice of pizza after a Yankees game, strolling through Central Park ... these are some of the indelible parts of a New York City experience. So, too, is the sight of yeshivah students clamoring from a converted RV—better known as the “mitzvah tank”—with tefillin and Shabbat candles in hand as they ask tourists and locals alike: “Excuse me, are you Jewish?”

The mitzvah tanks have become an iconic fixture in New York City and beyond, referenced in the media and popular culture throughout the world.

Yet despite their near ubiquity, the origins of the mitzvah tanks are largely unknown. To many, they are an accepted landmark, an expected part of the urban terrain.

Rooted in the unique challenges facing American Jewry during the second half of the 20th century, these “tanks against assimilation” go back 50 years to a pivotal time in Jewish history: the 1960s-era hippie movement, the start of the Six-Day War in 1967 and the launch shortly beforehand of the Tefillin Campaign by the Lubavitcher Rebbe—Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory.

Post-World War II and the Holocaust, Western Jewry faced a daunting challenge. Throughout the world, Jews whose ancestors had lived in Europe and Russia during the 19th and early 20th centuries sought to leave the pain of those places and their religious traditions behind. (Continued on page 6.)



A Mitzvah Tank.

By Danny Howard - Flickr: Mitzvah Tank, CC BY 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=32695503>.

MITZVAH TANKS (CONT.)



Mitzvah Tanks lined up.

By Ypevzner55 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=82055894>.

In America, Jews began to leave the confines of urban Jewish enclaves for the growing suburbs. Spurred by a decline in anti-Semitism and the promise of greater opportunity, many sought to blend their identities into the greater melting pot of Western ideals and culture. A new generation of Jews was being raised without regular Jewish education or synagogue attendance, encouraged to be more like their non-Jewish neighbors.

Perhaps no single headline summed up this trend in America more than one in *Look* magazine two decades after the war. Its May 5, 1964 cover story, titled “The Vanishing American Jew,” stated that “new studies reveal loss of Jewish identity, soaring rate of intermarriage,” a future where “Judaism may be losing 70 percent of children born to mixed couples.”

In the midst of this quagmire of Jewish identity, a new tool in the battle against assimilation burst on the scene in the summer of 1967: the “mitzvah mobile.”

Converted trucks from the Hertz rental-car company were transformed into ad-hoc synagogues, outfitted with Jewish books and religious accoutrements, including tefillin and Shabbat candles. Staffed by yeshivah students in New York City, the vehicle—and the idea behind it—quickly picked up steam.

It heralded a paradigm shift in U.S. Jewish identity. If until then Jewish expression could be summarized more quietly as “Jew in the home, American in the street,” the vehicles represented something entirely new. Jewish identity was exhibited loudly—and proudly—outside, no longer sequestered to the synagogue or yeshivah. In the words of the era, Judaism demanded to “be here, now.”

The RVs converted into mobile Jewish centers were Jewish pride writ large: bold, brash and ready to engage the public.

The name “mitzvah tank,” with its militaristic overtones, was intentional. Over the course of the summer, the Rebbe spoke about the nature of the name, explaining that they were not merely passive vehicles to deliver mitzvot to Jews around the city, but served as a proactive attempt at facing Jewish assimilation and loss of identity head-on.



A Mitzvah Tank.
By Edward Betts
- Own work, CC
BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=14763544>.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Provided by playwright Lindsay Joelle at the back of the TRAYF script.

Note: the Hebrew “ch” is not pronounced as in “chair.” It’s closer to the Spanish “j” in “rojo,” a gentle clearing of the back of the throat.

Alter Rebbe	(AHL-ter REB-bie) Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder and first Rebbe of Chabad
Ashkenazi	(Ahsh-ken-AH-zie) Descendants of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe.
Avodah Zarah	(Avo-DAH Za-RAH) Idolatry
Baal Shemske Yid	(Bal SHEM-skeh Yid) A Jew who is pure of heart.
Bar Mitzvah	(Bar MITZ-vah) The ceremony during which a thirteen-year-old boy is initiated into the rites and obligations of a Jewish adult.
Baruch HaShem	(Bah-RUCH ha-SHEM) Blessed be the name of God (see: “HaShem”). Said often as an expression of gratitude.
B’skert	(Bih-SHARE-t) Divinely destined. Meant to be.
Bracha	(BRAH-cha) A blessing expressing gratitude to God.
Chabad	(Cha-BAHD) Also, “Lubavitch” or “Chabad-Lubavitch”: A Jewish movement founded in the 1700s with emphasis on mysticism, prayer, and song. It also may refer to a “Chabad House”: a center for Jewish education and outreach, often on or near college campuses.
Chanukah	(CHA-new-kah) Also “Hanukkah.” An eight day “Festival of Light” commemorating when Maccabean Jews rededicated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.
Chasid	(CHA-sid) Also, “Hasid” or “Hassid” A member of a sect of orthodox Jewish mystics characterized by strict observance and spiritual devotion.
Daven	(DAH-ven) To pray, often with a bowing/swaying motion.
Farbrengen	(Far-BRANG-en) A “joyous gathering” for Torah study, philosophy, storytelling, and group song, with plentiful food and drink.
Fleishig	(FLAY-shig) Made of, prepared with, or used for meat products. According to Jewish dietary law, someone who has eaten meat cannot consume milk for a predetermined amount of time ranging from one to six hours, and is temporarily designated “fleishig.”
Goy	(Goy) A slang, mildly derogatory term for a non-Jewish person.
Goyim	(GOY-ihm) Plural of “goy.” A slang term for the non-Jewish population.
Goyishe	(GOY-ish-eh) Adjective meaning non-Jewish.
HaShem	(Ha-SHEM) “The Name.” A term of respect for God
Hava Nagilah	(HA-vah Na-GEE-lah) A traditional Jewish folk song sung at weddings.
Im Yirtze Hashem	(Ihm-YIR-tseh ha-SHEM) An expression meaning: “If God wills it.”
Karkafta	(Car-KAHF-tah) A person who has never laid tefillin. Initiating a Jewish male into the mitzvah of tefillin is considered a significant spiritual accomplishment.
Kashering	(KAH-shering) Making a kitchen suitable for Kosher dietary law.
Kippah	(KEY-pah) Hebrew for “yarmulke.” A skullcap worn by religious males at all times, except while bathing or sleeping, to show respect for God.
Klezmer	(KLEZ-mihr) Ensemble folk music traditional to the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe.
Kosher	(KO-shure) In accordance with Jewish dietary law.
Lubavitcher	(Lu-BAH-vit-cher - ch as in “chair”) A member of Chabad. (See: “Chabad”)
Mazel Tov	(MAH-zel tov) Literally: “Good luck.” Also: congratulations.
Milchig	(MIL-chig - Hebrew ch) Made of, prepared with, or used for dairy products. According to Jewish dietary law, someone who has consumed dairy cannot eat meat for a pre-determined amount of time ranging from one to six hours, and is temporarily designated “milchig.”
Mitzvah	(MITZ-vah) “Commandment,” referring to the 613 Biblical commandments which define orthodox Jewish life. In slang: a charitable or holy act, a good deed.
Mitzvah Tank	(MITZ-vah Tank) A vehicle for portable education, prayer, and outreach in the holy war against secular assimilation.
Moshiach	(Moh-SHEE-ach -Hebrew ch) The anointed one. A human leader who will bring political and spiritual redemption to the Jewish people. According to Chasidic philosophy, every generation contains a potential moshiach who will usher in the Messianic Era, but only if humanity first elevates the world to a place of goodness and justice. Not all branches of Judaism practice Messianic Judaism.

(Continued on page 8.)



GLOSSARY OF TERMS (CONT.)

Mourner's Kaddish	(MORE-ners KAH-dish) A group prayer in honor of the deceased, serving as an affirmation of faith and a reminder that no mourner is alone in their grief.
Oy	(As in "boy") Yikes. Used to express exasperation or dismay.
Pintele Yid	(PIN-teh-leh YID) The Jewish spark, the Jewish soul.
Rabbi	(WRA-bye) One who studies or teaches Jewish law; often a religious leader.
Rebbe	(REH-bie) The master mentor or leader of a Jewish movement. In Chabad, the term most often refers to Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), the last Rebbe of the Lubavich dynasty and one of the most influential Jewish leaders of the twentieth century.
Satmar	(SOT-mar) An insular Hasidic group founded in 1905 in Hungary and currently centered in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.
Sephardic	(Seh-FAR-dick) Descendants of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) as well as Western Asia and North Africa.
Shabbos	(SHAH-bis) The Sabbath
Shalom	(Shah-LOHM) Hebrew for hello, goodbye, and peace.
Shidduch	(SHIH-duhch -Hebrew ch) A system of matchmaking by which Jewish singles in orthodox communities are introduced for the purpose of marriage.
Shiksa	(SHIK-sah) A non-Jewish female.
Shnutz	(ShNUHTZ) Yiddish slang for testicles.
Shul	(shOOL) Synagogue, a Jewish house of worship.
Shvitzing	(shVIT-zing) Yiddish for sweating.
Tefillin	(teh-FILL-in) Small black leather boxes containing verses from the Torah, attached by leather straps to the head and arm. Worn by observant Jews during morning prayer, except on Shabbat and some holidays.
Trayf	(TRAY-f) Food not in accordance with Jewish dietary law.
Trayfing	(TRAY-fing) Making something dirty and unholy. (Not a real Yiddish word.)
Tznius	(TZNEE-yiss) Modest in dress and manner; an admirable quality for Chasidic women.
Yarmulke	(YAH-ma-kah) Yiddish for "kippah:" A skull-cap worn by religious males at all times, except while bathing or sleeping, to show respect for God.
Yeshiva	(Yeh-SHE-vah) A Jewish educational institution focusing on the study of Torah and rabbinic traditions.
Yid	(Yid) Slang for a Jewish person. Historically used as a slur by non-Jews, but not disrespectful if said by a Jew.
Zoftig	(ZAF-tig) Also "zaftig:" Literally: "Juicy." Having a curvy figure. Pleasingly plump.

Wrapping Tefillin.
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=71061713>



(Joelle, Lindsay. Trayf. Broadway Licensing, 2023, 74-78.)

TRAYF

BY LINDSAY JOELLE | DIRECTED BY ELYSE EDELMAN

IS GENEROUSLY SPONSORED BY

CO-SPONSORS DAVE GLENN, SANDY LAEDTKE, AND GUY AND MARY JO MCDONALD

MEDIA PARTNER



2027-27 SEASON SPONSORS



NEXT ACT THEATRE IS A PROUD MEMBER OF



255 S WATER ST | MILWAUKEE, WI 53204 | NEXTACT.ORG | 414.278.0765