

# The Jewish Weekly

## “Read the curses out loud”: From the Holocaust to the Holy Land

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin told the following story about Rabbi Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam, the spiritual leader of the Sanz-Klausenberg sect of Chassidic Jews. Rabbi Halberstam's wife, eleven children and most of his followers were murdered by the Nazis while he was incarcerated in several concentration camps including Auschwitz. After the war, he re-settled those of his Chassidim who survived in Brooklyn. The rabbi took over the Beth Moses Hospital in the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood, converting it into a large study hall and synagogue.

Rabbi Riskin related how, as a young boy, he left his home on Hart Street, Brooklyn on the Shabbat when the Torah portion of Ki Tavo was read in the summer of 1952, in order to pray with the Sanz-Klausenberg Chassidim. The 12-year-old boy wanted to experience Chassidic prayer and, perhaps, meet the holy Rabbi Halberstam.

The young Rabbi Riskin did so knowing that the Torah reading included the blessings God promises for following his commands, followed by 53 verses that describe the punishments in store for Israel when they forsake God's teaching: If you don't obey the Lord your God and all His commandments and statutes, then these curses shall come upon you... God will smite you with consumption and with a fever and with an inflammation and with an extreme burning and with the sword... God will turn your rain into dust, and it will come from the skies to destroy you... And your corpses shall be meat for all the birds of the sky and for beasts of the earth. God will smite you with madness and blindness and a confusion of the heart. God will bring a nation from afar against you, from the end of the earth, swooping down like an eagle, a nation whose language you don't understand. A haughty arrogant nation which has no respect for the old nor mercy for the young. (Deuteronomy 28:15- 50).

Jewish tradition mandates that these verses be read in a low voice.

“The Tochacha (admonition) is not something we're very eager to hear,” Rabbi Riskin wrote. “But if we have to hear it as part of the Torah cycle, then the hushed words, without the usual dramatic chant, are shocking.”

As per the accepted custom, the man reading from the Torah that day did so in a soft voice, almost a whisper. The young Riskin was shocked to hear Rabbi Halberstam, standing at his lectern, command in a stern whisper the Yiddish word, “Hecher” (louder). The man reading from the Torah stopped in confusion, deliberating for a few moments, torn between tradition and the rabbi's command. The congregation was equally confused. Could it be that the rabbi, an expert in Jewish law, was ordering them to break with tradition?



Rabbi Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam, the Sanz-Klausenberger Rebbe

The Torah reader resumed his chanting from the Torah, adhering to the tradition of reading the section about the harsh punishments in a whisper.

Rabbi Halberstam began banging on his lectern with his fist, raising his voice and yelling in Yiddish:

I said louder! Read these verses out loud! We have nothing to fear, we've already experienced the curses. Let the Master of the Universe hear them. Let Him know that the curses have already befallen us, and let Him know that it's time for Him to send the blessings!

The Rabbi turned his face to the wall of the synagogue, while the Torah reader continued, this time in a loud voice, chanting the curses to the stunned congregation.

“I was trembling, with tears cruising down my cheeks, my body bathed in sweat,” Rabbi Riskin related. “I had heard that the Rebbe lost his wife and 11 children in the Holocaust – but refused to sit shiva (mourn) for them because he could not spare a moment from the task of trying to save Jewish lives by enabling them to leave Europe. He himself refused a visa for America until the majority of his Chassidim had been saved. His words seared into my heart.”

After the conclusion of the prayer service, Rabbi Halberstam addressed his followers:

My beloved brothers and sisters. Pack up your belongings. We must make one more move – hopefully the last one. God promises that the blessings which must follow the curses will now come. They will come – but not from America. The blessings will only come from Israel. It is time for us to go home.

True to his word, Rabbi Halberstam led his followers to Israel and founded a new community, Kiryat Sanz, in Netanya in 1960.

Those words heard by the 12-year-old boy clearly had a huge impact on Rabbi Riskin. In 1983, Rabbi Riskin immigrated to Israel with his family where he became the founding Chief Rabbi of Efrat, a beautiful settlement in Judea, a position he still holds. Over the years, he was joined by many former members of his New York congregation. Rabbi Riskin has established a network of high schools, colleges, graduate programs, seminaries, and rabbinical schools with a total student enrollment numbering in the thousands.

## It Once Happened..

While in the concentration camps, Rabbi Halberstam attempted to remain fully observant despite the inhuman conditions, and to encourage his fellow prisoners. He never touched non-kosher food and refused to eat food cooked in a non-kosher pot, subsisting only on bread and water. Moreover, he would not eat the bread until he had ritually washed his hands, and would often wait for days to find some water for this purpose. Often he went hungry. His staunch faith gave spiritual strength to many. The rabbi suffered horrible beatings for refusing to work on Shabbat. He assured his fellow inmates that God was with them in the valley of death, and would not abandon them.

At one point, the rabbi and his group of prisoners were slated for extermination. All the prisoners were taken to a field outside of Warsaw, told to undress and stand near open pits, where soldiers prepared to machine-gun them. At the last moment, however, a car sped into the field. A high-ranking officer jumped out and communicated the special order from Berlin to stop the execution and send the prisoners to the Dachau concentration camp, where they were needed as slave laborers.

On the third day of what the Nazis intended as a death march to Dachau, the group was strained to the limit of their endurance. The group was finally brought to rest for the night in a field surrounded by SS officers. As the guards slept, the Rebbe passed the word around: “Everyone should dig beneath himself. God's salvation comes in the blink of an eye.” Each prisoner began to dig with his fingers, spoons, or pieces of wood. Remarkably, each found water, and small springs began to pop up everywhere, quenching everyone's thirst and giving them new life. Many years later, the Rebbe explained why he himself didn't drink from the water: because the date was the 9th of Av, a traditional day of fasting to commemorate the destruction of the Temple.

On the fifth day, the surviving marchers were packed into cattle cars for the rest of the journey to Dachau. Over the next few days, many succumbed to the overcrowding, lack of water, stench and heat in the cattle cars. Of the 6,000 that set out on the death march, less than 2,000 made it to Dachau alive. The Rebbe was one of the survivors.

His eldest son survived the war but succumbed to illness in a nearby Displaced Persons camp before his father even knew that he had survived. In 1947, Rabbi Halberstam remarried and had seven more children. His sons, Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Halberstam and Rabbi Shmuel Dovid Halberstam, succeeded him respectively as Sanzer Rebbe of Netanya and Klausenberger-Sanz Rebbe of New York.

*Reprinted from an email sent to our inbox.*

*Editor's Note: Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Halberstam the Klausenberger Rebbe ז"ל's, 28th Yahrzeit was this past Friday, 9th Tammuz – July 8th of this year.*



**Y-GRAPHICS**

Shabbat Times – Parshat Balak

	Candle Lighting	Motzei Shabbat	Motzei Shabbat ר"ת
Jerusalem	7:13	8:30	9:05
Tel Aviv	7:28	8:32	
Haifa	7:21	8:34	
Be'er Sheva	7:29	8:31	



## Truth on the Floor

By Rabbi Zechariah Wallerstein, zt"l

Gavi, while enrolled in the yeshiva Neveh Zion, just wasn't finding it to be his thing. He had become more interested in Judaism over the years and thought he'd give it a shot for a year in Israel, but it wasn't going as planned. More than anything, he was growing more disinterested.

One morning, as Yosef, his roommate, looked over and saw the sheets pulled over Gavi's head, he gave him a gentle tap. "Gavi, what about coming with me today? We're learning Bava Metzia."

Gavi turned to his side, the obvious message being that he wasn't interested.

"C'mon, just try it once. Come this one day." With that, Gavi threw the blankets down, his hands resting on top.

"Alright," he said flatly. "Just once. Just today."

A short while later, Gavi was on his way out of the apartment heading towards the yeshiva alongside Yosef. Settling into the class, the rebbe began expounding the famous second chapter of Bava Metzia, all of which details the laws of finding, announcing and returning lost objects.

Gavi, never having heard this before, was keyed in. But he found it to be outlandish. "Who returns lost objects today?" he kept on thinking to himself. Eventually, his interest waned and patience grew short. And then he decided to pick himself up and walk out the class.

Yosef, later catching up to Gavi, asked why he walked out. "Did the rebbe say something wrong?"

"No, it's just that none of it is relevant!" Gavi shot back. "The whole thing is a waste of time. No one returns lost items nowadays."

"Gavi," said Yosef, "I get where you're coming from, but can I show you something? I'm heading into

Jerusalem. Let's go together to the Zichron Moshe shul. There's something there I'll show you."

Gavi, not having anything particular planned that day, agreed to go along. Once there, Yosef immediately got to the reason he brought Gavi. "Look at this, Gavi. Everything on this board is a lost item and the person who found it is trying to return it." Gavi looked through all the hung-up papers, some big, some small. "Found pen, found watch, found glasses ..." On and on, the list went.

"All you need to do is call the number of the item you lost, give the finder a sign that it actually belongs to you, and he'll return it."

Gavi was genuinely moved to see this, but it didn't do much more than give him a moment's pause, after which he went about the rest of his day as he normally would. Gavi didn't stay in yeshiva much longer. But neither did he go home. He headed to India. Immersing himself in his newfound Indian culture, he not only developed an affinity for the intriguing way of life, but grew close to one guru of a particular cult.

One day, as he walked the streets of New Delhi, India's capital, along with his guru, they came across a wrapped pile of money. Gavi, who at this point was going by a different name, turned to his guru and asked what he planned on doing with it.

"The heavens sent this to me. It is a gift from above. Today is a blessed day." But Gavi wasn't so sure about that. "Someone must have lost it," he went on. "It could be someone's pay from work that fell out of his pocket. Maybe we should try to track down who it belongs to and return it. There seems to be some scribbled name and number here that we can call."

But the guru remained firm. "If it fell before me, it must be the gods who are sending it to me."

Now Gavi was growing confused. "We talk so much about morals and upright behavior. I don't understand why that doesn't apply here." The guru would not reply, and instead continued walking ahead, leaving Gavi standing still. To Gavi, this was the moment.

The moment he realized that Judaism, with its sensitivity and respect for others, was true. It was not "finders' keepers." That day was the beginning of Gavi's return back to Judaism. The truth of life had made its appearance that day to Gavi, in the form of money on the floor.

The one moment of sitting in class and hearing those words about returning lost items had remained with him for years. And it was those very few words which came back to redeem him later. We can never be sure when a moment will turn into a milestone. Time will tell. And when it does, the effects can be life-changing.

Reprinted from an email from TorahAnytimes Newsletter.



There are six Parshiot which have the names of people. They are Noach, Chayei Sara, Yitro, Korach, Balak and Pinchas. Four of these individuals were truly outstanding people: Noach, Sara, Yitro and Pinchas.

One can also understand the choice of Korach to be a title for a Parsha. Thanks to this Parsha, throughout all ages we remember the dangers of machloket; what divisiveness within communities and within our nation can cause.

But what can be said about Balak, the title of this week's Parsha? Balak was a רשע, an outright, evil individual who sought to destroy the Jewish people, so why did he merit having a Parsha named after him?

Our sages differentiate between Bilam and Balak. With regard to Bilam we read how when visitors came to him he presented himself to them as a worthy, outstanding, upright, dignified, G-d-fearing individual. But when you read the text with closer scrutiny, when you see what he said and what he did, you will quickly conclude that the real Bilam actually was a very different person.

Not so Balak. With regard to Balak, what you saw was what you got. He was a bad person and he didn't hide that from others.

In the laws of kashrut, the archetypal food which we associate with non-kosher is swine. And that's actually very interesting, because according to Torah law, there are two requirements for an animal to be kosher: it needs to have cloven hooves and it needs to chew the cud.

The pig actually ticks one of these two boxes. It scores fifty percent because it does have cloven hooves. And then there are animals who tick neither of the boxes, so why is the pig, more than any other animal, associated with that which is not kosher?

Our sages explain, the pig lies on its back, it dangles its feet, it pronounces to the world 'look I've got cloven hooves, I am kosher!' But internally, there's a very different story there. That is the type of person Bilam was; he deceived people, he was totally insincere.

Balak however was different; his saving grace was the fact that at least he was a sincere person. You know, even a broken clock tells the right time twice a day. With all of Balak's evil, nonetheless we can identify one characteristic of his which was good, and that was his sincerity. And that is why our Parsha carries his name.

On a side note, Moshiach comes from King David and Ruth who are direct descendants of Balak.

So let us learn from Balak and remember how important it is for us to always be genuine and sincere, and let's pray with all our hearts, for those suffering from the current situation in Eastern Europe, as well as for the recovery of all the sick, our soldiers and healthcare professionals, and Chevra Kadisha members worldwide, for peace and for those who need healing, shidduchim, children and parnassah and may we be blessed to have the most awesome, gorgeous, beautiful, peaceful, healthy, amazing, relaxed, spiritual and sweet Shabbat.

Yossi

בלק חקת

This week has been sponsored by Shmuel and Dina Halpern In memory of his mother פראדל בת ר' מרדכי ע"ה A Holocaust survivor Whose third Yahrzeit was

ט' תמוז

And in memory of her parents

ר' מרדכי בן ר' יעקב יצחק וחנה בת ר' יואב מיכאל and her five brothers

יואב מיכאל, אברהם לייב, משה שמעון, חיים אליה ויונה

murdered in Auschwitz and who's yahrzeit is

י"ז בתמוז

May all their Neshamot have Aliyot

### The Jewish Weekly's PARSHA FACTS

NUMBER OF MITZVOT: 0

NUMBER OF PESUKIM: 104

NUMBER OF WORDS: 1455

NUMBER OF LETTERS: 5357

HAFTORA: Micah 5:6 - 6:8

Sunday, July 17, is Shiva Asar B'Tammuz, 17 Tammuz, a Public Fast Day, the beginning of the Three Weeks.

This week in Israel, we study Chapter 6 of Pirkei Avot (outside Israel one studies Chapter 5).