

2. A Bad Sign

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid. I will provide the chapter now.

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A Bad Sign

Forty-seven years before construction workers discovered the skeleton in the old farmer's well on Chicken Hill, a Jewish theater manager in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, named Moshe Ludlow had a vision about Moses. Moshe had this vision on a Monday morning in February as he was cleaning out the remnants of a Chick Webb one-night stand at his tiny All-American Dance Hall and Theater on Main Street. Webb and his roaring twelve-piece band was the greatest musical event Moshe had ever witnessed in his life, except for the weekend he managed to lure Mickey Katz, the brilliant but temperamental Yiddish genius of klezmer music, out of Cleveland to play a full weekend of family fun and Yiddish frolic at Moshe's All-American Dance Hall and Theater two months before. Now that was something. Katz, the kid wizard of clarinet, and his newly formed seven-piece ensemble braved a furious December snowstorm that dropped fourteen inches in the eastern Pennsylvania mountains to make it to the gig, and thanks to blessed G-d, they had, because Moshe counted 249 Jewish shoe salesmen, shop owners, tailors, blacksmiths, railroad painters, deli owners, and their wives from five different states, including Upstate New York and Maine, who came to the event. There were even four couples from Tennessee who drove through the Blue Ridge Mountains for three days, eating cheese and eggs, unable to keep kosher on the Sabbath, just to be with their fellow Yids—and right before Hanukkah, for which they all should be at home lighting candles for eight days. Not to mention one of the husbands was a fanatic and believed that the fast of Tisha B'Av, normally celebrated in July or August, should be celebrated twice a year instead of once, which meant staying home every December and starving and peppering the walls with pictures of flowers for three weeks straight as a show of thanks to the Creator for His generosity in helping the Jewish people of Eastern Europe escape the pogroms for the relative peace and prosperity of America's Promised Land. Thanks to him and the weather, all four couples were in a foul mood once they arrived, having squeezed into two ancient Packards—one of which had no heat—and driven through the savage snowstorm. They announced plans to leave immediately when they heard talk of more snow, but Moshe talked them out of it. That was his gift. Moshe could talk the horns off the devil's head. "How many times in life does one get to hear a young genius?" he said to them. "It will be the greatest event of your life." He led them to his pocket-sized room in a boardinghouse on Chicken Hill, a tiny area of ramshackle houses and dirt roads where the town's blacks, Jews, and immigrant whites who couldn't

afford any better lived, set them before his warm woodstove, filled them with warm iced tea and gefilte fish, and amused them with the story of his Romanian grandmother who jumped out a window to avoid marrying a Haskalah Jew, only to land atop a Hasidic rabbi from Austria.

“She knocked him to the mud,” he exclaimed. “When he looked up, she was reading his palm. So they got married.”

That brought smirks and chuckles to their faces, because everyone knew the Romanians were crazy. With their laughter ringing in his ears, he rushed back to the crowd who waited anxiously in the snow for the theater doors to open.

As Moshe made his way down the muddy roads of Chicken Hill to his theater on Main Street, his heart sank. The makeshift line that had formed an hour before had exploded into a mob of close to three hundred. Moreover, he was informed that the temperamental genius Katz had arrived but was inside the theater in a foul mood, having braved the terrible storm, and was now threatening to leave. Moshe raced inside and found to his relief that his always-dependable helper, an old colored man named Nate Timblin, had settled Katz and his band backstage before the warm woodstove, serving them hot tea in water glasses, fresh kosher eggs, gefilte fish, and challah bread, all neatly laid out buffet-style. The young Katz seemed pleased and announced that he and his band would set up as soon as they finished eating. From there, Moshe went back outside to stall the waiting crowd.

When he saw that more people were coming—stragglers rushing from the train station carrying satchels and suitcases—he grabbed a stepladder and climbed atop it to address them all. He had never seen so many Jews in one place in America in his life. The reform snobs from Philadelphia were there in button-down shirts, standing next to ironworkers from Pittsburgh, who crowded against socialist railroad men from Reading wearing caps bearing the Pennsylvania Railroad logo, who stood shoulder to shoulder with coal miners with darkened faces from Uniontown and Spring City. Some were with wives. Others were with women who, given their fur coats, leather boots, and dazzling hairdos, were not wives at all. One fellow was accompanied by a blonde goy six inches taller than him, clad in gay Irish green, complete with a hat that looked like a cross between a clover leaf and the spikes on the Statue of Liberty’s crown. Some yammered in German, others chatted in Yiddish. Some yelled in a Bavarian dialect, others spoke Polish. When Moshe announced there would be a short delay, the crowd grew more restless.

A handsome young Hasid in a caftan and fur hat, bearing a gunny sack, his curly hair jammed into the hat he wore cocked to the side as if it were a fedora, announced he had come all the way from Pittsburgh and would not dance with a woman at all, which caused laughter and a few harsh words, some of them in German, about Polish morons dressing like greenhorns. Moshe was flummoxed. “Why come to a dance if you’re not going to dance with a woman?” he asked the man.

“I’m not looking for a dancer,” the handsome Hasid said tersely. “I’m looking for a wife.”

The crowd laughed again. Later, under the spell of Katz’s gorgeous musical wizardry, Moshe watched in wonder as the man danced like a demon all night. He frolicked through every dance step that Moshe had ever seen, and Moshe, who had spent his childhood as a fudgeyer—a wandering Jew—in Romania, had seen a few: horas, bulgars, khosidls, freylekhs,

Russian marches, Cossack high-steps. The Hasid was a wonder of twisted elbows, a rhythmic gyroscope of elastic grace and wild dexterity. He danced with any woman who came close, and there were plenty. Moshe later decided the guy must be some kind of wizard.

The next four nights were the most extraordinary gathering of joyful Jewish celebration that Moshe had ever seen. He considered it a miracle, in part because the whole business had nearly fallen apart before it even got off the ground, thanks to a series of flyer notices he'd sent out weeks before to drum up advance ticket sales. Using a Jewish cross directory that listed synagogues and private homes where traveling Jews could stay, Moshe sent flyers to every country Jewish synagogue, boardinghouse, and hostel between North Carolina and Maine. The flyers, proudly proclaiming that the great Mickey Katz Road Show of Winter Yiddish Fun and Family Memories from the Old Country was coming to the All-American Dance Hall and Theater in Pottstown, Pa., on December 15, were printed in four languages: German, Yiddish, Hebrew, and English. But Moshe had badly overestimated the organizational power of country Jewish rabbis, and most of the notices were lost in the ongoing rush of death notices, bar mitzvah commitments, once-in-a-lifetime sales, kosher cow-slaughtering requests, tallit-making services, business-dispute refereeing, mohel (circumcision) mix-ups, and marriage-arrangement snafus that were the daily bread and butter of a country rabbi's life. The few souls who had the presence of mind to open Moshe's letters containing the flyers only added to the confusion, for many were fresh immigrants from Eastern Europe who didn't speak English. They considered any letter that bore a typed address some kind of government notice that meant immediate shipment of you, your family, your dog, and your green stamps back to the old country, where the Russian soldiers awaited with a special gift for your part in the murder of the czar's son, who, of course, the Russians had killed themselves and poked his eyes out to boot, but who's asking? So the flyers were tossed.

Moreover, Moshe sent the wrong flyers to the wrong congregations. The Yiddish flyers went to German-speaking congregations. The German flyers were sent to Yiddish shuls who despised the German-loving snobs. The Hebrew ads went to Hungarians who everybody knew pretended they couldn't read English unless it referred to Jews as "American Israelites"—in Hebrew. Two English ads went to a Polish congregation in Maine that had vanished, the greenhorns up there likely having frozen their tuchuses off and dropped into the ice somewhere. One Baltimore merchant even accidentally forwarded his Yiddish flyer to the advertising department of the Baltimore Sun, which caused a ruckus, the advertising executive being under the impression that the Jewish clothing-store merchant from East Baltimore's Jewtown who regularly advertised in the Sun intended it for Yiddish-speaking customers only. In actuality, the kind merchant was translating the flyer from Yiddish to English in the back of his store when an argument between two customers broke out in the front of the store. When he stepped out to quell the fuss, his Yiddish-speaking wife wandered into the back storeroom, recognized the words "Baltimore Sun" among the papers on her husband's crowded desk, stuffed the half-translated flyer into an envelope along with their weekly advertising check, and mailed it to the paper. The ad executive who received it was too dumb to know the difference between advertising and editorial, and forwarded it to the city desk with a note saying, "Run this tomorrow because the Jew always pays," whereupon the night city editor, a devout well-meaning Catholic, handed it

to a new nineteen-year-old Hungarian copy clerk—hired, in part, because he claimed he could speak Yiddish. The kid sent the whole badly translated mess back to advertising with a note saying, “This is an ad.” The advertising department placed it in a large font on page B-4 on a Saturday on the last day of Sukkot, the Jewish holiday that celebrates the gathering of the harvest and the miraculous protection the Lord provided for the children of Israel. The result was a disaster. Moshe’s original flyer read, in Yiddish: “Come see the great Mickey Katz. Once-in-a-lifetime event. Family fun and Jewish memories. Red-hot klezmer like you’ve never heard before.” The translated ad read, in English:

“Mickey Katz is coming. Once a life, always a life. Watch the Jews burn and dance and have fun.”

The ad caused panic and fury in East Baltimore’s Jewtown, as many of its residents still remembered how the town’s first rabbi, David Einhorn, spoke out against slavery during the Civil War and was run out of town, his house burned to the ground. They demanded that the merchant close his store and quit the city.

Moshe nearly fainted when he got word of the disaster. He sped to Baltimore and spent four hundred dollars straightening out matters with the good-natured merchant, who kindly helped him write a second, better ad. But it was too late. The first ad was too much for Baltimore’s Jews. It was simply too good to be true. A klezmer dance? With the great Mickey Katz? Why would a star like Katz play for poor salesmen and tailors in the freezing hills of eastern Pennsylvania? In an American theater? Owned by a fudgeyer, a Romanian? Fudgeyers don’t own theaters! They wander around and sing songs and get the crap beat out of them by the czar’s soldiers. Where is Pottstown anyway? Were there any Jews there at all? Impossible! It was a trap!

The result was that only four Jewish couples from Baltimore bought advance tickets to see the great Katz, and Moshe had been counting on Baltimore’s Jewish community in big numbers.

Five weeks before the concert, \$1,700 in the hole to his cousin Isaac in Philadelphia, from whom he borrowed the theater rental and deposit money, and feeling lower than he felt when his father died, Moshe dropped to his knees, prayed to G-d for spiritual renewal, felt none, and found himself moping around the back storeroom of the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store, the sole Jewish grocery in Chicken Hill. The owner, a rabbi named Yakov Flohr, felt sorry for the young Romanian and offered to let Moshe study Hebrew from his Talmud, which he kept in the same storeroom where his youngest daughter Chona toiled. She was crippled from polio, with one leg shorter than the other, requiring her to wear a boot with a sole four inches thick. Chona spent her days sorting vegetables and making butter by stirring yellow dye into creamed milk stored in barrels.

Knowing he was up to his balls in hock and needing G-d, Moshe took the rabbi up on the offer and spent several afternoons glumly poring through the text, thinking of his late father and peeking at Chona, whom he dimly remembered as a quiet, mousey young thing as a child but who now, at age seventeen, had developed into quite a package. Despite her foot and limp, she was a quiet beauty, with a gorgeous nose and sweet lips, ample breasts, a sizable derriere that poked against the drab, loose-fitting woolen skirt, and eyes that shone with gaiety and mirth. Moshe, at twenty-one, in full bloom himself, found himself looking up several times from his Hebrew studies to gawk at Chona’s rear end as she stirred the butter on

those cold Pennsylvania nights, the swish of her hips moving with the promise of the coal stove in the far corner that heated only half the room. She turned out to be a spirited soul, full of wry humor and glad to have company, and after a few days of easy conversation, regaling him with warm jokes and smiling with her bright gay eyes, young Moshe finally confessed his problem: the upcoming concert, the massive debts, the money already spent, the wrong ads, the demands of a difficult star. "I'm going to lose everything," he said.

It was there, in the back of the rabbi's store, standing over the butter barrel, a churn in her hand, that Chona reminded him of the story of Moses and the burning coals.

She put down her churn, glanced at the door to make sure no one was watching, went to the desk where he sat, lifted her father's dusty, weathered Talmud—which they both knew she was forbidden to touch—grasped the Midrash Rabbah beneath it, and placed the Talmud back down. Then she opened the Midrash Rabbah, which contained the five books of Moses, and flipped to the story of Moses and the burning coals. She was a student of religion, she confided, and the story of Moses always brought her solace. It was there—the collapse of his theater imminent, peering at the holy Midrash Rabbah with one eye and the lovely hand of the beauty Chona with the other, his heart throbbing from the first flush of love—that Moshe first came upon the story of Moses and the burning coals, which Chona read to him in Hebrew, of which he understood every fourth word.

Pharaoh placed a plate of burning coals on one side of the infant Moses and a plate of sparkling coins and jewelry on the other. If the infant was intelligent, he would be attracted to the sparkling gold and jewelry, and would be killed as a threat to the pharaoh's heir. If he touched the black coals, he would be perceived as too stupid to be a threat and allowed to live. Moses started to reach for the coins, but as he did, an angel appeared and deftly moved his hand to the hot coals, burning his fingers. The child put his fingers in his mouth, stinging his tongue and giving him a life-long speech impediment. Moses spoke with a defect for the rest of his life, but the life of the leader and most important teacher of the Jewish people was saved.

Moshe listened in rapturous silence, and when she was done, he found himself bathed in the light of love only heaven can deliver. He returned to the storeroom for several days, filling himself with words of the Midrash Rabbah, about which he had been previously ambivalent, and the young flower who led him to words of holy purpose. At the end of the third week of Midrash Rabbah lessons, Moshe asked Chona to marry him, and to his amazement, she agreed.

The next week Moshe deposited \$140 in Yakov's bank account as a gift, then approached Yakov and his wife with his marriage proposal for their daughter. The parents, both Bulgarian, were so overjoyed that someone other than a cyclops was willing to marry their disabled daughter—so what if he was Romanian?—they readily agreed. "Why not next week?" Moshe asked. "Why not?" they said. The modest wedding was held at Ahavat Achim, the tiny shul that serviced Pottstown's seventeen Jewish families. It was attended by Moshe's cousin Isaac from Philadelphia, Chona's deliriously happy parents, and a few local Yids Yakov had drummed up to create the necessary minyan of ten Jews to say the seven wedding blessings. Two of them were Polish workers from the Pennsylvania Railroad train yard who had hustled up to Chicken Hill to grab a kosher bite. The two

agreed to attend the wedding but demanded four dollars apiece for cab fare to Reading, where they were expected to report to work the next morning. Yakov refused, but Moshe was happy to pay. It was a small price for marrying the woman who brought him more happiness than he ever dreamed possible.

So inspired was he by his new love that he forgot all about the \$1,700 he'd spent. He sold his car for \$350, borrowed another \$1,200 from Isaac, and spent the money on ads, this time properly placed, then watched in amazement as ticket sales zoomed. More than four hundred tickets were sold.

For four nights Mickey Katz and his magical musicians poured forth the most rousing, glorious klezmer music that eastern Pennsylvania had ever heard. Four nights of wild, low-down, dance-till-you-can't Jewish revelry. Moshe sold out of everything—drinks, food, eggs, fish. He even put up twenty exhausted New Yorkers in his theater's second-floor balcony, normally reserved for Negroes. The four couples from Tennessee who had threatened to leave stayed the entire weekend, as did the Hasid dancer who swore he would dance with no woman. It was a rousing success.

The morning after the festivities ended, Moshe was sweeping the sidewalk in front of his theater when he saw the dancing Hasid hurrying toward the train station.

Gone was the fur hat. In its place was a fedora. The caftan had been cut into a sportcoat-length jacket. Moshe barely recognized him. As the young man approached, Moshe spoke out. "Where are you from?" he asked. But the man was fast and silent and already moving down the sidewalk past him. Moshe called to his back, "Wherever you live, it's home to the greatest dancer in the world, that's for sure."

That did it. The Hasid stopped, reached into his gunny sack, and without a word, walked several steps back to Moshe, handed him a bottle of slivovitz (plum brandy), then turned and continued down the sidewalk moving fast.

Moshe called out cheerfully to his back, "Did you find a wife?"

"I don't need a wife," he said, waving a hand without looking back. "I'm a thwart of love."

"A what?"