



*He had arrived at a crossroads. Would he have to choose between family and G-d?*

# Shabbos Minchah with Reb Isser

ALAN D. BUSCH

**R**eb Isser knew intuitively something was wrong.

Truth be told, I didn't know what to do. My marriage was in jeopardy. I wanted to become more Jewishly observant. My wife and children did not. *Erev Pesach* our family suffered a near meltdown over kashrus in our home. Whatever *shalom bayis* still remained was crumbling fast.

I hurried to shul Shabbos afternoon to greet Reb Isser at the front door. *He'll know what to do*, I reassured myself. In the two

years since I had first wandered into his minyan, he had become my mentor, confidant, and proxy *zeide*.

I began helping Reb Isser prepare *shalosh seudos* each Shabbos afternoon. We draped the folding tables with white plastic tablecloths, set out twenty-five place settings, and served as much tuna fish, chopped fish balls, herring, cake, and soda pop as we could find left over from the morning *kiddush*. The minyan would file down the narrow stairwell after *minchah*, line up around the kitchen island to wash

and make *hamotzi* over the challah buns we had placed in a wicker basket to the left of the sink.

“Nu, Mr. Busch. What’s on your mind?” Reb Isser finally asked, as I had hoped he would. I guess he noticed my preoccupation.

“Well...uh, trouble at home, Reb Isser. My wife...you know,” I responded, searching for the right words but hopeful I would not have to explain too much.

“No, I don’t know. You want to tell me?”

“My wife is very unhappy with me.” I hesitated.

“Go on,” Reb Isser encouraged me, as if he had some familiarity with this problem.

“I spend too much time in shul, she thinks. By the time I get home Saturday night, now with spring and summer, it’s too late.”

“For what?” he asked.

“She wants to go out with me in the early evening, you know, a movie, maybe something to eat.” Reb Isser reflected for several interminable moments. Waiting nervously, I hoped his would be a sympathetic decision.

“Mr. Busch.” Reb Isser spoke softly. He removed a single photograph from his shirt pocket. For someone as forthright as Reb Isser usually was, he seemed reluctant to speak.

“I’ve shown this picture to no one in the fifty years since I came to America,” he confessed, handing it to me.

“Reb Isser, you don’t have —”

“Mr. Busch,” he gently interrupted, “yes, I do.”

I was afraid I knew where he was going with this. I fell silent.

“This was Rivkale, *aleha hashalom.*” He pointed to a pretty, slight woman with

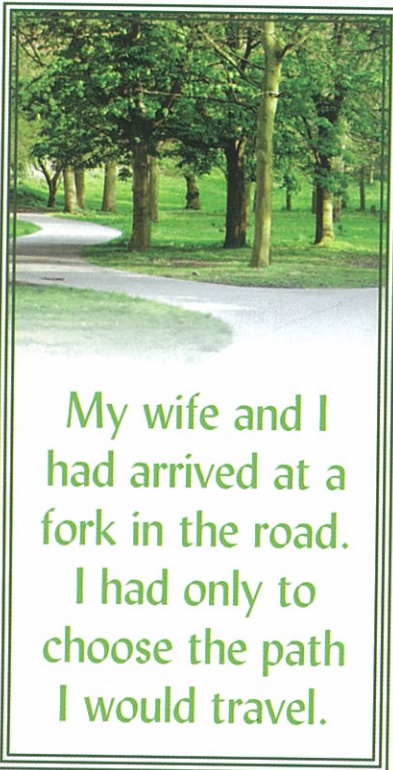
delicate features. Her long, flowery dress seemed appropriate attire for what appeared to be a family picnic.

“And these,” he continued, his forefinger trembling, “are *mein kinderlach...*”

He blinked repeatedly, trying to hold back the tears.

“Reb Isser, please don’t,” I pleaded.

He handed me a tissue. “Forgive me, Mr. Busch, but you need to hear this. This is Yossele,” he pointed to the older of his two children, a boy who looked about six



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years old. “I used to curl his *peyos* around this finger,” he recalled, holding up the same forefinger with which he had pointed to Yossele in the picture. “And this, this...” he began to sob, “this is...this is Chavaleh, whose red shoulder-length hair her mother specially fashioned into ringlets for the picnic.

“Do you see this spot?” he asked me, pointing to the hem of Chavaleh’s white dress.

I nodded.

“It’s a grass stain. She fell, running in the park that day.”

I couldn’t look anymore. I turned aside and began nervously dividing up the herring among several paper plates.

“Mr. Busch.” He patted my hand. I released the fork. “My wife felt I was working too much. She told me many times that our family time together was much more valuable than the few extra zlotys I was bringing home. I was a druggist, you know. In those days you had to make up the prescriptions by hand. It took a lot of time so I stayed after hours. Did I tell you that story?” I nodded again. “But did I listen to her? No. I was young like you.” He smiled ever so faintly, handing me another tissue.

“Thank you.”

“But by the time I realized she was right, the Germans came to our village. The men they rounded up. The women and children...they took away. Gone. We never saw them again.

“Mr. Busch, I never saw them again! Understand?”

I handed him back the picture, which he returned to his pocket.

“Go home to your family.”

His words seemed plain enough, but he stopped short of advising me any further. My wife and I had indeed arrived at a fork in the road. Whether I would keep Shabbos at home by myself, well...that he left to me. I had only to choose the path I would travel.

From the stairway, a voice beckoned. “Reb Isser?... *Ashrei!*”

I followed him upstairs for minyan. ■

*Alan D. Busch is an independent writer living in Skokie, Illinois, and the father of three children, Benjamin, z”l, Kimberly, and Zac. He is the author of Snapshots in Memory of Ben, and he has published articles of prose and poetry in Living with Loss, the Chicago JUF News Magazine, Potetworks.com, Aish.com, Skyline Productions, Poetica Magazine, The Jewish Press, and Everyone’s Got a Story, edited by Ruchama King Feuerman. He is currently working on a book about the last weeks of his father’s life, Dr. Albert I. Busch, z”l.*

Every person is a total fool for at least five minutes every day —  
wisdom consists of not exceeding the limit.