

The Governments of Chelm
Mismanaging the Shtedl

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Note: In the Yiddish folklore of Eastern Europe, the Polish town of Chelm is the traditional village of fools. Some perspective on the relationship of this literary convention to the history of the real Chelm (city and province), is provided at the end of this fable through entries from the Encyclopedia Britannica, 1986

1.

Introduction

Legendary Chelm is a shtedl located somewhere between the Russian Pale of Settlement and the north-eastern provinces of Poland. To image a shtedl think of Fiddler on the Roof , or the stories of Sholem Aleichem on which the musical is based : part market-town, part peasant village. Apart from a small number of successful businessmen, living on the outskirts and more concerned with their affairs in Lublin, Moscow or Warsaw than with life in this dilapidated hamlet , everyone is desperately poor. Indeed, Chelm is so poor that most of its inhabitants make a living by " clawing their way up the walls " .

Although the rest of the world, Jews and non-Jews alike, laugh at their folly , Chelm's inhabitants are proud of their great tradition of wisdom, embodied in the persons of the dozen or so rabbis , of distinguished genealogy and

credentials, who form the Council of the Wise Elders. This Council meets irregularly though frequently, at times of major political or economic crises, to put their stamp of authority on resolutions of religious controversies, to debate thorny legal matters, or to sit around telling each other stories.

Owing to its peculiar status as a legendary shtetl, Chelm is always able to produce on demand at least one representative of every stock figure of Ashkenazic life: rabbis; shadchans (match-makers); chazzans (cantors); moels (circumcisers); melameds (wandering tutors); maggids (revivalist preachers); shochems (kosher butchers); yentas (female busybodies); schnorrers (beggars); goniffs (thieves); schlemiels (clumsy fools); schlemazls (luckless fools); and so on. Several of these appear in the pages of this story. There are even some scientists in Chelm, the evidence for which is given by this classic account:

"It had been assumed for so many centuries that a dropped slice of toast always lands butter-side-down, that this conclusion had come to be taken for granted. During the Enlightenment everything was called into question, and this was no exception. From his studies at the University of Cracow a student had learned about Galileo's experiment, when the great physicist dropped objects of various weights from the Leaning Tower of Pisa to demonstrate that all things travel at the same speed in free fall. The student suggested to the Council that the buttered toast theory be tested in a similar fashion.

Witnesses to the experiment included two rabbis, one a skeptic, the other a believer. The student buttered a slice of toast, lifted it off the table and released it. Sure enough, when it collided with the floor, the buttered side was down.

'I rest my case', said the rabbi who had never doubted the wisdom of the old saying.

'Aha!', retorted the sceptic: 'He buttered the wrong side!'

2.

The Council of the Wise Elders

On a morning around the turn of the century - the exact century being immaterial - the wise elders of Chelm met in the assembly rooms above the Talmud Torah to determine the form of government most suitable for Chelm. Chelm, if one can imagine it, didn't even have a mayor; without a mayor, Chelm wasn't a city, wasn't a town, wasn't

a village : it wasn't even Chelm! And, since one couldn't expect the mayor to come from elsewhere, he had to be a resident, didn't he? Accordingly when a local well-to-do businessman, one Chiam the cattle merchant , offered himself for the post, he was as good as inducted on the spot.

Just before the vote was taken that would have confirmed him , an objection occurred to Rabbi Lefkowitz:

" If Chiam is a citizen of Chelm , and at the same time it's mayor , to my mind there's a conflict of interests. Others he obliges to obey his laws; but if he doesn't want to obey his own law? Nu ; so he changes it ! A room filled with such learned sages can easily understand that it is no more possible for a citizen to be his own ruler than it is for a servant to be his own master. Let's not get lost in abstractions: although Chiam the mayor can punish Moishe the nebish for stealing blintzes , who punishes Chiam for watering milk?"

Nobody spoke for quite some time. Then Rabbi Yonkel said, " I have a solution. Chelm needs two mayors, someone who also rules Chiam . I propose that we appoint another rich man, Yitzhak, owner of the shoe factory."

"But Reb Yonkel, how can a master of erudition like yourself propose such a thing ? Who rules Yitzhak?"

" Chiam! Who else?"

The decision to appoint Chiam as mayor was therefore postponed until the next meeting, when the proposal to appoint Yitzhak as well could be properly debated.

3.

A Question of Logic

At the next convening of the Council , Rabbi Sobel arose to announce that he had discovered a fallacy in Rabbi Yonkel's logic:

" That's all very well and good", he observed, " but if one of our ordinary citizens has a complaint, to whom does he go: Chiam or Yitzhak?"

The wise elders gave the matter their serious consideration. Eventually they decided that people with complaints would go to Chiam.

"And what if someone wants to complain against Chiam?"

He should go to Yitzhak.

"That's all very well and good", countered Rabbi Sobel, who was always using that expression, " but suppose Yitzhak himself has a complaint. To whom does he go? Answer me that one! "

"That's such a simple question", retorted Rabbi Yonkel, " that I marvel at the ignorance of someone who would raise it. Look: if somebody has a complaint which doesn't involve Chiam , he goes to Chiam. If he wants to complain about Chiam, he goes to Yitzhak. And if Yitzhak himself has a complaint , well ... well ... well: he comes to us!!"

4.

The Cowherd's Complaint

At the next Council meeting , a citizen who wasn't Chiam, and wasn't Yitzhak either , a landless peasant and cowherd , showed up with a grievance:

" Learned rabbis ", he said, " I got a complaint against both Yitzhak and Chiam! "

He was given the floor and allowed to speak.

" Here in Chelm - what can I say? Chiam? So, it's common knowledge, Chiam is the mayor. He's mayor, not somebody else? Not me, not you? Good! Why is he the mayor? Well - it's because he's gotta big cattle business and owns a dozen farms up in the hills. Nu ? So; Chiam's mayor: good. If it's God's will, even a broom can shoot.

Yitzhak? Well; he's mayor, too! This is Chelm, and because it's Chelm, we do things differently from everywhere else in the universe. So we got two mayors ! Why is that? You say , somebody's got to be Chiam's mayor. But I say , it's because he's a rich shoe manufacturer, what has a factory with maybe 30 employees that slave for him like the Israelites under Pharoah from dawn to dusk and can't take so much as a prayer break . About some other fool, every fool's an expert.

Now, you say there ain't no conflict of interest. Yet in fact, Chiam and Yitzhak are , both of them, traders in cow flesh: Chiam's cows graze on all the surrounding meadows, and some of them become shoe leather for Yitzhak

Let's deal with Chiam first: what's he do the minute he gets into office? He raises the price of beef ! Give a chair to a dog , he'll want to get on the table. Between you and me and the Almighty (Praise the Lord!), he would have succeeded , too, if he was the only mayor. I gotta hand it to you; you wise men outsmarted him ! You made Yitzhak his mayor , so he don't get away with it ! I'd take my hat off to you, but this is a holy place. Mazel Tov

Next: Yitzhak raises the cost of a pair of shoes! In my own family even , we ain't got four shoes between the five of us. All the same, he does it and thinks he can get

away with it, because he's mayor. But! Praises be to the God of Abraham , Isaac and Jacob for giving us such a Council of eminent rabbis! Chiam sees to it that this didn't happen.

What more is there to say? What won't a Jew do for a living? These two goniffs put their heads together, and when they 're finished talking, they issue a joint decree lowering wages for many categories of workers , starting with nebishes like myself, cowherds that take care of the cattle from which they make all their money, may it rot in their pockets before they get to spend a groschen of it !

Already my family has to dig the ground for roots after the harvest is over . Who is it does all their dirty work and never receives more than a kick in the ass for his pains? (Begging your pardon, eminent sirs!)

Der oisher hat nit kein yoisher ! The rich have no sense of justice. Give us a bit of justice, and there'll be peace."

The vigorous debate that followed threatened to turn into an uproar. Rabbi Lefkowitz stood up and requested silence. He had a notion:

" Since cows seems to be the common interest of our two mayors, our system of government cannot function unless they also have a mayor!"

Accordingly Horowitz, a well-to-do landlord, was invited to serve as mayor for the cows of Chelm. He was contacted in due time, raised no objections to the proposal, and was sworn into office .

" Now everything is perfect!" commented Rabbi Silverstein : "Say someone has a complaint about Chiam, Yitzhak, or cows: send him to Horowitz!"

5.

The Tenant's Complaint

A villager presented himself at the next Council meeting:

"Gentlemen!" he said , " I want to lodge a complaint against Horowitz."

" Nu? Out with it!"

" It's like this : suppose Horowitz gets it in his head to do something he knows neither Chiam nor Yitzhak are going agree to , like what he did last month when he doubled the rent on all his tenants. Well, Horowitz goes to Yitzhak and says:

" You don't want that dog, Chiam, to raise the price of shoe leather , do you?"

" I should say not!"

" I'll see to it that Chiam keeps down cattle prices ."

Then Horowitz goes to Chiam and says,
" Do you want to stop Yitzhak from raising the price of shoes ?"

"Of course!"

" I'll stand by you in making sure that shoes stay cheap."

Then Horowitz again leaves. Well, you see it's this way: Horowitz knows that Chiam is always trying to raise the price of cattle. He also knows that Yitzhak won't stop trying to find a way to raise the price of a pair of shoes . Therefore it must be his duty to get them to stop trying to cheat the good people of Chelm. By some kind of schmegegy logic, he concludes that this gives him the right to raise the rents!

And by the time he gets through explaining his reasoning to Chiam and Yitzhak, they're so confused they don't know what to think."

Angry voices broke out all around the room:

"Fire Horowitz!" someone cried.

" But what about peasant discontent? What about the cattle market?"

" Then fire Chiam and Yitzhak!"

" So! We should keep Horowitz then ? "

" Is a thief honest just because he can't steal? Fire them all !"

" What do you want? Anarchy?"

It was a problem which called for much deep thinking and study of the Talmud. After dissolving the civil administration they had put together with such pains, the Council adjourned for two weeks.

At their next meeting, Rabbi Yonkel was the first to arise. He had brought with him a proposal for an amendment to the town constitution:

" The Talmud never wearies in reminding us that the study of the Law is higher than all other pursuits and occupations. Did not the Rabbi Yochanan state that a schnorrer with education is superior to a wealthy rabbi who also happens to be a nincompoop ?

Esteemed sages, far be it for me to vaunt my own learning to you, knowing full well as I do the words of the great Rabbi Hillel who said:

He who wears the crown of learning for personal gain shall surely perish.

And, this is , indeed, what we see coming to pass: all of the failures in our institutions of government to date

have come about through the greed of those who would place their own mercantile self-interest above the word of God.

Yitzhak and Chiam are like the fox and the snake in the story of the - of the - well; I don't remember the story. And Horowitz! : Whoever lies down to sleep with a dog gets up with fleas ! Truly it was with such a person in mind that Solomon states that He who seeketh mischief, it shall come unto him .

Rabbi Yonkel removed his spectacles , looked around the assembly room, and commented : " It's because of people like him that we've had to place the synagogue's donation box so close to the ceiling that nobody can reach it. "

He coughed, adjusted his spectacles and once again consulted his notes: " To my mind there is only one way out of this dilemma. To avoid a conflict of interest, we must require that a mayor of Chelm be without any occupation whatsoever. "

" But Reb Yonkel", cried Rabbi Sobel, " That is all very well and good, but whom are we going to find without an occupation? Do you expect Chiam and Yitzhak to go out of business? Will Horowitz rent rooms for nothing? "

"Reb Sobel, you are an idiot - a Chelmer chochem ! " snapped Rabbi Yonkel, " and I wonder sometimes why you are allowed to remain on the Council. I have no intention of asking Chiam or Yitzhak or Horowitz to give up their thriving concerns. From this time forth, the mayor of Chelm will be the town schnorrer ! "

And it was entered into the records that the town beggar would be required to serve as mayor in Chelm.

6.

The Schnoorer's Tale

For several months there was a gratifying smoothness to the spinning of the wheels of government. People with proposals, grievances about the government, or conflicts requiring mediation went to Bogow, the lazy disreputable beggar of Chelm , a derelict to whom it appeared not to make the slightest difference whether he were mayor or not. If somebody wanted to lodge a complain against Bogow he could, in theory, put in a word at meetings of the learned Council. Yet for two months the elders heard no news of any further disturbances of the public order. Pleased with this lull in the affairs of Chelm, and as a reward to itself for its' own cleverness, the Council voted itself a month's vacation.

Upon its' resumption a citizen came with a grievance to be presented to the assembly of the wise. It was Bogow.

"Gen'lmen", he said, making a determined effort to behave in a dignified manner: "Zis vitz , zis joik hez got to shtop. I'm no more cut out to be ze mayor zen zis louse." He held up the one he'd extracted from behind an ear and crushed it to death between thumb and forefinger.

" It is your civic obligation !" Rabbi Lefkowitz barked at him, " Let me remind you, Mr. Bogow, that the Torah makes no distinction between civil and religious duties! "

" Duties! Schmooties!" Bogow retorted, " Ferst - vat ken I tell you? It's a disgrace to haf somevon like me as mayor; a no-goodnik, a Trombenik ! You ken't fill a seck mit hoils . In all my life I ain't earned so much as von bent kopek! I ain't got kadoches ! But - let it go. Your disease don't gif me no fever. Ze Talmud says? ... the Talmud says....Vat I know about ze Talmud?...

I'm lyink under a tree - sleepink - shlof ist a goniff - I gotta empty stomach vat makes a noise like a oild chazzan . Vy does poverty vistle? ... Beggink your pardons, learned rebbes , I'm mindink my own business when zese two schlemiels ! , Hyman Rebinovitz unt Lev Goldshtein, people vat in ze real voird wouldn't gif me ze time of day, come runnink up to me - because - like you say - I'm supposed to be some kind mayor - eskink me for - vat else? : zey vant justice!

Let me tell you frenkly, vize rebbes , I ain't got ze least idea vat is justice : "Who judges ze judge?" It's in ze Talmud . But - I'm ze mayor? .. I'm ze mayor. Unt, because I'm ze mayor I promise at least to listen . Keep your mouth shut, and people vill call you chochem - a vise man. Of course: zey won't get nothin' vrom me widout they pay me - and vell, too! Zen I esk Rebinovitz:

' You got tsuris ?' Oy Gevolt ! Learned rebbes ! - Right avay it's skreamink ! Und yellink! A groisse tummel ! Mit shakink ze fists, right in my face, mind you! Threats! Curses! A ruckus like I ain't never hert in oil my days! So I shout:

" Hak mir nit kein chineck- don't bang ze tea kettle ! " Zen I say to Rebinovitz:

" You ferst, nudnik ! " So he spins me a long, ridicilous yarn , a gantze bubba meyscha , not von verd - belief me - is true:

"Reverend mayor" , he begins. I vant go kochsen mit zis 'reverend mayor' meshegass , " Reverend mayor, I own a business."

And, I esk you, learned rebbes : vat I got to do mit his business, me, vat nefer earned so much as a kick- in -

ze -pents for cartink vood? But... I'm ze mayor? ... I'm ze mayorNu ? Even a broiken vatch is right twice in ze day. So talk already! He begins :

' Well, your honor: My son is a good-for-nothing wastrel, a grauber yung who does nothing all day long but play cards and drink up my money . Since he's the youngest of my 3 heirs, I have taken steps to put this son of mine, this farshvender I've created, out of my will. ' "

Bogow paused, then commented:

" Between you unt me, learned rebbes , I know his son. From a goose you can't buy oats . Vell, he goes on:

' Lev Goldstein, here, on the other hand, has a daughter who, God's ways being mysterious, is in love with my momser ! - ' "

"Mr. Bogow", interrupted Rabbi Abramovitch , " I would remind you that we are a dignified body, and do not tolerate the use of expressions of that sort - "

" I apoligize, to itch and ef'ry von uf you, although it ain't me vat said it , it vas Rebinovitz . Beggink your pardons, he continues :

' Goldstein's daughter wants to marry my son. What can I say about Goldstein's daughter? They bury prettier girls. But all right; Goldstein's daughter. Goldstein informs her that she won't see a penny of any dowry unless my son gets put back into my will. Which, he can wait until the coming of the Messiah, won't happen.

Secretly , without either of us knowing about it, this pair of pishers run off to the neighboring village, wake up the magistrate - a man without scruples who can turn any law or custom to suit his pocketbook, who agrees (under Polish law but against all Jewish tradition), to marry them on the spot: an elopement! That by itself wouldn't be so bad, kinohaira , except that the very next day there she is, Goldstein's daughter, knocking on my door, demanding my son's inheritance! Now what kind of a schlemiel do I have for a son!?' "

Zat's vere he ought'a hev shtopped. But zis Hyman Rebinovitz! It vas all yatata - yatata ! Oich uh dray kop ! Mit all my fingers shtuffed in my ears, he vouldn't shtop talkink ! Vat I care about him, his gelt or his verschlugene son , neither ? Noch a mol ! Zere zey go egain: Goldshtein breaks in mit yellink:

"Liar! Swindler! Mangy dog! Reverend mayor, that's not the way it happened! You see, I can explain..."

"Geh in drerd arein.... drop dead ! " I svore: shut up! Zen I points to Goldshtein , nod my head and say "Nu ? You deaf or vat? Spick! "

' Reverend Mayor: Hyman Rabinowitz is a liar! As the Talmud says, there are four enemies of mankind: a liar, a slanderer, a flatterer, and a deceiver. Rabinowitz, and I take King Solomon as my witness, is all of these things!

In the first place he's a liar: because didn't he lie to you just now? Then he's the worst sort of slanderer, because he's been slandering my good name in front of you. Then, begging your pardon your honor, he's a flatterer, too: wasn't he trying to flatter you right now so that he could cheat my daughter out of her rightful property? Last of all, he's a deceiver! Because he deceives me, my daughter, and even you, honored sir."

"Spare me the mishegass ! " I'd hed enough,"Crep or get off ze pot!"

" Your honor: like Hyman said, his son is a worthless, no good, low-life , a paskudnyak , it's true . His accomplishments , if we can call them that - are limited to sleeping through the day, gambling, and sponging off innocent young women. So this worthless schlepp , who doesn't even know how to pronounce 'Torah' if you know what I mean, comes to me and says , " Sir. I've come to demand your daughter's hand in marriage"

'What do I do? Of course: I throw him out! The very next day his father , this schvindler standing next to me, this shnuck , this oisvorf , Hyman Rabinowitz ! comes to my house and pleads: " Please" , he whines, "let my son marry your daughter! I'd do anything to get him off my hands. I promise you, he'll get 50% of my fortune, even before I kick the bucket."

'And how did I receive this, your honor? I say, and I can find you a hundred witnesses to prove it, I say to him: " Not until the coming of Elijah, not until the oceans dry up and the sun drops out of the sky, will I allow you to marry my daughter, fortune or no fortune ! "

' Then Rabinowitz leaves my house hurling curses at my head, and I slam the door in his face . But then what does this - moujik - (may he be burned to a crisp!) - do next? He tells his son: " It's all arranged. You get your inheritance on the day of your marriage to Goldstein's daughter. And then, perfidies of all perfidies , worse than Haman he is , he goes to my daughter, my daughter mind you , and says :

"Your father just told me you'll get a big fat dowry when you marry my son. "

So secretly he arranges the marriage. But the very next day, his shikker son is knocking on my door, demanding the dowry!"

ain't no secret neizer, because you reserve ze biggest hall in Chelm, hire ze best caterers and put up ze the notices at ze synagogue a month in advance.

At ze weddink - right unter der chupah ! - Goldshtein gives Rebinovitz' son ze nadan in a lump sum - vitch in a veek's time it's gone: down to ze lest groschen .

All of a sudden, you, Lev Goldshtein, realize what kind fool you've been. It's too late, ze marriage ken't be chenged , but - you ain't shtopped being shtupid. Now you tink maybe you ken mek Rebinovitz pay back ze nadan . Enyvay, iz possible, he hopes, he can disgrace Rebinovitz so much zat he iz writink his son's name back in his vill , mit sometink put aside for ze techter .

Zat's vay you vant me: if I buy Rebinovitz' bubba meyscha , his cock-unt- bull story , Goldshtein don't get nott'en. But, if mine judgment goes mit Goldshtein, my guess is he goes home, sits around unt waits until Hyman Rebinovitz drops dead so's ze techter ken collect.

Gen'lemen! I vant help you, belief me! I ain't ze Rashi , but I ain't from Schnipitchuk neither! Rachmones ! May your hearts be far from trouble. I've considered your problems; unt here's my edvice :

You're a real pair schlemiels , both of you. You got lots of chutzpah , I'll grent you. Gen'lemen, I got only the highest respect for zat eydler mensch , Rebinovitz's son. He's ze von honest man in ze whoilmachloikes . You grosse machers , you hot shots, are all chazers : you vant lif like lazy bums, but mit respectability .

Since Rebinovitz's son is ze hero, he deserves ze heppy endink ,Nu ? Mazel Tov! My vish is zat Rebinovitz's son vill go on makink you bot look like fools - and gets rich too ! If I vas him, I'd do exactly like he does, - kinohaira ,I ain't got his telents! Zai gesint ! Good day to you, gen'lemen!"

" Honorable, vise, distinguished, learned and sagacious rebbes ! I vas flabbergasted at zer reactions ! Zat zey vouldn't like vat I say, zat I know already; but I didn't expect zey vould greb me, cover me mit curses , spit on me, shek and rettle me till all ze teeth fall out! Zey empty out my pockets unt tek beck all zer gelt . (It von't do zem no good: brains you ken't pay for.) Oi Vey , zey slep me around! Vat ken I tell you? On ze vay hoim they dropped me into a big pile horse dreck !

I got just von more tink to say : Chelm is too respectable to hef a men like me for its mayor. Ich zol

azoy vissen fun tsuris : eabout how to be a mayor , I should know as much about misfortune ! I QVIT ! "

The wise elders of Chelm were struck dumb by this new revelation.

"That's all very well and good", Rabbi Sobel wondered aloud, "but how can a mayor be respectable if he hasn't got an occupation?"

" But isn't he working at being mayor?" Rabbi Rubin asked.

" But who's going to pay him?" asked Rabbi Yonkel, to whom the thought had not previously occurred

" The citizens of Chelm, who else? Let him raise taxes ! "

" But for what?"

" What do you mean, for what? For his professional capacities !"

" But what does the mayor do?"

To this there was no answer. Nobody could state what the mayor of Chelm was supposed to do.

7.

A Discourse on Government

For the next meeting of the Council Rabbi Yonkel showed up early with a position statement on the functions of government. It had been composed after long nights studying relevant passages in the Bible, Torah, Talmud, Mishnah, Gemorah and other commentaries. Nor had he stopped there, but had continued his readings in the treatises of Greek philosophers , notably Plato's Republic, Machiavelli's Prince , the writings of Ibn Khaldun , Rousseau, Montesquieu , the Federalist Papers and the Declaration of Independence, the Wealth of Nations and the Zohar. It may come as a surprise to some that so much scholarship was being invested into the matter of finding a proper government for a insignificant settlement like Chelm . As with all municipalities everywhere, from New York to Tokyo to Paris, to Pamplona , Spain , Camden , New Jersey or Middletown , Connecticut , Chelm is convinced that it is at the center of the universe. No amount of effort was deemed excessive in figuring out the best system for its administration.

Rabbi Yonkel exchanged greetings and shook hands with each elder as he filed into the assembly room. When they were all seated , he rose to speak, document in hand:

"Eminent seers", he began, "worthy sages, scions of knowledge and founts of erudition, heirs to the ancient prophets , purveyors of eternal light and wisdom, blessed

with the most profound sagacity." He stroked his long white beard and scratched under his yarmulka :

"Since the days of Moses and Abraham - and before, since the beginnings of recorded history - and before, since the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden - and indeed even before that, since the 7 days of the Creation - earthly government has always had two, and not more than two, essential functions. The first obligation of any government is to provide security for the lives of the governed. The second obligation is to make them happy. Now, whether it is the purpose of rule to promote happiness, or whether it is possible for there to be happiness without rule; whether rulers themselves can be happy; or whether the ruled, once they are happy, can ruler themselves without the need for rulers; or whether happiness is merely secondary and rule primary - or the other way around : to such questions we find no answers in the Talmud, nor any of the commentaries, nor in any of the Christian, Islamic or secular authorities that I have diligently consulted. For in some places it is written that "Affliction is a blessing " ; elsewhere however it states that "The unruly man is miserable." While some implore God to "save the innocent from harm" , others lavish praise on heroic figures who have openly defied temporal law in a just cause .

Since the Talmud has abandoned us on such questions , I have labored to exert my own feeble wit " - (exclamations of denial from the audience) - " to resolve them in my own way. But even at this late hour I cannot honestly say whether it is better to be ruled or to be happy, or whether one is possible without the other, or which of the two is more important. After long inquiry and reflection, I have come to the conclusion that it is best that such matters be left to the citizens of Chelm for themselves to decide. I therefore propose that Chelm should be ruled when it wants to be ruled, and not ruled when it doesn't want to be ruled. ! "

The conclusion of Rabbi Yonkel's dissertation was followed by long applause. His proposal was placed on the floor and immediately passed without further discussion, or even the formality of taking a vote. Chelm was now going to be ruled when it wanted to be ruled, and not ruled when it didn't want to be ruled. It was in this fashion that democracy came to the legendary town of fools .

#1...

8.

A Free Society isn't a Free Lunch

Townsfolk milled about the main square of Chelm, their minds in confusion, their world in chaos. When would they ever be allowed to get on with their lives?

"This obsession with government has brought us nothing but

tusris ! ", the baker sighed , " Why can't we go on living the way we've always lived? I bake bread? ; you buy bread! If I steal, I go to jail. If I've got no way to earn a living, I become a schnorrer or, if that's below my dignity, a Council elder. Before they started all this groisse tumel , this narrishkeit , about government we never quarreled. Now we fight over which end of a pickle gets eaten first ! Like we hear today, you never heard such accusations!

It wasn't so long ago either, that life was pleasant: Yeshiva - buchers rocked back and forth all day in schul ; schnorrers lay in the gutter and dreamed of being aristocrats ; schlemiels spilt hot coffee on schlimazls ; green pickled herrings hanged on the walls whistling ; chazzans lulled themselves asleep listening to old Yosele Rosenblatt records ; moels soaked heaps of foreskins in formaldehyde ; yentas banged ears ; maggids scared us out of our wits with hellfire and brimstone ; goniffs stole from groisse machers , who cheated you and me .

The point is, everybody was happy. I tell you, this insanity has shortened all of our lives twenty years! "

"What are you saying, Schmuel?" Isaac, the synagogue shammas (sexton) , replied : "Have you ever heard tell of any place in the world without government? It's simply unheard of. Look ; it's obvious: You want to build a house? I want to build a house. So what happens? We go to the government ! If my friends are higher up than your friends , I get the house and you don't. Society can't function without government; it's as simple as that. There's no other way to get things done. "

"Sure, sure", retorted Meyer the innkeeper: " But what kind mishegass is this funny idea of being ruled when you want to be ruled, and not ruled when you don't want to be ruled? Suppose, just to take an example, I want to be ruled?

"Nu? So you're ruled!"

"And if I don't want to be ruled?"

"Nu? So you're not ruled!"

" But, and I bet you never thought of this : suppose I want to rule !

"Nu? So, go ahead and rule, who's stopping you?"

Which sums up, more or less, what happened to Chelm. Within a short time the villagers found themselves in the category most congenial to them. By far the largest group consisted of those people who wouldn't have understood the new arrangement if Elijah had suddenly reappeared on earth and gone wandering through Chelm trying to explain it to them. Going about their daily round as if nothing had changed, they made the best adjustment to this perplexing state of affairs. Indeed the majority of them could not later recall that Chelm had ever gone through a crisis of authority.

The second group consisted of those who needed somebody to rule them. They scrambled to pay their taxes on time, submitted their letters for censorship, labored at menial jobs like worker ants in exchange for empty promises of modest but guaranteed pensions at the end of the road. In their spare time they attended great rallies at which they shouted praises to their rulers.

Those who didn't want to be ruled canvassed petitions and organized demonstrations against the rulers. They distributed tracts and pamphlets denouncing them. During synagogue services they gathered in the central downtown plaza for ostentatious demonstrations and public burnings of Bibles, Torahs and Talmuds. They were to be found hanging out in Chelm's kosher deli, talking politics and agitating for revolution.

Those who wanted to rule soon installed themselves in the seats of power. They levied exorbitant taxes, gave summary justice, established ministries stocked with their friends, cronies and sycophants. They were perpetually embroiled in elaborate conspiracies against one another.

All disputes between the rulers, anarchists and subjects were arbitrated by the Council of wise elders. As the Council discovered, most of its' efforts were diverted to censuring those who didn't want to be ruled, for bullying those who wanted to be ruled into standing up for their rights against the rulers.

9.

The Fortunes of War

So? Noch amol: What else is new? The Russians invaded Poland. As the saying goes, if you want to avoid old age, hang yourself when you're a kid. While the Polish landed aristocracy fled, their pitiable, hastily assembled army left Chelm to its fate. If these Jews

wished to defend themselves they were welcome to do so : it was no business of theirs.

At night all cows are black.

From their side as well , the Council of Elders sat by and did nothing. War was not a branch of philosophy; invasion was a pragmatic, not a theoretical, reality . Such things were best left in the hands of the government they'd established with such deliberate care.

There now being four categories of Chelmites , it was only to be expected that responses to the crisis would follow on four different lines. The bulk of the population, those who found even the subject of government uninteresting and made little distinction between Polish, Russian or Talmudic rule, lived as they always had, from day to day. Potatoes they ate, five days a week , sugar beets on Fridays and potato soup on Saturdays. How did they survive? : by 'crawling up the walls'!

Those who hated rule organized themselves into battalions. Armed with pitchforks and clubs, they spread out along the banks of the Uherka River to defend Chelm to their last drop of blood.

Those who needed to be ruled patiently awaited the transfer of power.

Those who wanted to rule used the opportunity to patch up their differences. In private meetings they determined how to best exploit the Russian presence to advance their own ambitions. This conspiracy resulted in a directive to those who needed to obey rulers to sabotage the efforts of those who were out fighting the Russians. In this they succeeded very well , so much so that the para-military gangs of thugs that the Russian Army had assigned to the task gained control of the village with no loss of life to themselves.

As their only motive for conquering Chelm was plunder, they slaughtered the population indiscriminately, ignoring all distinctions between soldiers , rulers , subjects, rabbis ,merchants or scholars. Nor did they spare the Council, murdering Rabbi Sobel himself right in the assembly rooms of the Council, huddled on the floor in the midst of the prayer of Schema Yisroel !

10.

Tyranny, on Delivery

Staying just long enough to exact a ruinous tribute, the invaders moved on. Apart from the sporadic pogrom , the Russians had no further use for the shtetl of fools.

In accordance with its' time-honored historic destiny , it was left to its' own devices.

The vexing issue of the appropriate form of government for Chelm surfaced again at the wake following the funeral of Rabbi Sobel:

"We must have government!" pleaded Rabbi Rubin. There were no murmurs of dissent. The notion of a people living together without government was something of which no mental image could be formed .

"Maybe we should govern?" Rabbi Lefkowitz timidly suggested.

"That's a notion!" snapped Rabbi Yonkel with undissimulated sarcasm: "And, Rabbi Lefkowitz , you tell me, to whom can the people turn to resolve the really big issues ? Suppose for a moment that we do agree to accept the burdens of government? After spending the whole day worrying about Schmuels's goat, Leah's horse , Pincus's son's bar mitzvah , the potholes in the roads and the salary of the town undertaker , where do we find the time to debate matters of tradition , law, justice and religion ? Even a stupid ox cannot be forced to move in two directions at once: we cannot be concerned with practical concerns! "

" I have a suggestion", said Rabbi Abramowitch, who had replaced Rabbi Sobel on the Council: " Since it is impossible, (indeed a logical contradiction), that a people should rule itself - for who can persuade himself to do what he will do only under compulsion? - I propose that Chelm be ruled by someone who is not a Chelmiter ."

Speculation ran high as to likely candidates for this honor. Who would agree to such a thing? Whom could they find, other than a resident of Chelm, to accept the frustrations of worrying about Chelm's business?

Rabbi Yonkel was the first to grasp the implications of the new idea :

"My esteemed colleagues", he said, " learned, sagacious, holy, humble and wise chochems ! Not knowing how to solve the problems of their own country, the Russians have wasted many lives to take over ours. Since ruling Poland is so important for them , I suggest that we ask them to govern Chelm also ."

The resolution passed by a narrow margin, and only after prolonged and strenuous debate. Rabbis Rubin, Lefkowitz and Abramowitch volunteered to form the delegation to Lublin to hand the village administration over to the Russian Army.

11.

On Widows, Goats and Other Matters

It may appear strange to some of us who are accustomed to think rationally - (though one may search long and hard for a rational definition of rational thought) - but it appears that the Russians , despite having invested so much energy in the conquest of Poland, were somewhat less than pleased with the prospect of governing Chelm.

"You Jews handle your own affairs." , grumbled the regional military commander.

" But sir, speaking to you with the greatest respect" , explained Rabbi Rubin, " That's just what the problem is; we've failed in every attempt to do so ! And think of what will happen if Chelm remains without a mayor? Anarchy is certainly the next step. And after that? Well - revolution for one thing ! What else?

And, even if the revolution fails - a sure certainty , Chelm being Chelm, - you still have to make an example of us! Without rulers there can be no rule. Without rule there can be no order. Without order there can be no command. Without command there is no possession. Without possession there is no ownership! And without ownership - without ownership ...well, what was the point of your invasion in the first place?"

" Get your smelly backsides and your Yid dialectics back to Chelm!" roared the garrison commander, " and don't let me ever see your faces again!"

But as they backed out the door with a profusion of gestures of obeisance and obnubulation , he shouted after them, " Expect your new mayor the first thing tomorrow morning!"

True to his word, their new Russian mayor arrived shortly before noon the next day. It quickly became evident that he was neither Jew nor Pole. Within a few weeks, he and his underlings had raped the wives of all the leading men of the village. The poor were rounded up and organized into chain gangs. Working around the clock they built him a grandiose mansion in an outlying neighborhood. The jails were emptied of thieves and cutthroats to stock his goon squads. Most of the members of the political opposition were put to death. The Council of the elders was dissolved, the synagogue boarded up. All teaching of Jewish law was forbidden.

For the townsfolk of Chelm, in such sufferings there were no surprises and were readily assimilated as the order of the day. Public opinion held it better to make a bad bargain than no bargain at all.

Yet the tyrant of Chelm, Ivan Ivanovitch Petrov, after a reign of less than two months, fled one night under cover of darkness and never returned. Once again, Chelm found itself mired in anarchy.

The Council reconvened the day after his mysterious abdication. The rabbis could not fathom what had motivated him to quit a situation where he had but to raise his voice for people to come running to fulfill his every command. However, there is little doubt that his departure had been precipitated by the accumulation of a number of minor incidents, of which the following may be taken as typical:

One of the few services that Petrov had provided for the townsfolk was in the maintenance of a tribunal, 3 days a week between the hours of 11 and 1. People were encouraged to come to him at these times with their grievances and disputes. For those willing and able to pay, Petrov's vanity was gratified when he sat, a modern-day Solomon dispensing justice in all matters great and small.

On a certain Monday morning, two months or so into his tenure, Petrov opened his doors to a delegation consisting of Rabbis Abramovitch and Lefkowitz, the town's kosher slaughterer, and the widow Greenberg.

"Pani Petrov" said Rabbi Abramovitch, in tones mixing respect with obsequiousness in equal amounts, "The matter I bring to you today concerns the very future of Chelm itself."

"Hey! Yid! So what? Svolitch! Spit it out! I haven't got all day!" His legs crossed and riding boots resting on the desk top, Petrov picked his teeth with the point of a sheath knife. "If it's important, Reb Hamflesh, I listen to you.", he held up a glass of vodka and shook it in his face, "But, if it's not? - Woe unto all of you!"

"Sire: it is a indeed matter of great urgency. Far be it for one such as I to waste the time of a high dignitary such as yourself, Pani Petrov! For rightly has it been said that, "A wise man keeps silent as long as he can", and "It is good for a wise man to be silent. How much more so for a fool?", and I am but a fool, who passes his days studying the Tal - "

"Go to hell with you and your Talmud!" Petrov screamed, "and I want no more of your introductions, Reb Abrahamster and Reb Laugh-Shits!" Petrov pointed ostentatiously to his watch: "You have exactly five minutes to state your case."

"Yes...Forgive us", they replied together. Rabbi Abramovitch went on, "Far be it for us to consume your rare moments of leisure with nonsense. For, if I remember correctly, it is said of Solomon that -" Rabbi Lefkowitz silenced him with a stern gesture, then picked up the story:

" I will come right to the point: This women here , a poor widow whose husband, Meyer Greenberg, Boruch Hashem! , died six years ago leaving her nothing, that is to say , some cows and chickens , one ass and a few dozen goats, the latter being the object of our visit.

Honored mayor, worrying about goats may seem nothing more than a petty nuisance for you , but to a poor widow like Mrs. Greenberg they are everything in the world. Once a year she fattens up two or three of them and arranges to have them slaughtered. The meat she sells to the grocers. All this by way of explaining why we have our slaughterer, the shochet , with us today.

It may seem like nothing to you, Pani Petrov, but Mrs. Greenberg has no way of carting her goats into town without assistance. She is therefore obliged to pay somebody to take them to the kosher butcher. Then she must pay an additional sum to a rabbi, usually one of us, to examine the meat and give his approval in the form of an official stamp testifying that it has been slaughtered and dressed in accordance with our kosher laws. We of the nation of Israel have always taken pride in our humane customs with regard to the killing of livestock. As you will find it written in the book of the prophet Elijah: " There will come a day when the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and - "

" Rabbi Lefkowitz!" interrupted Rabbi Abramovitch, " I cannot understand why you have deemed it suitable to take up the mayor's time with such tedious displays of erudition ! If you will now permit me , I will relate the rest of the story in a more thoroughly business-like fashion!"

" And if you do not tell me immediately, "screamed Petrov, " what all this has to do with me, my high tribunal, or your filthy town, I will have all of you locked up!" He slammed his knife on his desk and jumped out of his seat.

" I will stick to the point", Rabbi Abramovitch continued, "Well: it just so happened that the man to whom the goats were entrusted was a worthless paskudnyak ! - (the Russian word caused Petrov to burst out into loud guffaws) - and, what was worse, (no criticism, by the Torah!, of your Lordship !) , he was a Gentile and knew nothing of our customs. Or perhaps he did know them, but

since he intended to steal the meat, it made little difference to him. Once out of her sight he drove the goats to another town and had them slaughtered by a Polish butcher in an utterly atrocious fashion. He did not return, after this, to the widow Greenberg, but took the freshly slaughtered meat home for himself.

Fortunately, Mrs. Greenberg learned of the theft in time, and was able to have the man arrested the same day. This brings us up to date, and to our reasons for appearing before you today.

The widow Greenberg came to us with the slaughtered meat, bringing along this butcher, (an honorable tradesman of Chelm, sir, if there ever was one!) They wanted to find out from us if there exists some official procedure for unslaughtering the meat, so that it can be reslaughtered with our benediction. If this turns out to be possible, she may then either sell it or keep it for her own use. You must understand, honored mayor, Mrs. Greenberg is a very very poor woman, left all alone in the world. She would like to convince the shochet that, since her intentions were kosher, the meat really is also kosher. But our shochet, your Lordship, is an honest man; and not once in all his days had he heard of meat being reslaughtered, and refuses to do unless we prove to him that it's allowed by the Torah."

Petrov was hopping about the room on one foot by now, stammering with pent-up rage, his sweating face red as borscht. Removing a boot, he threw it against the wall:

"And what is the name of blazing hell has anything of this got to do with me?!!" he roared.

"Well, your honor, it is, in the strictest sense, a religious matter. But, as the shochet will not abide by the religious authority, it becomes a matter for the civil administration. We've come here, to you, Pani Petrov, to beseech you in the humblest manner to draw up some kind of legal certificate that will testify that the goat has somehow be unslaughtered, thereby opening the door for the shochet to have it reslaughtered in any way he deems fit. That much we should be able to do to save Mrs. Greenberg from starvation!

Your refusal to do this will leave us with no choice but to concur with the orthodoxy of the shochet and condemn the meat as treff."

"Get out of my sight this very instant, all of you!!" Petrov screamed. The four visitors raced to the open door.

"But your reverence" pleaded Rabbi Lefkowitz as they backed out into the street, "It's because of problems like

these that we wanted you here in the first place. And, if you don't imagine that the fate of Chelm itself is involved, you're much mistaken ! Suppose theshochet refuses to work for us any more, and leaves for another village ! Suppose we forget the observe of our kosher laws! Suppose our good shochet has to start competing with goyische butchers? What will happen if the citizens of Chelm believe that we've neglected our duty to protect the widow and the orphan? What then, Pani Mayor? What then, I ask you?"

" What then?? I'll tell you, what then!! Get the hell out of my sight!! If I ever see another filthy Yid face here again, I'll hang a dozen hostages! I'll shoot you all!! I'll set fire to this pig-sty!! I'll ..I'll..I...!

" The tyrant of Chelm having exhausted his store of imprecations, collapsed into a chair speechless and gasping for breath

A week later , Ivan Ivanovitch Petrov's horse was nudged out of Chelm at 3 in the morning , to carry him back to Lublin and the train to St. Petersburg .

12.

And why not?

The wrangling over the causes of Petrov's precipitous departure went on for some time. Eventually the Council, recognizing that it never would understand what had impelled him to leave, turned to the next item on the agenda: the perennially vexing issue of government.

"Reb Yonkel!" Rabbi Yehudah was an elderly, much-beloved sage, conspicuous by a scruffy beard which looked as if tufts of cotton had been placed at different places around his face. Lame for more than a decade, he gesticulated with his cane, but without malice , in the direction of his audience : " What sense is there in continuing these fruitless experiments in government? Before we began with this government here, government there business, if my memory serves me aright , everybody was happy. Then there was only laughing and singing. now there is only rachmones - endless woe and lamentation !

Our succession of failures have taught us nothing, yet we appear almost eager to engage ourselves in an enterprise that is only bound to bring renewed grief. My advice to this venerable assemblage of sages - (whom I demean by my very presence , (a prolonged fit of coughing)) - is that Chelm dispense with government altogether ."

" We've grown accustomed to hearing nonsense from you, Reb Yehudah!" snapped Rabbi Yonkel, in good form

as ever : " yet never before has such a thoroughly ridiculous proposition been heard during a meeting of the Council! To live without government is simply unthinkable. A people without government is like a law book that isn't the Torah. It has some sort of scribbling on its pages, and once in awhile it may even say something - but so what? In the same way, Chelm without government is nothing . It is not even Chelm!"

The effect of this final phrase in Reb Yonkel's discourse was to give Rabbi Lefkowitz a sudden inspiration:

"That's a splendid idea, Reb. Yonkel! A mitzvah from heaven ! My brethren, defenders of the Law, laudable in all things - let's change the name of Chelm to something else!"

Everyone stared at him as if he'd lost his mind:

"Why?"

" Nu ? if Chelm without government is not even Chelm, it can maybe be called something else? "

"Like what...for instance? " snarled Rabbi Yonkel, in a tone that conveyed all that possibly can be conveyed of withering sarcasm:

"Like ...like ...like Elchem !!"

A motion was therefore placed on the floor which , in effect, allowed that Chelm could call itself Elchem whenever it chose to be ungoverned.

This strange motion carried with a single vote. Indeed it was Rabbi Yonkel himself who cast it at the last moment.

"We've tried everything else", he sighed.

13.

What's in a Name?

It was at the synagogue services on the following Friday evening that the villagers heard for the first time that they would henceforth be living in a single place, but with two names: Chelm and Elchem . Chelm was governed , Elchem ungoverned . Since every resident, if he lived in either place, lived in both , all were both governed and ungoverned.

Justifications for this procedure were drawn from comparisons with the condition, both free and unfree , of the soul in the body; with the bride and bridegroom in Solomon's Song of Songs; with the Diaspora, combining as it did the sufferings of Exile with the promise of Return; and so forth and so on.

The more philosophical inclined among the wise elders devised a tightly reasoned rationale to prop up this peculiar fabrication. Long experience had shown that all

systems of government were eventually self-defeating . Whenever a new form of government replaced an earlier one, it always turned out to embody features which, though the opposite of whatever had been wrong with its predecessor , were just as bad, if not worse.

Any flaw in the governance of Chelm could now be side-stepped simply by moving all aggrieved parties to Elchem. As the present system of government contained a loophole for every contingency it might, it was to be hoped , evolve in such a way that only the best features were retained.

For Chelm's mayor the wise elders reappointed Chiam. It was understood that , although Chiam wielded authority in Chelm, he was just an ordinary citizen in Elchem .

Chelm/Elchem collapsed in two days. In the middle of the night, sometime around 2 A.M., all the Council's rabbis were rudely summoned from their beds to a meeting in the Assembly with a delegation from the public demonstration gathered in the town square. Their spokesman was none other than Chiam himself :

"Learned rabbis", he said, ' this mishegass has got to stop."

Rabbi Lefkowitz's head was bowed in contrition: " We are prepared to hear the worst. We accept your admonition "

"Honored sages: I don't know where to begin to relate to you all the miseries I've suffered since I was reappointed mayor of Chelm - or is it Elchem? To tell you the truth I don't honestly know! Anyhow, I'm mayor of one and not the other.

Well: suppose, (this actually happened, by the way), Ziskind the tailor and Yitzhak the shoemaker accuse each other of robbery . First one, then the other, they come to me demanding that the other one be locked up. What can I say? : both the bartender and the drunkard smell of whiskey! What they actually did to each other, you can't learn by any means. When I question Ziskind about Yitzhak's accusation , he says:

" I don't have to answer to you , because I'm a citizen of Elchem" (That's right. Now I remember: Chelm is governed, Elchem is not governed.) But then I return to Yitzhak, who cries , " I demand my rights as a citizen of Chelm! And when I go back to Ziskind he says the same thing. What is really happening is that Yitzhak, while in Chelm, accuses Ziskind of a crime , which Ziskind admits he might have done in Elchem, over which I have no jurisdiction.

Everyone knows, when you talk to a fool, it's a conversation between two fools. When Ziskind accuses Yitzhak, then he is in Chelm, and Yitzhak is in Elchem! I tell you, wise teachers, whom I have not once ceased to revere since the days of my youth, it's too much for me. I resign. "

" And that's not the whole story either!" interrupted another villager, "because Chiam himself, though he may speak against others, has raised the price of milk in Elchem, and demands his money in Chelm!"

The rabbis were readily forthcoming in their apologies to the community. After hearing all points of view, they excused themselves to retire to the inner chambers for prolonged deliberation. Although they recognized that something had gone terribly wrong with their ingenious construction, it turned out to not be an easy matter to lay one's finger on it. Rabbi Yehudah was the first to discover the fallacy in their reasoning:

" Venerated and estimable colleagues, ", he said, "among whom it is my great privilege to sit, you whose powers of illumination are so vast that even the Sanhedrin of ancient Jerusalem would have been embarrassed to come into your presence : when we decided to change the name of Chelm to Elchem, we did not really expect that Elchem would be ungoverned. Our real intention, which we failed to grasp at the time, was only that Elchem's government should be different from that of Chelm!"

The rabbis congratulated Rabbi Yehudah for his astounding powers of penetration. The Council returned to the populace the next day to announce that everyone subject to the laws of Chelm would also be subject to those of Elchem. Elchem's government was somewhat different from Chelm's, although they had not yet gotten around to determining in what ways they would differ. Rabbi Lefkowitz had been proud to enunciate the catch-phrase of the new innovation: "One village, two systems!"

For mayor of Elchem, they reappointed Yitzhak.

14.

Identity Crisis

Several weeks passed. Then before the Council stood Horowitz the landlord.

"Holy rabbis!", he began, " May you inspire awe among the angels! May the heavenly host bow down before your feet! May -" Rabbi Abramowitch stopped him, " Mr. Horowitz", he chided, " if you want to flatter the beings of the supernatural realms, it's quite all right with me. But if you please, leave us out of it. "

" Mentors and teachers, truly I meant no offense. " His voice was trembling and his eyes overflowed with tears, " If I overreach myself, it is only because it is my sad duty to bring you dreadful news: Chelm and Elchem have declared war on one another! "

"That's ridiculous!" Rabbi Lefkowitz barked, glowering at him as if he'd been personally offended, " How can Chelm and Elchem fight a war when the citizens of the one are also citizens of the other ? "

"Narrishkeit it is indeed, and even worse than that as it must appear to such wise dignitaries as yourselves , if you choose to think so. Unfortunately it's also true. I prayed all night long that I would not have to appear before you today.

It started with the old bickering of Chiam and Yitzhak over milk and shoe leather. Begging your pardon, both of them have grown more cunning through experience. Now they dare to do whatever they merely fancied before. Whenever Chiam issues a law, Yitzhak brings out a law nullifying his law. And Chiam does likewise .

Yet somehow they were able to get together long enough to raise taxes. And together they lowered the minimum wage . Honored sirs, to have to pay higher taxes to both Yitzhak and Chiam, yet work for nothing at the same time , it's impossible! Need I remind you that it affects me too, because how are my tenants supposed to pay rent if they don't earn anything?

So some people go to Yitzhak, the rest to Chiam, begging for mercy . Chiam gives the matter some serious thought. Then he decrees that the citizens of Chelm don't have to pay taxes to the town of Elchem. And Yitzhak does likewise. Naturally, when the tax collectors come around, people tell them they'd already paid taxes to their own town , which is always the opposite from the one the tax collector claims to represent. To both Chiam and Yitzhak this is insubordination, and they order out the police (the same in both towns), to arrest anyone who didn't pay taxes to them .

Finally, outraged at the arrest of their citizens by the police from another village, Chiam and Yitzhak send out more police to arrest the ones who were making the arrests ! It was only a matter of time before they accused each other of invasion and commanded their subjects to take up arms! Since all the inhabitants of Chelm also live in Elchem, they were, in effect, demanding that the people declare war against themselves!

And gentlemen, excuse me for saying this, but, following this logic to its conclusion, even Chiam and

Yitzhak should be fighting themselves, since they may be mayors of Chelm and Elchem, but they're also citizens of Elchem and Chelm!"

"Schema Israel ! ", Rabbi Yonkel cried and rent his garments, "Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echod ! "

15.

Reinventing Socialism

The Council dissolved the government and hostilities ceased forthwith. No pitched battles had been fought and no-one was injured.

"This Chelem-Melem, Elchem-Melchem mishegass has got to stop!" Rabbi Silverstein insisted, " Already we're the laughing-stock of all Jewry!"

"We've tried absolutely everything! The situation is hopeless! " wailed Rabbi Abramovitch.

Rabbi Yonkel, a tall man of erect posture, rose to his full stature. Between stroking his long, silver-streaked patriarchal beard, he grasped the lectern with trembling hands. Fixing his audience with the sharp eyes of an eagle, (their piercing gaze no wit diminished by years of studying far into the nights) , he commanded silence. Then he began a speech in that style of flat-footed ponderousness familiar to those who'd listened to him over the years, and which had made him famous even beyond the borders of Chelm:

" My dearest friends! Ye mighty founts of erudition, sages all! Scions of genealogies of no less eminent sages, stretching back to the dawn of time! Your Reb Yonkel feels nothing but shame from having to lay these evidences of his feeble capacity of thought before the accumulated sagacity and intellect, like a fabled treasure of so many precious gems , herein assembled before me ! "

This time no-one bothered to contradict him. They were not in good humor. After glancing uneasily about the room he went on:

" The issues that confront us this day are very grave. Our endeavors have come to a complete halt, and we are obliged to return to first principles. Speaking frankly , it has always been obvious to me that most of our troubles stem from the fact that we have never resolutely dealt with the fundamental dilemma of government: happiness versus rule .

Even a certain notorious anti-Semite, an Englishman I believe, knew a thing or two when he wrote : "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown!" Does not Solomon himself state that rule is a burden? When subjects are happy,

rulers are miserable . And usually, when rulers are happy, their subjects live like slaves.

And if we're going to have rulers - and rulers above rulers - and even rulers above those rulers! Very soon it becomes impossible!"

"Rabbi Yonkel" - it was the voice of Rabbi Yehudah as his most ingratiating - " May I be permitted the audacity to ask again: Does Chelm really need a government? People didn't know that they wanted to be governed until we told them they did. Not a single one of our ideas has succeeded. Even tyranny doesn't work in Chelm! Life was so horrible under the Russian Ivan, that if the ten plagues that Moses inflicted on Pharaoh had descended upon us, it couldn't have been worse.

And are we going to continue to pile Yitzhaks' upon Chiams' , and Horowitzs' on top of Yitzhaks ? Let's forget these silly notions of government and go back to living the way we've always done ! "

As Rabbi Yehudah spoke the Council sat immobilized,. For no little time they all stared at him in cold and stony silence. Then as if on cue, they all started talking loudly against him together.

"No government?" cried Rabbi David, a young man in whom senility had not yet made significant inroads. He'd joined the Council but recently; already , however , he'd developed the habit of compulsively readjusting his glasses with his right forefinger while speaking : "Reb Yehudah, do you realize what you're saying? Not since the days of Sabbatai Zevi, the false Messiah, has such infamy been spoken!"

"As the Talmud says", sing-songed Rabbi Silverstein , "Man is like the angels in three ways, and like the animals in three other ways. If you, want us to start living like the animals, Rabbi Yehudah you're certainly welcome to do so on your own. But I, and I believe the rest of this distinguished congregation, haven't forgotten that the better half of us is angel! We intend to do all that we can to bring back government ! "

" In the final analysis", snapped Rabbi Yonkel, "Reb Yehudah is talking nothing but insolence and ignorance! I, too can quote Talmud ! :

" A wise man knows what he says. A fool says what he knows.

" Let me suggest to you , Reb Yehudah, that you return to Yeshiva for a few months before making your voice heard among us again . Ignoring this unfortunate digression, it happens that I've come up with a way out of our perplexities. " The assembly quieted down.

" As the twin functions of government are happiness and rule, which are rarely identical, although they may overlap , being as distinct as smoke and fire, or leaves and twigs, both of which arise from the same source yet have little in common ; and as any exclusive pre-occupation with one is bound to bring disaster upon us by neglecting the other; and as it appears that all functions of government need to be brought under the same roof; and that, furthermore we will have to govern ourselves since nobody else seems to want to do it for us I therefore propose that Chelm's government be divided between 3 autonomous, albeit inter-related, branches.

Firstly: we must have a ministry of rule. Then we want a ministry for happiness. An independent branch of government will then be necessary to administer these ministries . I have thought long and hard about this , and reached the conclusion that it is only in this fashion that we can guarantee that the people of Chelm will be secure , happy, and unconfused ! "

" Not since the days of Solomon has such wisdom been spoken !" cried Rabbi Lefkowitz with elation, his enthusiasm reciprocated by all the other members of the Council. Even Rabbi Yehudah, formerly so critical, clapped his hands and improvised a little dance. Rabbi Yonkel's proposal, cast into the form of a motion, was carried by consensus.

"And let it also be resolved", cried Rabbi Abramovitch, "that the name of Chelm be forever changed to Elchem !!"

His motion was seconded and passed without a murmur of dissent.

It was in this way that Socialism came to Chelm - or Elchem - or whatever it chooses to call itself.

16.

In Pursuit of Happiness

And so the municipal buildings of Elchem were soon crammed with bureaus, each with half a dozen or more offices under its command. There were offices in the basements, offices in the attics. There were offices even in the bathrooms and coat closets!

And if there are bureaus, there have to be bureaucrats - no ? Before long, there wasn't a citizen of Elchem who wasn't some kind of bureaucrat. There were directors and sub-directors , administrators and subalterns, division supervisors and district coordinators, civil servants and case workers, executives and secretaries, activators, implementors, facilitators, commisioners, arbitrators,

ombudsmen, negotiators, hangers-on, layabouts, flunkies, stooges, lackeys, running dogs, cranks , and - (have I forgotten anyone?) - all the trappings of a modern democratic polity in a state of advanced civilization.

Hierarchies, chains of command, balances of power and intricate mechanisms of countervailing forces were everywhere in evidence. While law and order were enforced by police, lawyers and judges, social workers of every description dedicated their lives to seeing that everyone was happy. Finally, administrators at many levels, grades and ranks monitored the smooth workings of government.

In these sorry times, any person who stole as much as a crust of bread was more miserable than one who, in former days, had stolen the Minorah from the synagogue.

The magnitude of the theft is of no relevance; the entire police force of Elchem works around the clock to track him to his lair. Even in the middle of the night, when all good citizens are safely inside their homes , when even the mice in the synagogue are fast asleep, the suspected goniff is liable to be dragged from his bed in his pajamas and made to walk on bare feet to the police station.

One can be certain that the police convoy , after traveling half way across town, is brought to a halt. A social case worker sent from the ministry of happiness is there to confront them with orders that their captive , innocent until proven guilty, be accompanied back to his bed and allowed to stay there until dawn. Then and only then can a proper summons be delivered. Even at this moment, the case worker says, the ministry of administration is debating whether to charge the police with trespassing.

While, with that close attention to particulars and addiction to casuistry for which Chelmites are noted, the police and the case-worker debate the merits of their respective positions, the poor nebbish of a goniff will be left standing out on the street corner in the wintry night, turning into a block of ice . Were some kind-hearted kibitzer to suggest that, since the prisoner has already walked halfway to the jail, it would be better for him to continue on to the police station rather than contract pneumonia, the town officials might stop quarreling just long enough to tell him to mind his own business. Otherwise, the police suggest, he may be in danger of being locked up himself. And if that happens, even the case worker won't put in a good word for him!

The argument goes on for quite some time, but eventually a mediator arrives from the ministry of

administration. He soon reaches the same conclusion as the friendly outsider : that the prisoner be walked the shortest distance that will secure him from the cold. Now, however, a new problem presents itself: being halfway between his home and the jail, between happiness and rule, the choice of which of the two directions to send him is impossible to make. This being Chelm (Elchem for now)

Therefore the prisoner may be forced to stand on the street corner for the rest of the night until the sun comes out , an arrest warrant is delivered to him, and he can be taken to the station.

In the short term, being in jail is better than standing out on a bitterly cold street corner. But, honored and attentive readers: don't imagine that the troubles are over for this pitiable schlimazel . For we defy anything to arouse compassion in the hearts of decent people more readily than his trial the next day! Can you believe it? : a law-and-order bureaucrat for prosecutor, a happiness-bureaucrat for public defender , and an administration-bureaucrat for his judge!

According to the law, the goniff can be sent to jail: he did steal, indeed he admits to stealing the little thumbnail of a heel of pumpernickel lying on the floor of Chelm's bakery. The judge is not obliged to punish him , mind you; it is the prosecutor who is determined to pressure the judge into applying the maximum sentence.

The defender has no motivation for establishing his client 's innocence, a moot point since after a night on the street, the nebbish is ready to confess to anything. His reason for being there is to defend his client's right to happiness. The final verdict doesn't interest the judge any more than it does him. His only reason for presiding is to make sure that the intricacies of the trial don't become too complicated.

Nu ? So the schlub , the hapless wretch does serve out his sentence, kinohaira ! , although his indefatigable social worker is able to provide him with so many privileges, comforts and amenities that, schlemiel that he is, he briefly imagines that being a goniff is pretty clever after all .

The presence, or the imagined presence, of such arrogance did not please the forces of law and order, and it wasn't long before a law was passed stating that stealing a crust of bread was punishable by hanging! But - and I don't expect you to believe this but it's true - the social workers saw to it that when goniffs went to their

final reckoning, the noose was braided in such a way that it didn't scratch their necks!

And the complications within the legal and penal systems ended up causing problems within the rest of the bureaucracy as well. While the social workers did what they could to keep the police - citizens of Elchem in their own right - happy with their work, the prosecutors aggressively sponsored laws making a social worker's job all but impossible.

So that even as the rulers were bringing back ancient punishments like flogging, tattooing, ear-cropping, mutilation and branding, the likes of which had not been seen for hundreds of years, the social workers went around building clinics, hospitals, day care centers, homes for retired shammas, ski resorts for Yeshiva-buchers, pensions for schnorrers, and free psychiatry for yentas.

It got to be so bad in Elchem, that nobody could decide if he were happy or miserable.

Than this, greater misery does not exist on earth!

17.

Concluding Remarks

Surely the saga of Chelm's many valiant attempts to govern itself is without end! The name "Elchem" never found favor and everyone went back to calling it by its former name - which, as its origins lie in the sources of all true myth - will never be anything but CHELM, the Yiddish village of fools.

The Council of wise elders never will arrive at a workable form of government; indeed, those that last the longest are worse than those which immediately fall flat on their faces. And, although a wise rabbi or two may, from time to time, draw from their failure a lesson in politics, they never stay around long enough to put their ideas into practice. As the composition of the Council changes frequently, the same blunders are destined to be repeated time and time again.

So Chelm advances in years but never in wisdom.

Yet one is not inclined to say that Chelm fares any worse from its inability to do anything right, or get anything done, or even to organize a system for doing so. Its citizens may all be simpletons, but no one ever lives there who is really bad at heart.

Indeed: A legend relates that a Lamed- Vov, one of the 36 clandestine angels whose earthly presence alone spares this world from destruction, took a fancy to visit Chelm. A residence of a few months was enough to convince

him that the good folk of Chelm were, without a doubt, the most foolish of all the beings he'd encountered in his endless travels. Before his departure , (for as the Baal-Shem informs us, the Elect never stay in any one place for long) , he paid a visit to the Council president, at that time one Rabbi Baruch.

"Reb Baruch" he asked : " Why is it that Chelm, in living memory or recorded history, has never produced anything but fools?" Rabbi Baruch answered him thusly:

" Your question is normal, coming as it does from someone who has lived in our village for a short time only . We of Chelm have come to look upon our foolishness, as you call it, as a sign that we have found favor in God's eyes. Reflect upon those many persons who, exceedingly shrewd in the ways of the world, cease never to betray His commandments day after day? They do not hesitate to imagine themselves superior to Him, while we dwellers of Chelm, through our very incompetence and ignorance perhaps , are incapable of such presumption. Unable to devise laws to govern ourselves, we somehow manage to adhere to those laws which were not made by Man.

This made the Lamed-Vov thoughtful. Then he said: "Excuse me, Reb Baruch: but isn't it true that , in a certain sense, no-one ever really breaks the laws God handed down to Moses. Soon enough he comes to such grief that he must begin again, and yet again, until he learns how to keep them? How does that make this little village of yours better than others ?"

" I will tell you", replied the rabbi: "In all respects save foolishness, we surely are no better than anyone else . Yet Chelm possesses one characteristic through which it will always retain the esteem of Heaven. Tell me, sir, whoever you are - (for Rabbi Baruch , nor anyone besides a few chosen saints , would ever see in the Lamed-Vov anyone but the most ordinary of mortals) - Can you name me another settlement which, through the sorry account of its mishaps and woes , fills mankind with such laughter and joy? Somehow what the world calls wisdom draws such a long face that we may be forgiven, I think , if we prize our foolishness above most of what passes for intelligence elsewhere.

And consider this: could any people for whom God does not nurture a special fondness, have survived centuries of lamentable disasters from all its' undertakings? "

And when the Lamed-Vov heard this, he thought: "Truly I have lived in a village of saints."

And when, in his frequent returns to Heaven, he sits at the table of the Most High , the Lamed-Vov pleads for

leniency for every citizen of Chelm who, leaving the transitory governments of this world for the perfect one above, comes into His presence.

Afterword: From the Encyclopedia Britannica , 1986

Chelm : województwo (province), eastern Poland, established 1975, comprising an area of 1, 492 sq. mi. (3,865 km). On the east, it borders the Soviet Union; on the south, Zamos'c' province ; on the West, Lublin; and on the north Biala-Podlaska province. Chelm, one of the least densely populated provinces, has extensive meadows among fields of potatoes, rye, and sugar beets. The Bug , which constitutes the Soviet border, is the largest river; others in the province are the Wieprz, the Udal, and the Siennica . The Wieprz-Krzna drainage canal crosses both the northwestern and the southwestern corners of the province. During World War II the Nazis established the Sobibór (q.v.) extermination camp in the village of that name near the Bug River (the Ukrainian border) south of Wlodowa, then in Lublin province but now in Chelm. Some 250,000 Jews died there. Pop (1982 est.) 232, 800 .

Chelm : city , capital of Chelm , województwo (province), eastern Poland. The city is located on the Uherka River, a tributary of the Bug, 15 mi. (24 km) west of the Soviet border. It received town rights in 1233, passed to Poland in 1377 , and fell to Austria (1795) and then to Russia (1815) . During World War II, 90,000 people died in two German prisoner-of-war camps in the town. The Polish republic was proclaimed in Chelm in 1944. The city is a rail junction and commercial centre, with an economy that includes mineral extraction, wood processing, flour milling, brewing and the manufacture of cement (a quarter of Poland's annual production) and machinery. Pop. (1982 est.) 54,900.