

Why A Hen's Comb Falls Over

An Original Chelm Story by Fishl

While everyone knows that Chelm was a shtetl, not everyone knows that all of the yidishe mames had chickens in the coops attached to the back of their houses. Richer ones even had a goat. Fresh eggs and goat's milk are the best medicines for a sick person.

Anyway, one day clever, little Yankele was sitting in kheyder, daydreaming as usual, when the melamed came over and gave Yankele a sharp rap on the back of his neck. Yankele quickly awakened and looking right in the melamed's eyes asked him a question. It proved to be the start of the greatest turmoil and side-taking that Chelm had ever seen since antiquity.

We already know it was Yankele's question that precipitated the dilemma, that it occurred in the kheyher, that it occurred one day when the melamed rapped Yankele on the back of his neck. Nu, but what did Yankele ask, and why did it create such a division in the shtetl?

There was no problem for the melamed or the town folk when Yankele asked why ducks don't have combs and wattles like chickens, but this was another matter. When it came to why combs of hens fall to the side and why Rooster's combs are erect, that is an entirely different matter.

On the one hand there was the viewpoint led by the rabbi. His learned position was that the rooster is a proud bird. He has a beautiful curved tail with many feathers. He struts around crowing, and so it would be natural that his proud bright red comb be erect for all to see. That sounds logical, and all the men of Chelm raved about their wise rabbi.

But that is only the beginning of the story. Word spread that the rebetsn had another explanation. At first it was only gossip, but then the rumor went all around until the chief rabbi in Warsaw heard about it and decided to visit Chelm.

It seems that in the thousands of years rabbis have debated the torah, the mishne, gemore and all of the commentaries this question had never been raised. Imagine it was the opportunity for a once in a lifetime opportunity to have a decision

that would be written, and left for all of posterity to read and ponder. Before we go any further let's hear what argument the rebetsn used, and why the Chelmer men would not accept it.

When God made chickens, both sexes had erect combs. However, when an enemy threatened the chickens' nests the hens told the roosters, "Go and protect us—charge those enemies and spear them with the points of your combs." But this was not what actually had occurred.

Everyone knows that the rooster is a proud and a cocky bird. All that he likes to do is strut around all day long singing cock-a-doodle-do. He does not want to get his feathers ruffled or his proud comb bent.

So it became the duty of the hens to protect their nests and to go out to do battle. Everyone knows that you don't tangle with a mother hen when she is guarding the lives of her baby chicks.

You can guess what happened. After many hundreds of years and countless encounters the hens' combs began to flop to a side. Even the Mendelian selection and Darwin's Survival of the Fittest didn't work here.

Now you know why this disagreement almost tore Chelm apart—until Yankele, now a very old man had daydreamed a solution.

He said, "All of the other birds like the ducks, geese, turkeys and pigeons do not have erect combs. This means that both the males and females must have equally worn them down in their battles with intruders. Since the rooster is the only one who has a stiff comb, he must be the only coward.

This wise statement, by the elderly Yankele, has never been challenged by any rabbinical scholar. In fact there is a separate trachtate that has been added, for this matter does not fit into any of the existing categories. To this very day all talmudic students study this case as an example of the complexities in God's creations and how Yankele solved this enigma.