

Discovery of *The Book of Chelm*

by Philip Fishl Kutner

On an upper bookshelf in the last stack in the old Chelm Public Library was a thick, dust-covered book. Its black cover had long since faded and the edges of the acid paper pages were turning brown.

It was this book that caught the eye of Nar the Narrator, one of Our Yiddish Club members from Yenemsville on our trip to visit Chelm, Poland. When he asked the Chelm librarian if he could check out the book, she answered, "You can keep it—no one has ever taken it off the shelf."

It was only after returning home, and taking the book to an antiquarian dealer, that he learned it was *The Book of Chelm*. The only way that the brittle pages could be turned was to place a thin spatula between the sheets and inserting a clear plastic sheet between the brittle sheets. It was decided to make copies of these protected pages and never turn them again.

At this point we must leave the story for an explanation of the historic significance of the book's discovery. Readers who know about the *Book of Mormons* (an account written by the hand of Mormon upon plates taken from the plates of Nephi) have an idea of the similarity and nature to *The Book of Chelm*.

Joseph Smith found the Gold Tablets in a field. The book recounts the history and is the basis of the Mormon belief. Likewise *The Book of Chelm* recounts the start of Chelm and how it was populated. The story about an angel dropping baby fools in one spot (Chelm) is totally incorrect according to the account meticulously recounted in *The Book of Chelm*.

A quick look at the date 1344 and the handwritten pages in old medieval Yiddish made the book totally uninteresting to the Chelm scholars. It was only Nar's discovery that gave the Yiddish scholars of the world access to the greatest Jewish discovery since the discovery of the ancient scrolls in a cave in Israel.

Scholars from Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, Bar Ilan University, Vilnius University and Oxford University came to Nar's home to look at the copies Nar made of *The Book of Chelm*. Each maven read, transcribed and translated the tome.

YIVO convened a conference (attendance by invitation only) of the world's top Yiddish scholars. Papers were presented at plenary sessions and a vigorous debate ensued about the premises and conclusions drawn by each presenter. After much debate and compromise it was decided to release a final version of the translation of *The Book of Chelm*.

So, what did it say? What is the bottom line? How was Chelm founded? Who were the original settlers of Chelm? Why is Chelm known as the City of Fools? All of these questions were addressed and answered at the conference by these internationally renowned Yiddish scholars..

Der Bay received an early copy of the proceedings, and a concise summary of the conclusions was published. Needless to say, the answers to each of the questions would require a full chapter in itself. Here is a very, very brief summary to the answers as they appeared in the report.

How was Chelm founded?

Chelm was the original site of the Garden of Eden founded by God herself. It was chosen because of its solitude and beauty. Because the original settlers of Chelm were evicted from the Garden of Eden, it was vacant for millennia. Then wandering bands of Jews wishing to escape from attacks by Mongolian Huns sought refuge in the bucolic environs of Chelm.

Who were the original settlers of Chelm?

The wandering bands of Jews who first inhabited Chelm were the Lost Tribes of Israel. They were called the Lost Tribes of Israel because they lost their way in their journey after leaving the Promised Land. Because they were lost, we would call them losers.

Why is Chelm, known as the City of Fools?

Fools do foolish things. People who do foolish things are known as fools. The Lost Tribes of Israel got lost because they did foolish things. All they had to do was to follow the stars, just as a mariner does at sea. Unfortunately they did not and got lost. In their wanderings they finally were so tired that they decided not to go any further. Would you believe they ended their long journey in what now is Chelm.

The Elders of the tribes knew that some day, many years in the future, that the question would be raised, "What happened to the Lost Tribes of Israel?" It was decided to write *The Book of Chelm*

Copies of *The Book of Chelm* may be borrowed, by readers of *Der Bay*, from the Yenemsville Yiddish Public Library. The original was copied by scribes. Requests must be sent to *Oystsugn fun briv in der redaksye* (Excerpts from Letters to the Editor) in care of the editor. It will be published and the request will be forwarded to the Yenemsville librarian.