

# Chelm's Model Jail

by Philip Fishl Kutner

Criminologists from many countries came to Chelm to learn about an innovative method of rehabilitation. Because the standard punishment for breaking laws has been incarceration without rehabilitation, the rate of recidivism has been high. Even in the United States it costs more to house a criminal than it does to educate him.

## How Chelm Came to Have a Jail

Jews lived quietly in the small sleepy shtetl of Chelm for centuries. As bible-fearing people, transgressions were rare. When they did occur, the wise rabbi quoting scriptures, made wise decisions. However, as time went by and strangers came to town with word of the outside world, the number of sins increased. It was then that a new form of punishment was needed. The old "Eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" left too many disabled Chelmers who became a burden on the shtetl. The wise sages of Chelm decided that a jail would be necessary to punish the offenders, but it would have to be a place where the criminal would leave rehabilitated and would be doing community service.

## The Nature of the Jail

No bars or locked doors would exist in the jail. Inmates would live inside and sign out when they left and sign in upon return. Since Chelm is the closest place to the Garden of Eden, no one would want to leave the shtetl. If someone did not return, the word was out and the person soon came back.

Accommodations were simple but more than adequate. The men and boys had their own section and the women's and girls' dormitories were on the upper floor. The women did the normal household chores and the men did the repairs, gardening and took care of the livestock.

Part of each day was set aside for study and the illiterate soon learned to read and glowed in their new knowledge.

## Benefits to Chelm

- Little by little Chelm began to reap the rewards of this innovative means of incarcerating its sinners. Since services were held every day to help atone for their sins, there always was a minyan. Yes, the big shul was overflowing on the High Holidays and was full Friday nights and Saturday mornings, but during the week there often was not enough men

present for a minyan. Soon the only daily place to say Kadish was at the Chelm jail. Even for those who came only once a year, it definitely was appreciated.

- Since each repentant had to do community service, the inmates would chop wood for the poor, carry water, and take care of the livestock. Thus the poor, elderly and sick were not a burden on the shtetl. In the process the criminal developed compassion and new skills.

- Perhaps one of the most novel areas of rehabilitation was a method by which the inmate could pay back the debt to society. Because of the poor medical facilities, Chelm had a high mortality during childbirth and the men died from infections.

The novel approach was for a widower to go to the jail and select a stepmother for his children. As long as she tended to the needs of the children and the personal needs of the widower, she remained free. On the other side a widow came to the jail to select a stepfather for her children. Often she had a small business and he had to be helpful and do his share of bringing in income to support the family. In both cases parents with children are not as desirable as single men or virgins, and this helped alleviate the problem of single parents.

- One of the top advantages of the Chelm jail came with its utilization as a reformatory for juvenile offenders. By having the children mixed in with the same-sex adults made for a comfortable home-like environment. The elders acted as a stabilizing effect on the youngsters. It gave the elders a feeling of importance and made them act as better role models.

Youthful offenders are given the opportunity to continue their religious studies full time. If not, they accompany an elder on the rounds of community service. They are apprenticed and learn a trade. The only way they can be released is for their families to accept them back, or for them to mature and eventually be married to a widow or widower.

In recognition of *Der Bay's* positive publicity of the Chelm Jail, Chaim, the Chelm Commissioner of Corrections has sent a Chelm Citation to show its appreciation. Furthermore, any reader of *Der Bay* will be warmly welcomed and receive a guided tour of this internationally renowned model house of correction.