

Chelm's Nronim and Noronim

By Philip Fishl Kutner

It had to happen sooner or later. It happened in France with the Revolution and Napoleon. Later it happened in Russia with the Revolution and the overthrow of the Czar. The winds of change blew over the sleepy little shtetl of Chelm.

When Nar of the Yenemsville Yiddish Club of the USA returned home and reported of the changes that were occurring in Chelm the Yenemvillers were astonished. Here is what Nar told the Yiddish Club.

Nar's Report

It all started when Nachem Norr the Chelm shadkhn visited Lublin to find a match for the son of the Chelm vaser-treger. None of the fathers in Chelm wanted the vaser treger's son for a shidakh with any of their daughters. So Nachem had to go oysland.

When Nachem Norr returned from Lublin without a match (no Lubliner father would even think of such a match) he came back with a radio. And that was the start of the "two party system".

The old-timers called themselves Naronim—the followers of the ways of their grandfathers and their grandfathers' grandfathers. Their spokesman was Na Nar. He was Nachem's son and the nephew of The Yenemsville's Yiddish Club Nar.

The other group's spokesman and leader was Nachem's nephew, Nu Norr. Nu had been a mischievous boy in kheyder. Everyone new that no good would come of Nu. He rebelled at all of the rules of the old ways. The parents all warned their daughters about Nu. On the other hand the other boys admired Nu, and looked at him as a sort of leader.

Na Nar followed the old ways. He was proud of his heritage and to be called a Nar and leader of the Fools of Chelm, the Chelemer Naronim. Meanwhile Nu Norr questioned everything. When told anything by an elder, he always responded with "nu?, nu?" Soon he and his followers were known as the "Nuers".

The Nuers referred to themselves as the Progressive Party while the Naronim insulted them by referring to them as the Aggressive Party. Things reached a boiling point and the whole shtetl took sides and there was discord all about. It was decided to visit the Chelmer Gaon for a decision.

The Case Before The Chelmer Gaon

Sooner or later it had to happen. As the disagreements, name-calling and quarrels began to escalate, unusual situations arose. First, Na Nar's prize nanny (also called a doe) had a stillbirth with her kid—this goat always gave birth to frolicking twin kids.

Second, one day there was a terrible storm and the hail came down in pea-sized pellets. But the hailstones that came down on Nu Norr's house were the size of walnuts and did much damage to Nu Norr's house.

Na blamed Nu for his nanny's stillbirth and Nu blamed Na for the hailstorm damage. Na said that Nu went to the old witch who lived outside of town and that she cast an evil spell. Nu said that Na prayed in the synagogue that the Lord should punish Nu for his evil deed.

If this was the only problem the Gaon would have easily dismissed the case as nonsense, but the problem had escalated and divided the shtetl.

Na's followers were the elderly, the wealthy landowners and the merchants. They were what we would call the Conservative element of society. Nu's followers were the young people and the workers, the poor Chelm folk.

Nu and Na both presented their cases before the Chelemer Gaon. Meanwhile The Gaon's courtyard was crammed with Chelemer's awaiting the wise decision.

After much shukling and running his hands through his long white beard, the Gaon went into a long discourse peppered with "on the one hand" and "but on the other hand".... and that is my decision.

Everyone left unsure of what the decision was, but the Gaon had spoken and there would be no more disagreements, name-calling and quarrels. It was the decision that henceforth there would only be a difference of opinion.

So if you visit Chelm today you will find in the kavehayzer young and old men discussing the merits of Na and Nu. You will see them throw their hands up after their discourse and say Nu oder Na. So if you have an opinion be sure you know whether you are a Nanaer oder a Nunuer.