

Chelm's Great Political Debate

Philip Fishl Kutner

Politics, as we know it, came late to Chelm. Why have political parties when the Chelemer Rebbe could settle all problems? After all, the Rebbe was the smartest man in Chelm and no one would question the Rebbe's decision. But freedom came to Poland and there were national elections, county elections and soon it was Chelm elections.

Most of the time the main political parties were referred to as Mayners un Dayners. The Mayners said "Vos iz mayn iz mayn un vos iz dayn iz dayn." The Dayners said "Vos iz dayn iz mayn un vos iz mayn iz mayn."

Progresivs un kinsoyvativs, hobn nishters un hobners, oremelayt un raykhe were other names used to refer to the two different political parties. However, the official names of these two parties were the Chelemsnikers and Chelemn timers.

The snikers constituted the party of change. They wanted to bring in the Period of Enlightenment. They wanted "Equality for All" and the final abolishment of poverty. This would be done by having their members not pay taxes to the landowners. Their slogan was "Let the landowners pay the taxes from the money they take from us."

The nikers slogan was "Work is wonderful for those who have calloused hands." Their belief was that if you did not have calloused hands you should not work. Their belief was that their work of collecting money and spending it was equally hard and just as important. After all, what was the point in making money if it wasn't to be spent?

Lest you think that there were no other much, much smaller parties, let me set the record straight. A group referred to themselves as the partitioners. They were the separatists. Members believed that Chelm could not maintain its bucolic charm and way of life as part of Poland. They wanted to secede from the Polish Republic.

There was the Yeshiva Butters, young men who flunked out of the Yeshiva and had all kind of excuses. When anyone made a point the Butters responded with "but, but....". Most of the time there was nothing else but, "but, but".

Another splinter party was the Vaypers. A Vayper usually was a spinster, a divorcee or a widow. Their motto was "Help the forsaken, the outcasts of society, the ones whom men have discarded." No men were permitted to join the party.

The Political Debates and the Election

All of the parties had candidates up for election. Their names are not important—you will shortly find out why. The candidates' names have been lost, for no recorded notes were taken.

All of the parties held their own primary election. Since no one could agree on who the frontrunner was, each party decided that the only fair way was to have their nominee drawn from a tub filled with names of all the Chelemerers who were registered party members.

After all the parties drew their candidates from their respective tubs the date, time and place of the Great Political Debate was selected by the Chelm Rebbe. His decision was to have it take place on shabes right after shabes services in the Great Chelm Synagogue.

The Day of the Great Debate

All Chelemerers were seated and the chairs were set on the bima—one for each candidate and one for the rebbe who was going to act like a modern day emcee. However, a new problem arose. Who was going to sit on the left of the bima, for that would be the right side for the audience as they looked at the bima. Since Hebrew is read from right to left, the person sitting on the right would start and the one on the left would be the last one to speak.

This new problem was not as easy to solve. The Vayper Party candidate was Kurvele, who said gentlemen let women go first, so I should start.

Wait a minute said Alter Knoker, the Niker party candidate. Everyone knows the proverb, age before beauty. Thus I should lead off.

Vvvvvaart stuttered Boyni the Butter Party candidate. We are losers and need to have a little handicap advantage, I should start the debate.

The Sniker Party candidate, Shlime, cried out, "I don't care who goes first, as long as it's me."

There is no record of who won the debate, or if there ever was one. What is known is that the voting ballots were in Polish and were labeled treyf by the Rebbe.

If you visit Chelm, you will discover, that to this very day, the Jews of Chelm still do not vote.