

Yankl's Yiddish Yacking and Yodeling

by Philip Fishl Kutner

Over the years Chelm has had its share of unusual citizens. Some were internationally renowned rabbis, cantors, merchants and some were thieves. None, however, was more unusual than Yankl the Yiddish Yacker and Yodeler.

Yacking came naturally to Yankl, for his father Yosl was the town crier. He would go around calling out in front of each house to be sure the men attended services. For this he received a special seat at the eastern wall but no money. This made his wife, Yentl, angry and she told him so—as well as the rest of Chelm. The only answer Yosl gave was that he did it for the *koved*.

This explains Yankl's natural ability to yack, yack and yack. Of course, often it got him into trouble in kheyder with the resulting blows on the knuckles or across the back of his head. Once in a while it got so bad that the melamed even went to speak to Yosl and Yentl.

Ha, ha, ha, like as not the melamed left with a headache and with little result for his effort. Usually it was the new melamed in Chelm who fell into this trap. For weeks afterwards he was the butt of jokes by all the women and boys.

If word got out that the melamed was going to visit Yankl's house, there would be a group of boys who followed him at a distance. The boys quietly waited nearby until the voices inside Yankl's house became louder and louder. It was so loud that it could be heard halfway around Chelm.

Then the laughter of the boys drowned out the melamed, and he quickly left entirely embarrassed.

Yankl's keen ability to yack obviously was inherited. There was no couple in town that could match his parents. Even Yankl's brothers and sisters avoided any long discussions with him. This was likewise true for uncles, aunts and cousins.

There was, however, one person in Chelm who was a more astute yacker than Yosl, Yentl or even Yankl. She was Gendzl, Yentl's mame, the shviger of Yosl and Yankl's bobe.

Although in her mid seventies, she was still a formidable foe. What she had lost in loudness, she made up in a sharper tongue, deep piercing eyes and curling the outer edges of her lips. It quickly subdued anyone who displeased her. This was Yankl's heritage.

How Yankl Learned to Yodel

One day a group of Yankl's friends went into one of the caves under Chelm. These were made from the removal of chalk. Chelm is well known for its chalk caves.

As the boys walked along the tunnel of the cave, the damp, cool air felt good, but the sight of bats hanging from the rood of the cave frightened them. Yankl decided to sing, and an echo bounced back off of the cave walls. This was the beginning of his wanting to learn how to sing.

At the same, there was a stranger in Chelm who told stories about foreign lands. One of these stories was about the mighty Alps, the St. Bernard rescue dogs and all about yodelers and yodeling.

When Yankl finished kheyder, he decided to run away and go to see the Alps and visit Franzl Lang, the yodeling in Germany. Franzl had made 40 albums.

Before going too far, dear reader, we must define yodeling. It is a type of singing form where the notes are extended and the pitch is changing all along. This results in an alternating high and low pitch.

Yankl loved this type of music and quickly excelled. After yodeling in various countries surrounding the Alps, he became homesick for his parents, brothers, sisters and his childhood friends. He decided to return to Chelm, but what would he do in Chelm?

Why not sing for a living? This thought came to him while he was walking one day along the Danube. How could a singer make a living in Chelm? Aha, why not be a cantor!

No one had ever sung the Kol Nidre Services, on the evening before Yom Kiper, using the yodeling form.

When Yankl returned to Chelm and yodeled the Kol Nidre Services, everyone was amazed and pleased. Every year, and still today, Yankl chants (yodels) the service.

If you are unable to be in Chelm for Yom Kiper, you may wish to purchase Yankl's CD of his yodeling the Kol Nidre Service. Send a money order to Yankl in Chelm for fifteen French francs.

