

An Anonymous Gift by Philip Fishl Kutner

One day the following letter arrived from America and would change Chelm forever.

To the Wise Men of Chelm

Dear Sirs:

Many years ago my great grandfather was expelled from the Chelm Yeshiva because he was stupid. He was so embarrassed that he fled to America and after many years as a peddler pushing a pushcart in the Lower East Side of New York he opened a small store that grew into a small department store, and became a wealthy man. He recently left us, and in his will there was a small gift to the Wise Men of Chelm to be spent for the benefit of Chelm.

Signed: An Anonymous Donor

When the letter arrived, the Wise Men of Chelm immediately called a meeting with the prime purpose of determining how to spend the money for the benefit of Chelm.

There was no agreement, and even though they met many times there was no solution. Everyone in Chelm began arguing for a different way to spend the huge gift. As the days passed and turned into weeks and even months, it became obvious that something had to be done and done soon. Children were not doing their lessons and women forgot to go to the mikve—that made the men very unhappy. Even the animals were agitated, for they were not fed on time—but what to do?

Malke, Mayer the Mayor's wife, said, "We must find out who was this anonymous donor?" The Wise Men of Chelm all agreed, but how were they to find out if the donor had been in New York and they were in Chelm. It was decided to send someone to New York and speak with the letter-writer and once and for all settle this dilemma.

The emissary to New York had to be bright to be able to deal with the clever Americans. He would also have to be young to be able to withstand the dangerous and tiring trip across the Atlantic Ocean.

Pincus was the unanimous choice. After all, wasn't he the brightest yeshive bokher! His other attribute was that his father Petricov (a converted Jew) was a peddler and often visited other towns around Chelm. Besides all this, Pincus was the tallest and

strongest yeshive bokher—he was perfect for the great task that was given to him.

At first, his mother was hesitant because she did not want to lose her son to what might happen to him in New York. However, all of the other women pestered her, and reminded her that otherwise Chelm would completely fall apart, and that this was a mitsve.

So the following Monday morning Pincus said goodbye to his parents, brothers, sisters and all of his friends and set forth to America to find out who was this anonymous donor.

Pincus Arrives in America

When Pincus arrived in New York City, he immediately called the Chelm Landsmanshaft. He learned that its name had been changed to the Chelm Brethren Benevolent Society. For a full week he walked around The Lower East Side asking all the storekeepers if they knew anyone from Chelm.

Finally he got a yes answer and learned that the man came into the deli every once in a while. Pincus decided that he would come to the deli when it opened and stay there all day until it closed.

Each day he ate the same sandwich of pastrami and corned beef on rye bread with a sour pickle. After a week of this schedule, he decided that this would not work and another method would have to be used. However, when he looked at the money he had left, he realized that there was not enough money for the ship ticket back to Chelm.

The kind deli owner took pity on Pincus and offered him a job and to live free in the back of the store. The deli owner had a daughter who already was 20 years old and there was no suitable match.

Out of pure necessity he offered Pincus a small partnership if Pincus would marry the deli owner's daughter. It was a plain wedding with few guests. While Mrs. Pincus was not particularly attractive (to be honest, she was sort of homely), she was an astute business lady.

After the deli owner died, Mr. and Mrs. Pincus took over the deli. If you visit New York today and walk into the Pincus Deli, mention Chelm. You will be given a free Pincus Pastrami sandwich.