

Moishe the Mikve Maker from Minsk Visits Chelm

By Philip *Fishl* Kutner

Moving along the muddy road one May day, Moishe the Mikve Maker slowly made his way along his regular route repairing and making mikves. Mikve-making is an art just like a scribe writing and repairing Torahs.

Moishe came from a very long line of mikve makers. Mendel his father and Mayer his father's father and all the way back as far as anyone in Minsk could ever trace, the family had been in the mikve business. From father to son the art was handed down.

These mikves were no ordinary mikves. Much love and care went into each design—no two were alike. Once you had immersed in one of Moishe's Mikves you were never the same. There was an ethereal aura that surrounded the place. It was said that Meshiakh herself came to bathe in the Great Minsk Mikve. Towns vied for Moishe's workmanship. When Moishe came into town, all the women sent their husbands to invite Moishe over for dinner.

Moishe always was home for the Shabes, for Miriam, his wife, would not tolerate his absence over the Shabes. Each Monday Moishe hitched Malke, his trusty mangy mare, to the wagon and set out to bless and repair many mikves. No longer did he travel more miles, for his promise to Miriam kept him locally. This happened when his son Meksele was born.

As with all things human, problems arise. One stormy morning, while Moishe was on the new macadam road, a tremendous storm arose and washed away the bridge home. The boatman would not cross the swollen river. So Moishe decided to go along the river until he would find another bridge or another boatman. It was now Friday morning and he had to be home before sundown.

Well, as sometimes happens matters became worse. Moishe got farblondzhet, and even though he drove his mare harder, it seemed that he was getting further and further away from home.

Because sundown was rapidly approaching and he would not drive during shabes, he looked for the nearest Jewish home. It seems that in traveling so far that he had reached the outskirts of Chelm.

When word spread out that Moishe was stranded away from home, and looking for a place to stay over the shabes, every woman and maiden the length and breadth of Chelm started to primp and prepare to have him stay at their house.

Naturally Mayer the Mayor wanted Moishe to stay at his house and Molly, his wife made a special milts for supper, and so Moishe spent the night in the Mayor's home.

The next morning everyone went to the Great Chelm Shul. All the men sat downstairs on the main level while the women and girls were in the balcony.

The gossip among the women was how to get Moishe to design a mikve. For generations now Chelm had no mikve. It seems that a fire had burned the last one—having been set by a distressed lover. Since no one in Chelm knew how to design a mikve, the women went down to the river to bathe. But each spring the water was muddy and this made the men very unhappy. Thus the women were not clean, and this silenced the baby-making machines.

Since Moishe could not leave anyway, why not have him stay this next week and design a new mikve. With Moishe's design the men of Chelm could proceed to build the new Chelm Mikve.

That night everyone in town came to plead with Moishe to design a one-of-a kind Mikve. Moishe was overwhelmed by the sincerity and enthusiasm of the Chelm mentshn—especially the maidens. He agreed and proceeded to design the most elaborate mikve he had ever made—with the possible exception of the Magnificent Minsk Mikve.

Moishe received a huge sum and set out on his way home. It was an uneventful journey and his mare brought him home before sundown.

Meanwhile back in Chelm there was a town meeting. Plans had to be made on carrying out the construction of the Chelm Mikve. Soon a dilemma arose—no one in town could read the plans, and town pride would not let them tell anyone else. After all, what would the others think if they found out that no one in Chelm could read Moishe's plans. It would be a terrible kharpe un a shande.

Just like in all democratic societies, it was decided to call a town meeting and to have the combined town mind to come up with a solution.

Finally, a wise woman said the reason no man could read the plans was because they did not hold the paper properly. If it was turned upside down, it could be read. Lo and behold, as soon as the plans were turned upside down all became apparent, and so the Majestic Chelm Mikve was built.