

Chelm Convenes a Beth Din

By Philip "Fishl" Kutner

At the very start let me tell you that this was no every day occurrence. This was no laughing matter. No, it was not something to be taken lightly. The entire shtetl spoke about it morning noon and night. After all a Beth Din is the convening of the Jewish High Court.

Who were the individuals involved? What was the principle to be upheld and what was the specific legal point that was the cause of this highly unusual and extraordinary historical event?

Let us cut to the chase, let us let out the whole nine yards, let us not dilly-dally around, but get right to the core of this matter.

On the one hand it related to the rights of an author to have his manuscripts kept in contact for perpetuity versus the rights and welfare of the masses.

Specifically it deals with the use of the word *luftmebtsh*. How is it possible that a single word can have such an overwhelming effect on the worldwide Yiddish Community?

Everyone knows that Jews have been *The People of The Book* and that knowledge, and its accompanying studying have a foundation in Jewish culture for millennia. Part of this dilemma was the rabbinic concept of pilpul, or hair-splitting dialectical debates.

The question was, "Should the time-honored tradition be set aside for the common good when times change and new knowledge is uncovered?"

So what was the new knowledge that precipitated the convening of the Beth Din? Of all places why was it convened in Chelm? After all everyone knows that Chelm is far from the Yiddish centers today in New York, Los Angeles, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Yes, why would such media interest have been generated that channel WJEW from New York and channel KJEW from Los Angeles would send their top anchor women to cover the proceedings?

The New York daily Yiddish newspaper, *Der Chelmer Yid* (worldwide circulation of 350,000) the Tel Aviv based weekly magazine, *Der Nayer Chelmer Yid* (claiming to have a worldwide circulation of 350,001) both sent their top reporters to Chelm.

The media moguls are not fools. When advertisers rush to double advertising space, then the media follows the time-honored maxim of publish or perish.

The hotels in the new Chelm Jewish quarters were so cramped that prefabricated hotels were flown in on Air Force One. President Kust, trying to increase his popularity among the Jewish voters, personally ordered the services of his own Air Force One.

Finally came the day of the trial. All was in order. The media was in the balcony so as not to interfere with the panel of judges, the plaintiff, defendant, the lawyers, the court recorders and the bailiffs. The balcony was twice the size of the lower level, for the media came from all over the Yiddish-Speaking World.

Dear readers of *Der Bay*, we wish you to know that our editor, Fishl, has personally set up an office in Chelm for the duration of the trial. At first he was going to send Dr. Izzy to cover the proceedings, but Fishl's dear wife Serke convinced him that it would be a shande, for his readership expected nothing but the best. So at this moment Fishl is comfortably quartered in downtown Chelm only a short distance from the newly constructed Yiddish quarters.

The panel of judges literally represented all religious ideologies and came from all over the Yiddish World. Our own Nar the Narrator of Fishl's Chelm stories was unanimously selected as the chief judge.

Thus began the famous case that was known as the *Case of the Chelm Luftmentsh*. The plaintiff was the famous lexicologist of the *Greypritch Yiddish-English, English-Yiddish, Yiddish-Polish, Polish-Yiddish Dictionary*. Yes, none other than Yehudah Graperich.

Advokat: Dr. Greypritch, please state your case.

Dr. Greypritch: I just have finished the revision of my internationally accepted standard for the Yiddish language. If I had to change the definition of a *luftmentsh*, it would mean that I would have to retype all the pages from M-Z. Besides, if Sholom Aleichem, Mendel or I.L. Peretz were here they would agree with my definition of *luftmentsh*, and they were the great literary writers of Yiddish.

At that point one could hear a loud murmur of agreement from the judges. Nar admonished the judges for voicing their agreement. "The case is not over, the prosecutor has another witness and we still must hear from the defendant."

Return next month, Dear Reader, as we follow the *Case of the Chelm Luftmentsh*, hear the next witness and learn of the defendant's testimony...