

The Myth of Chelm in Jewish Literature

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Without a doubt, the “Chelm myth” is a product of many generations of anonymous oral inventions found in the deep memory of the people.

The “Chelm myth” in its present form is a result of the long transformation from the people's mouths to the people's ears. The generations and the years roll on their way and like a childish snowball the myth changes its shape and grows larger through rolling. Dozens of motifs, Jewish and non-Jewish, are adapted and made accessible, with the help of variations, so that they pass into the area of humor. Alien themes are localized, stabilized and made Jewish through a more familiar colorization and even through an accessible literary bridge. Over the years, systematic, collective, creative activity occurs, from which will come the expression of a rare “epic of humor” entitled “The Wisdom of Chelm.” We think of the “Chelm myth” as a collective anonymous folk creation which immediately raises the question: why did Chelm happen to have the honor of becoming the object for the humorous folk fantasy?

And although the question is posed, we must, however, leave it for scholars and folklore specialists. Perhaps, when it is left for them, they will discover the concealed laws of the whimsical muse.

We, for our part, will simply draw the reader's attention at this moment to a mistaken idea, namely, that contrary to what some people believe – that this saintly community, Chelm, is well known primarily because of the “Chelm myth” – in fact, Chelm must have been known enough in the past so that it could become the traditional object of Jewish folk humor.

Even if we accepted the idea that the first folk story about Chelm was created by chance (in other words, was connected to Chelm by chance), we must then recognize that chance would not have succeeded in reinforcing the folk invention if the name Chelm had not been known well enough to the Jews, at least, within the borders of Diaspora Poland

And even if there were not any other historical evidence, in other words, if the city of Chelm did not have any other documentary evidence about the past, the sole

fact that the Chelm stories exist in Yiddish folklore is evidence that this city was once a definite influence in Jewish life – an influence that made its name known far and wide, an influence that, perhaps, ended as a result of its rivalry with another, larger city within the borders of the Kingdom of Poland. And incidentally: in the rivalry between the other city and the city of Chelm, we must look for the likely origin of the Chelm story.

Naturally it occurs to us to say that there is now not even one kernel of authenticity in the Chelm story and even if there is, it is of meager importance. The Chelm that we have known in the course of the last dozen years, of course, has no connection.

If however we look for the “historical” cause for connecting the Chelm myth with the city of Chelm, it is clear that by this we mean to learn a very interesting and deeply concealed quality of folk invention, in other words, a secret from its laboratory, because we believe that in the outward causality is present a definite resolution.

However, until this quality is revealed, until it is exactly defined, for us it is beyond doubt that Chelm was not created through the folk story. In the past it already had grown in Yiddish life and its

name must have had a well known ring if it could be gradually used as a synonym for a Jewish popular look at certain actions in human life.

The collection of “Chelm Stories” in Jewish folklore tells not only about Chelm, about her experience in Jewish life, but simultaneously tells us about the deep-rootedness of this life in Polish soil. Without this feeling of being rooted in the Polish soil, of the sense of deep roots having been planted, the folk creation could not have woven its grotesque web around a concrete geographical idea, around a city.

It is therefore true that in later times the “Chelm Story” reached places where the name Chelm sounded fictitious. Even to this day someone can be heard saying: “It is just like Chelm” and the one saying it does not have to explain the geographical reality of Chelm. Because of the folk myth, Chelm has become a synonym, for example, like Sodom. The strength of the created folk synonym extends further than the original “reality” that was invented and thanks to its strength remains the creation in folk memories. This is its great worth, which takes it out of the narrow limit of the folklore specialist and makes it the living property of people of culture, of artists and writers. It is however more than certain that when speaking about Chelm humor in Yiddish folk invention, along with its

actual living significance, there is also in mind its cultural historical worth. We are interested in the fruit as an object that can quench our joy as well as in the tree on which the fruit has grown. When it comes to the Chelm humor-fruit, the folkloric tree is, of course, important for us and particularly the climate in which it ripened and in the course of years matured. Therefore it is important for us to assert that the humorous work arose by being rooted in the land, where all protagonists figure in an actual city.

From the Chelm myth we must make an inference: if every folklore inventor is bound to a well known common theme, is it not all the more so for the creator who bases his work on an actual geographic idea? Most certainly we must therefore have a feeling of an unchanging creation.

Making a city the protagonist in a work that was “written” over the course of generations could only be done when the lives of the people in that city are seen as unchanging over the years. And not only this city, but Yiddish also had to be secure in the land in which the city is found, because, if not, they would never have indulged in the luxury of completely entrusting their humorous creative energy to such a city.

The French could indulge in such luxury with “Tarascon” in France. The Jews in Poland could indulge in such luxury in regard to Chelm.

According to the discourse of Reb Pinkhas Koricer, the Jewish exile was easier in Poland. Jews in Poland lived not only with their own customs and old practices, but also with a sense of home. Only with this sense could the Chelm myth be born.

Here are two anecdotes that characterize the most vivid sense of home of the Jews in Poland. One of them is told this way: Jews travel on the train. They converse. “What is your city called?” – One of the Jews asks the other.

– My city? Answers the one who is asked – The gentiles call it Medziboz, but the world knows it as Mysliborzyce. (There is no telling what comes to the minds of the gentiles. But “the world” that is the Jews knows the correct name).

And the second anecdote: A Jew from a small *shtetl* comes into an office in a larger city. The clerk rummages in his papers and asks; – Who does your city follow?

– Earlier it belonged to the followers of the Aleksanderer [*Rebbe*] – the Jew answers – but now we have expelled them from their *shtibl* (small prayer house) and the city chiefly follows the Ger [*Rebbe*].

(That the city belongs to a prince, too, or is part of a *voivode* (province) does not occur to the Jew. For him, it is clear, that the city belongs to one *rebbe* or to another).

The Chelm stories, as in the cited anecdotes, arose in a world of Jewish stability, in a world where the concept of home is concrete and real.

In another story, this reality of home is in our final incident transformed into “a Chelm story,” with the typical moral of Chelm wisdom.

In the “Chelm stories,” the folk inventiveness shows a distinct tendency to concentrate the subject matter in one geographic area, in one concrete area of Jewish settlement. Such a tendency is generally familiar in the folk story.

There are all kinds of stories in Jewish folk fantasy bound to the “*ergetz hinter di Hore-khoyshek*” (somewhere behind the legendary mountain of darkness) – stories of wonder that are framed in the geographic novelty of wonderland. While it is clear that actions of fantasy can occur only in a place of fantasy that does not let reality control its every moment, this land on the other side of the Sambation,* this place “under the seven mountains” or “under the seven rivers” where every step is imbued with the miraculous, is also highly suitable. And it once happened that when the nameless teller of folk stories wanted to approach the boundaries of our geographic reality, he just brought with him from “under the legendary mountain of darkness” a piece of its miracle-imbued atmosphere, a piece of its mystical climate. The “flowers and fauna” in such stories were, of course, familiar, homey, one's own, but the impreciseness of the area of action still remained. Such a story teller never risked using a specific geographic name, unless it appeared to be very far away.

*Translator's note: the legendary, impassable river of rocks, on the other side of which the ten lost Tribes of Israel may be found.

The people had other designations for the extraordinariness of a smaller subject of wonder: “somewhere in Goshen” or “somewhere in Bobryk.” First in the Hasidic story we begin to meet the well-known city or *shtetl*, concrete places and names that one can see, believe can be touched by the hand. In the newness of *Hasidism*, the people stopped going up to heaven and began to bring heaven down to earth. *Hasidism* revolted against the mysticism that lies outside the earthly life and proved that only the earthly life is full of mysticism. Therefore, it is clear that the Hasidic storyteller did not need to carry away his fantasy somewhere to a wonderland. Wonders, according to their world view, can happen in and really do happen here on earth, in one's own small space. They did not need a specific climate, no special atmosphere, no imagined area, no likely conditions that would make them believe. All of these attributes were created only through one magical strength, the strength of rapturous belief.

The Chelm story is in one respect comparable to the Hasidic story. It is, also, in its action not far from our reality. The stage on which it appears is in the

very middle of our life. Contrary to the *Hore-khoyshek* story, it wants to lead to belief so it states the concrete place of its occurrence. It buys our trust with the illusion of nearness and, therefore, probability, because without this it would mainly lose its humor.

The Chelm story is a crooked mirror. In order that the comedy of the warped lines properly impact, the reflections must always be found near the objects that become deformed in it. Only in confrontation with reality can the proper comedic effect be summoned.

A Chelm story can be recognized from a mile away. It contains a definite established nucleus around which moves the comedy and situation.

The comedy of the Chelm story is built upon a kind of principle of humor. It is literally a golden treasure for a certain theory of laughter.

The comedy of Chelm achieves its result automatically as a human effect.

This automatic result is a consequence of not noticing and not comprehending the consequences of an action.

The comedy of the actions of the heroes of the Chelm stories consists in their inventing for themselves a certain fiction and carrying it out, not seeing what follows in the end.

The comic effect becomes clear because the actions of the Chelmers lack the natural logical connection between cause and result.

It is automatically one-dimensional and perfunctory; this is the stumbling point of Chelm's good will.

When Chelm buys an extinguisher in order to fight fires in the city, this is actually a logical wish realized in fiction. This fiction becomes comical only when a second cause and another fiction (the walling in of the extinguisher with a thick brick wall, in order that thieves would not be able to steal it), makes void the first effort. The mechanism, the way the fiction is automatically carried out, not taking into account its effect, brings out laughter among those with normal human judgment.

The Chelm story is an example of good intentions, which in the reality of life, become transformed into their opposite with laughter guarding the person against the routine in life; and with laughter over the Chelmer actions, we guard against the routine that transforms our fiction into the opposite of that which we wanted. In this manner, the folk experience wanted to underline that good will is not enough; this good will must be recognized; that means one must take from the understanding and consider the attendant phenomena of each fiction and bind it with the understanding of the intention.

When Chelm wants the fallen snow to remain fresh and unwalked upon, this is certainly a good wish. (The snow can be thought of as an allegorical indication of

a definite ethical quality in our life). However, the fathers who are equal to realizing this wish are unnatural and, therefore, comedic. They are unnatural because of the chain of logic among them. The Chelm storyteller asks: Who disturbs the snow? The answer is: The *shamas* (the synagogue beadle), who is the first to go out into the street, in order to wake the residents for religious services. The answer is logical and correct. However, this logical truth misleads the Chelmer on a detour to illogic. Because if the *shamas* disturbs the snow, we must find a way that he will not do it. (As for myself, a correct conclusion.) The solution that four people should carry the *shamas* is in itself again logical. However, it becomes illogical in connection with the first impulse for the first action – the wish that the snow should be entirely undisturbed.

We see, therefore, that the joke about the Chelm heroes admits that they, the heroes, have good will. Their actions in carrying out their will is comic, because the Chelmers act automatically, they look to remove a certain condition through an action that strengthens the earlier condition tenfold.

When the *shamas* becomes old and cannot go around the *shtetl* rapping on the shutters looking to summon the Chelmers, how will the *shamas* be able to carry out his functions without exerting himself? This is not a bit comic and, in fact, logical. However, on the way from inclination to realization, the Chelmers lose the connection to the expression and the reality of life. All of the shutters are brought to the *shamas* at home in order for him to be able to rap on them and, thereby, not needing to go around the *shtetl*. The importance of the actual activity is lost. The *shtetl* both will not hear the rapping and exactly like the extinguisher, the entire effort and energy is wasted because there was no thought given to the link between the two actions and the result.

The same automatic reaction to the action, the same omission of an essential connecting link between the action and the result is seen, too, in the story about the water mill that is built, not near the water, but on a mountain and in many other Chelm stories.

The same Chelm story is a rich source of material for literary-artistic forms. In essence, this great humor epic is taken as the great artistic revitalizer of the popular, anonymously created works of artistic consciousness and artistic permanence. The Chelm story contains those allegorical moments that can be applied in connection with general human events and actions that fill our lives. Until now we have very rarely elected to use the Chelm story material in our literature.

We know the comedy, "*Chelmer Khakhomim*" ("The Wise Men of Chelm") of Aaron Zeitlin that was successfully presented on the Yiddish stage, but it is not available in book form.

Gershonson, the young Yiddish writer from Soviet Russia who perished tragically, also wrote a similar comedy. The comedy is found in the work of the popular artists Sh. Dzehigon and Y. Shumakher.

The stories of Chelm were recorded at that time by M. Kipnis. He finished a folkloric work. It is not known if the text will be published in book form.

Shlomoh Simon published a book in New York under the name, "The Heroes of Chelm." An accurate adaptation of the Chelm stories for children.

The book "*Chelmer Khakhomim*" by Y.Y. Trunk, artistically fashioned from Chelm story material, is worthy of a separate discourse.

Yiddish writers have used the Chelm story material, carrying it over to their towns and places. (For example: Leib Kwitko in his children's song, "Leml's Present.") Others again have given the style of Chelm to their things; the stories themselves, however, have no connection with Chelm material. (For example: Y. L. Peretz, *Der Chelmer Malamed* ["The Chelm Teacher"].) It is certain that other Chelm stories wait for their great genius who will do justice to the Chelmer literary material. And until this happens, it is our duty again and again to record all the nuances, all the variations of the Chelm story, as it travels among Jews all around the world.

It would be a great accomplishment if the Chelm *landmanschaftn*, which are spread all over the earth, could stimulate and even organize both the renewed collection of the Chelm stories and their artistic revision. The latter is not a restraint on the organization, but an appropriate bonus, for a book of Chelm story material would perhaps stimulate Yiddish writers and artists and even without this, the interest in the theme is great enough. Only a little bit of initiative is required for it to be realized.