

Holidays in Chelm

The Sukkot Dilemma

by Jessie Schoenwald



Once upon a time, there was a village called Chelm. This small, but thriving shtetl was located in Poland, halfway from Shedlitz to Warsaw (and, incidentally, on the way back from Warsaw to Shedlitz, also halfway). The inhabitants of the bustling village were infamous throughout the country for their incredible logic (so boasted the Chelmites), but, certainly out of jealousy, the world called Chelmitic wisdom "foolishness."

"What do you mean?" You may ask. "How could wisdom be called foolishness?" Well, dear reader, the best way to answer that question (without offending a Chelmitic) is to tell you the story of one of their wisest decisions.

It happened in the fall after Rosh Hashanah. Yom Kippur was approaching and four days after Yom Kippur, Sukkot, which happened to be one of Chelm's favorite holidays. As everyone knows, during this festival, every Jew must erect a temporary shelter and live in it for seven days. The Chelmites were especially grand in their sukkah-construction. They were fond of making their booths architectural wonders, complete with life-sized images of the biblical desert wanderings depicted on the interior walls. Ever aware of the travelers who frequently passed through Chelm on their way from Shedlitz to Warsaw, the Chelmites insisted on building their sukkot on the street in front of their houses so that wayfarers could easily view the masterpieces and marvel at Chelm's ingenuity and creativity.

It was a season of great joy and celebration; but this year, the Chelmites antici-

pated it with a sense of anxiety.

I must explain, reader, that the Chelmites were businessmen first and foremost, and their main export was lumber. Everyday that was not a holiday, all the men tramped out into the thick forest surrounding Chelm and sawed away at the tall trees. Then they would cut the logs into boards and take the boards into Shedlitz to sell.

The Chelmitic's anxiety was not over a shortage of wood with which to build their sukkot. No, no, no, it was much more serious than that. The price of lumber had been raised by the Chelmites several times in the past year. It brought them more money from Shedlitz, but, alas, none of them could afford to buy the lumber themselves for their sukkot! If they couldn't afford the lumber, what would they build their sukkot out of?

But that was the least of their problems. For you see, it seems that in the past year, every home had felt the need for more space to accommodate the growing families, so before the price of lumber had been raised, every home had added various rooms, parlors and wings to their abodes. As a result, the width of the street seemed to shrink into an alleyway. If the Chelmites built their sukkot in front of their houses, there wouldn't be a street left on which sojourners could pass through Chelm. Even if they all became millionaires in the next week and could afford to buy their lumber, there would not be enough room to build!

"This will never do!" cried Mottel the

Mayor, wringing his hands as he looked at the narrow street. "The only way to solve this problem is to get assistance from those even wiser than I." With that, he bounded away to call for the ten sages of Chelm.

They arrived immediately, each with a look of thoughtful concern on his face. As they gazed up the street, down the street, and on both sides of the street, the citizens of Chelm gathered around them.

"Good citizens of Chelm," the chief sage, Naftali, addressed the anxious crowd, "the plight of Chelm's Sukkot celebration has come to our attention. Do not fear. We wise men of Chelm will not leave until we have a solution. Does anyone have any suggestions regarding the space that is needed to build our sukkot?"

A voice spoke up from the midst of the crowd. "We could take the roofs and the front walls of our houses off so that our homes can serve as our sukkot."

The ten sages pondered for a moment, and then Naftali said thoughtfully, "It is a good idea...but it is impossible; for surely that would not properly fulfill the mitzvah."

A second suggestion arose from the crowd: "We could remodel the roofs of our houses so that they are flat instead of A-shaped. Then we could build our sukkot on top of the roofs."

But the ten sages shook their heads again. "Too much could go wrong -- a baby could roll off the roof into the street and a traveler, craning his neck to see the sukkot on top of the houses, would trip over the baby and injure himself. No, the idea was a good one, but it is too risky."

Another voice. "Why not build the sukkot behind the houses. There is plenty of room back there..."

The entire populous of Chelm gasped and Naftali jumped to his feet in a rage. "Who dared to speak such a foolish idea in the presence of these revered sages?!"

A moment of terrified silence passed before the same anonymous voice responded fearfully, "It was I, Yossi Chochma."

At that, the crowd exploded in relieved laughter.

"Ha, it was just Yossi, the village idiot."

"That Yossi! Such a simpleton."

The sages also chuckled, "Oh Yossi, Yossi, Yossi," they chided, "Even the youngest Chelmiter school child wouldn't suggest such a foolish notion. Why, if we build the sukkot behind the houses, how would our wives get the food from the kitchens to the sukkot? Since the houses in Chelm are built so close together, they would have to walk all the way down the row of houses to get to the back of them. And since the backs of our houses are not a familiar part of town to them, they could wander about wondering which back of the house is the back of THEIR house, and they could get lost, and our dinner get lost with them. Yossi, you obviously haven't thought this idea through clearly. Wait, I can just guess what you are going to suggest next. 'Let's put doors on the BACKS of our houses.'"

Here, the other sages guffawed and slapped each other on the back in merriment at Naftali's wit. "Houses with doors on the back of them. Who ever heard of such a ridiculous thing? Yossi, Yossi, you have a long way to go before you can be counted among the wise men of Chelm."

After Yossi had been thoroughly put in his place and the laughter had subsided, the Chelmites became serious once again and offered their ideas to the elders. But none of the ideas were worthy of the admiration of the sages. Naftali cleared his throat. "The problem of the location of the sukkot is, no doubt, a difficult one and will require the wisest men in Chelm to find a solution. However, maybe you all could give us some ideas for how to get the lumber we need for our sukkot."

Mottel the mayor muttered under his breath, "We would have been able to afford it if it wasn't for SOMEONE'S suggestion to increase the price."

Avi the chief woodcutter didn't miss the remark. "I heard that mayor! I only recommended that we raise the price because you said that the economy was low!"

Mottel retorted, "Well, I never would have mentioned it if my neighbor Berel hadn't of complained of the holes in his wall that let the cold air in!"

Berel was quick to shift the blame. "I never would have said a thing, Mayor, if my wife Miriam hadn't gotten chilled so badly that she screamed to me that she was dying!"

Miriam defended herself. "I never would have gotten sick in the first place if you had patched the holes when I told you to!"

"Well, I would have patched the holes if Mottel had lent me the money for supplies!"

"I would have lent you the money if Avi had raised the price of lumber a little bit higher!"

"Oh, so now you want the price even higher, is that it? One minute I'm the swindler, the next minute I'm the cheap-skate..."

It would have turned into a full-blown war except that a voice raised itself over the commotion, trying to make peace:

"Why don't we just cut the lumber we need from the woods and not worry about paying ourselves?"

Again, Naftali rushed to his feet in horrified anger. "Who said that? Who wishes to make us paupers with his reckless idea?"

"It was I again, Reb Naftali. Yossi Chochma."

This time, the people were not amused. They shouted at Yossi, "Give the lumber away for free?! What do you think we are, fools? Who could ever make a living that way?!"

"Please, forgive my foolishness," Yossi stammered, red-faced and embarrassed. The Chelmites were known for their mental prowess, but also for their compassion and kindness. Yossi's sincere penitence touched them deeply and they tenderly affirmed him, "Don't worry, Yossi. You'll think before you make a suggestion next time, won't you?"

Naftali spoke soothingly, "Good people, do not fret. We have never failed to provide a wise answer. Prepare for your holiday, and we shall give you direction

for sukkah-building as soon as we discover the solution."

So the ten sages of Chelm sat for seven days and seven nights, scratching their heads, gnawing their fingernails, and pulling their long, white beards. On the afternoon of the eighth day, Naftali's loud shout of victory echoed off the wobbly walls in Chelm. The villagers came running.

"A solution! A solution! Did you find a solution?" They asked excitedly.

"Yes, good people, we have a brilliant solution which we will present the day after Yom Kippur."

Yom Kippur came that very evening, and the ten sages fasted and prayed along with the rest of Chelm. The next day, they ecstatically proclaimed their solution throughout Chelm:

"LET ALL THE SUKKOT BE ERECTED ON EITHER SIDE OF THE ROAD LEADING INTO CHELM FROM SHEDLITZ. THEN, WHEN TRAVELERS ON THEIR WAY TO WARSAW PASS BETWEEN OUR ROWS OF SUKKOT, THEY WILL BE ABLE TO FULLY ADMIRE OUR HANDIWORK. AS THEY PASS THE LAST SUKKAH AND ENTER CHELM, THEY WILL SAY, 'TRULY, IT IS THE REMARKABLE WISDOM OF CHELM THAT HAS WROUGHT SUCH BRILLIANT ARTISTRY.'"

MOREOVER, SINCE WE WANT THE WORLD TO SEE NOT ONLY OUR CREATIVITY, BUT OUR RESOURCEFULNESS, LET US NOT CHOP DOWN TREES IN ORDER TO OBTAIN WOOD FOR OUR TEMPORARY DWELLINGS. LET US INSTEAD USE WHAT WE ALREADY HAVE. HERE, THEN, IS THE SOLUTION TO THE DILEMA OF GETTING LUMBER FOR OUR SUKKOT: EVERYONE IS COMMANDED TO TEAR DOWN YOUR HOUSE AND USE THE MATERIALS TO CONSTRUCT YOUR SUKKAH."

BY ORDER OF NAFTALI, CHIEF SAGE OF CHELM

A shout of joy filled Chelm, soon followed by the noise of demolition as the Chelmites tore down their houses, hauled the disassembled particles to the road leading into Chelm and rebuilt

their dwellings (minus a roof and front wall). The holiday of Sukkot arrived, finding the Chelmites in happy spirits. There had been plenty of room for everyone to build an expansive sukkah and to decorate it to their heart's content (and it hadn't cost them a thing). The wisdom of Chelm had prevailed yet again.

Of course, there was the small question of how they would afford the lumber to rebuild their houses after Sukkot. However, dear reader, that's another story for another time...

That night, the sun set on the rows of bough-covered dwellings...and evening shadows filled the now desolate clearing that once was Chelm.



Make a Sukkot Banner

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord

Materials:

- Dark colored felt, 25" tall by 28" wide
- Squares of light colored felt (about 4)
- 2 dowel rods, 29" long
- Fabric glue
- Fabric paint (bright colored glitter or metallic paint is best)
- 40" of matching ribbon to hang it with

Directions:

1. Stitch a 2-inch hem in the top and bottom of the dark felt piece.
2. Trace the Hebrew letters provided here. Cut out the tracings and use them as patterns to cut the letters out of the light colored felt. You will need:
 - 3 of Bet
 - 2 of Aleph
 - 1 of everything else
3. Place felt letters on the dark felt piece according to the picture below. When you are satisfied with their placement, glue them to the fabric. Weight the letters down as they dry.
4. Using a bright colored fabric paint, outline each letter carefully. Allow paint to dry thoroughly.
5. If desired, glue bright colored trim to the sides of the banner, as pictured below.
6. Slide one dowel into the top hem, and the other dowel into the bottom hem. Tie one end of the ribbon to one side of the top dowel and the other end of the ribbon to the other side of the top dowel.
6. Hang the banner in your sukkah, and don't forget to bring it inside the house if there is rain in the forecast!

