

Farming in Chelm: A Medical Allegory

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According to legend,¹ in eastern Europe there flourished until World War II a Jewish village named Chelm. Seven hundred souls lived there. Some say it was situated in Ukraine; others say Russia, or Poland. Some say it could have been located just about anywhere. Its people were simple, plain, and embarrassingly backward in the conduct of the most ordinary daily affairs. Even their rabbi, their spiritual leader whom they called upon to interpret God's law, could help little in correcting their ways since he was one them. For the people of little Chelm, no task was too simple that could not be made more complicated. Fellow Jews everywhere looked down on them as *schlemiehls*, naive fools who would surely perish of their own ineptitude. Still, they thrived for centuries. Even the Cossacks and the angry peasants left them alone—what fun would it be to pillage Chelmniks? Maybe God blessed them, at least for a while, with backwardness.

If everything the Chelmniks did was so flawed, nothing they did was ordinary. It was ordained by the God of Israel, so they in Chelm thought. What each was called upon to do, each did. Each person elevated the most ordinary task to extraordinary service, no matter how flawed or pathetic the outcome. If the God of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps, what does He care if they take longer in Chelm to do things than in villages or cities where Jews are smarter? In raising wheat and dairy cows, in gardening, in their homes, in daily prayer, and in *schul* (Yiddish for synagogue, the house of worship), they lived as they knew their God ordained them to be. For the people of Chelm, each day was an echo of eternity. They were not so learned, so quick-witted as Jews in the

other villages. If they were inept, they rarely knew how foolish they were. It was just their way.

Now and again, one among them would excel in *cheder* (Hebrew school) and even miraculously go far away to Moscow or St Petersburg to the university to learn how to improve on a trade. He (alas, only men went away to school) would return to better the lot of his Chelm. For their village was uppermost in all their hearts. One such young man was Shmuel, the eldest, the pride and hope of his family. Shmuel went away to learn the most up-to-date scientific secrets so he could improve on the yield of the very limited land for wheat in Chelm, as well as increase the cows' milk and the beets. When Shmuel had completed university studies, he returned with St Petersburg's revolutionary agricultural ideas. "What was the point"—he spoke with the urgency of a Biblical prophet and a scientific zealot—"of every family doing everything that wheat and gardening require: plowing, planting, weeding, harvesting, winnowing grain from chaff?"

What a waste of time, he railed, when they could specialize instead! Each family, he explained, would do but a single job. No one would ever again have to do, to know, everything. His ideas caught the eager ear of many families, most of them poor, and all anxious to have more food. It was like watching a prairie fire spread. Soon Shmuel was organizing the people of Chelm into groups, each of which would have but a single calling in this new way of farming. Some would only milk the cows, some would only feed the cows, some would only collect manure for the fields, some would only plow, some would only plant, some would only pull weeds, some would only harvest, some would only thrash the grain. How brilliant, how obvious, they thought. How much additional time this would give them for study and prayer. They hoped soon to have an abundant crop of hard, red winter wheat. A few old timers scoffed at this rebel who had gone to Moscow. Their lot might be cumbersome, they insisted, mostly to deaf ears, but they knew their animals,

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and they could follow the course of wheat the way they tended their children.

Hundreds of Chelmniks volunteered to join Shmuel's legion. Shmuel was forced eventually to have the people draw lots for how their land would be used and how the work would be equally distributed. From the pulpit and in his daily interpretation of Jewish law, the rabbi endorsed the plan. A bumper crop was certain.

Harvest time approached, but no wheat was to be found in the fields of Shmuel's followers. Neither beets, nor other vegetables, nor milk. Some fields had been manured, but nothing was planted. Planted fields were overgrown with weeds. Fields to be harvested had never been planted. Harvested fields rotted with the seed still in the chaff. What was to be done? They pressed Shmuel with questions, as respectfully as they addressed their rabbi. Dread began to seize them. Fortunately, some people of Chelm had not embraced Shmuel's radical ideas, and there was enough food from their little plots and cows to tide the village over. Somehow they would survive winter, and they would not become too dependent on their Slavic neighbors.

From their midst stepped Maishe, a third son, modest, not at all well educated, and if the truth were told, a disappointment to his family. Maishe, who had never ventured beyond the village's dirt road, came forward one day with abject humility when all the people of Chelm were gathered outside the rabbi's home to decide what to do. He spoke to them slowly, haltingly:

"I have never been outside Chelm. I have no objection to university learning. I harbor no malice toward Shmuel. But though I am myself from Chelm, I ask you only what we are called upon to be here in Chelm. Do we lack minds here? Do they think only in Moscow and St Petersburg? If we know what we are supposed to be, then we will know what to do with our wheat, with our beets, with our milk cows. How can we be called upon to work the ground but not to plant also? Or only to harvest? To gather manure from the milk cows, but not to spread it in the fields?

"We have much to learn from today, but is everything we learned yesterday worthless to us, without lesson? Have our eight and nine generations in Chelm nothing to teach us? Shall we banish Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from our books because they lived too long ago? Do the scientists in St Petersburg know *our* cows, *our* soil, *our* beets? Do they know that my Rivka-the-cow gives more milk when I sing to her in Yiddish? Does the Tsar ever come to our little Chelm and see how we have persevered beneath his yoke? What people outside Chelm ridicule as our stupidity is really our wisdom. And we know that no longer. That is our tragedy.

"I cannot fault Shmuel entirely. His far-off cities are in love only with their theories. But we have fallen for him and his St Petersburg, thinking that we in Chelm can do better than to be from Chelm. That is our greed, trying in Chelm not to be from Chelm. What makes us think that if we plow our furrows, we do not need also to plant, that furrows are enough, or that planting is enough, or that anything alone is enough? Did The-Most-Holy-Blessed-Be-He rest after creating only the first or second or third day? No, only after the end of 6 days; then He left to us to be who we are. Even in Chelm. Why do we not have a rich harvest? Because we have failed to ask first who we are called upon to be. Who are we? We are people who trust what we already know. Breaking the earth, fertilizing our gardens and land, planting seeds, weeding the garden and field, waiting for harvest, cutting, and separating wheat from stalk, these are all part of growing and eating. They are all part of each other. They are part of who we are called to be in Chelm.

"This does not require each of us to *do* everything. Some of us might be better at tilling or harvesting or milking. Some of us might like to do one of these tasks better than another, or be trained to do one especially well. We would have to work out who does what, so that everybody does not end up spreading manure on the fields! But each of us has to know what other people are doing, and how their own part plays in the whole. We have to be able to *imagine* Chelm, not narrow ourselves to the path only *our* horse walks. A garden is not only what a horse and a plow do, but without them, there is no garden.

"I do not say we should not listen to the university. Chelm can learn from the outside. After all, our Russian rye comes from them, as does our borscht, and our pancakes, and our barley. But we know what we know. If we listen foremost to who we are called upon to be, we will know how to garden, how to farm, how to live. If we *forget* that, we are not Chelm. We surrender everything we know and pretend to be ignorant. We are nobody. We are lost. If we *remember* that, our little Chelm might still be poor, but we will flourish."

The people of Chelm stood quietly, almost as if they were in *schul* and this was the Sabbath. They nodded their heads and walked back to their homes. The slow-talking Maishe approached Shmuel, looked at his eyes with great warmth and sadness, extended his arms, and gave him a huge hug. With joy, they both wept for their beloved Chelm, with whom they were now reconciled. They had not forsaken their Chelm.

The people of Chelm had heeded what they were called upon to be. They had remembered. A world had

been restored. The people of Chelm were, once again, the village they were supposed to be.

They looked out over their village, and they saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning. The last light of dusk draped the sky deep in purple. For a moment, Chelm could have been a scroll of Torah and the sky its soft velvet cover. Chelm, foolish Chelm, backward Chelm, wrapped itself in the warm goose down of its newfound wisdom. And went to bed.

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Reference

1. Rosten L. The joys of Yiddish. New York: Washington Square Press, 1968:84-5.

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