

THE RIVER OF MONEY

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As I've said before, it's not easy being the Cultural Attache for the Embassy of Chelm. I am the messenger who tells the rest of the world how things work (or don't work) in Chelm. And, as you may know, Chelm is blessed with more questions than answers.

For example, Chelm's biblical scholar, Mendel-Mendel, was recently asked by Schmuel the Mule, "What is the nature of God?" His response was, "Is it more important to talk about 'the nature of God', or 'the God of Nature?'" This led to a week of conflict in Chelm with the population divided about what the question should be. Half thought it was more important to discover "the nature of God." The other half thought that they should devote themselves to understanding the meaning of "the God of Nature." The debate went on, day and night, finally ending just before Shabbos. Each of the two opposing groups was so successful in presenting their case to the other side that the two groups switched positions. The "nature of God" people became the "God of Nature" adherents, and vice-versa. At the end of the week, each group took great pride in the fact that their arguments had won over the other side. In Chelm, this is considered progress.

You are probably wondering how Schmuel the Mule got his name. Schmuel was a lazy thinker. He would think when he felt like it, and rest his mind when he did not. It was Mayor Schlomo who suggested that Schmuel's thinking process resembled the arbitrary stubborn behavior of a mule. So that's how he came to be known as Schmuel the Mule. (But if his name had been Roth, would he be known as Roth the Sloth? Or if his name were Sardlark, would he be called Sardlark the Aardvark? Or if his name were Farma Pillow,..... Well, you get the idea.)

Last month, at a town meeting, the synagogue's treasurer, Meyer Nudelnik, gave a financial report, ending with a question: "Now that we have wrestled with the question (not the answer) of the God/Nature relationship, we turn to our synagogue's financial crisis. Many people are not paying their dues. Our outgo is greater than our income. How can we raise more money?"

Mendel-Mendel shouted, "Oy, that's like asking 'How can we squeeze more juice out of a lemon?'" And many other "Oys" were heard.

After the commotion calmed down, Schmuel the Mule stood up and said, "Don't worry. The river of money is always flowing. Just dip in when you need some." Well, everyone breathed a sigh of relief, and praised God for providing the answer through Schmuel.

As the people started to leave the meeting, little Batya, nine-years-old, shouted out, "Where is the river of money? And what do we use to scoop the money out?" There was much laughter at the innocence of a little girl who didn't understand high finance. But then, someone else said, "I don't think it is the river that runs through our town. We would have noticed paper money floating by."

So they all sat down again and Meyer Nudelnik said, "Schmuel the Mule is geographically challenged. The river he talked about must be somewhere else. We are back where we started. We still need to raise more money."

Mendel-Mendel stood up and said, "I want to amend my question about squeezing a lemon. We don't have lemons here. It should be an etrog." "Seconded", hollered Schmuel, reasserting his intellect.

Meyer Nudelnik said, "The question now is 'How can we get more juice out of an etrog?'" So then there was a lively discussion about techniques for squeezing etrogs. Finally, Schmuel the Mule actually came up with the best answer: "Cut the etrog in half. Squeeze each half until nothing more comes out. Then put the two squeezed halves out in the sun to dry. When they are thoroughly dried out, soak them in a bowl of water for an hour. Then remove them and squeeze them again. There will be more juice."

Following this logic, Meyer Nudelnik came up with a plan. "First, Rabbi Bebe goes to all the prosperous merchants in Chelm and explains the biblical passages that require giving generously to the synagogue. And he lets it be known that there will be two lists on the bulletin board: The merchants who gave, and those who didn't. That's the squeezing part. Then we motivate the merchants with a picnic by the river on a warm sunny day. We feed them and encourage them to just lie in the sun and relax. That's the drying part. Then we announce a swimming contest, for these lucky donors, with prizes and honor for all who swim to my rowboat in the middle of the river. So they will all jump in the river and

swim to the boat. That's the soaking part. Then we send the fundraisers to their homes that night to 'squeeze' them again."

No one objected, and the merchants agreed to go along with the plan, even though they knew they would be squeezed. Some skeptic, knowing the "generous" nature of the merchants, might have suspected that these businessmen would have a secret meeting where they would all agree to not give more after the picnic and swimming.

The sunny day came for the picnic. The merchants lay in the sun and dried out. Then they jumped in the river and all swam to Meyer Nudelnik's boat, which was in a shallow part of the river. Some of the merchants got tired, so they walked back to shore. The water was only a few feet deep there.

But then, a funny thing happened: as the merchants were walking out of the river, they started yelling "Ouch" and complaining that they were stepping on shells on the bottom of the river. However, when they bent down to pick up the shells, they discovered that they were actually stepping on coins -- real money.

The Chelmites cheered and Schmuel, now vindicated, kept saying, "I told you so. I told you so."

Meyer Nudelnik was surprised that there really was a river of money, but then, thinking fast, proclaimed that the Chelmites should harvest the money flowing in the river. So here is my part as Cultural Attache, based on my knowledge of human and Chelmite behavior. I stood by the river and said, "I know you are all honest people and when you dip into the river, you would give all the coins to the synagogue. But to avoid anxiety, Schmuel the Mule has suggested a way to save you from the temptation of keeping some of the money for yourselves. He has convinced Meyer Nudelnick, the synagogue treasurer, that every person can keep the money he or she finds, but should first make a donation to the synagogue, before fishing for coins, for the right to fish the money out of the river. This way, the synagogue will collect enough to solve its financial problem without squeezing the merchants, and all of you will get the wealth that you deserve. Now go home, eat something, and bring your donation back here in one hour, and then you can dip into the river."

As the people left, praising Schmuel the Mule for pointing them toward the river, Meyer Nudelnick came over to me and said, "That's a brilliant idea for getting

understand why you gave Schmuel the Mule credit for the idea. You must have thought of it yourself." I didn't say anything. And Schmuel the Mule, while receiving accolades, looked confused, because he couldn't remember making that suggestion.

Later that day, Meyer Nudelnik, as synagogue treasurer, was at the river bank accepting donations from the townspeople for the right to extract the money flowing along the river bottom. And next to him was little Batya, selling butterfly nets on poles for scooping up the coins.

Well, after everyone had contributed for the right to dip into the flow of the river, I accompanied Meyer Nudelnik back to the synagogue. As he put the donations into the synagogue's safe, I asked him if he would reimburse me for the coins I had dropped into the river the day before the picnic. Closing the safe, he said with a generous smile, "Just go down to the river and dip in. For you, no need for another donation."

Walking back to the river, I saw many empty-handed angry people complaining that the river of money had only water in it. They were saying that someone had misled them. Then I saw what looked like a fast-moving parade going away from the river. People were screaming and waving their nets. At the front of the parade was Schmuel, running faster than I had ever seen a mule run.

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