



## JUST STAY PUT

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*Mendel is on an exciting adventure – he’s heading to Warsaw! Unfortunately, Mendel is from the upside-down town of Chelm – which means nothing goes quite the way you think it will. Will he ever get to where he’s going?*

There’s no place quite like Chelm. Known in Jewish folklore as a village of fools (though the residents are sometimes facetiously called “clever” or “wise” or even “heroes”) nothing is ever quite what it seems in the mythical, mystical town of Chelm. Words take on double meaning, thoughts are easily misconstrued, and everything is much more complicated than it need be. In this Chelm story, Mendel’s poor sense of direction thwarts his big travel plans. But as is often the case with Chelmites, things end well in spite of themselves. Mendel unknowingly ends up right back where he started -- in Chelm, with his wife and family, and content to be there. The gentle, amusing ending of this story shows Mendel to be a fine example of the Jewish maxim: “Who is happy? One who is content with his lot.” This is one of the many teachings from *Pirke Avot*, often translated as *Ethics of Our Fathers*, a beloved Jewish text of ethical lessons.

Why are Chelm stories prominent in our folklore? For centuries, humor has played a central role in Jewish culture. When faced with tremendous challenges, Jews the world over found a good sense of humor key to resilience.

Chelm is, in fact, not only a place that appears in Jewish folklore, but an actual industrial town in eastern Poland near the border with Ukraine. The “real” Chelm has a

sister city in the United States – Knoxville, Tennessee.

### USING THIS BOOK AT HOME

How did Chelm become a village of *schlemiels*? (*Schlemiel* is the Yiddish word for a bungler, an often likeable but unlucky person who seems doomed to fail in everyday experiences.) There are a number of fabulous, thought-provoking stories to explain how and why Chelm was “chosen” for this “honor”! In fact, some of the most famous Jewish writers, including Sholom Aleichem and the Nobel prize-winning Isaac Bashevis Singer, enjoyed writing about Chelm’s interesting citizens. Your children might be interested in

- exploring additional Chelm stories online or at your local library
- reading or re-telling a story of Chelm at the dinner table
- creating a story that could take place only in Chelm -- and adding a backdrop of some lively, distinctively-old-world Jewish Klezmer music for effect
- pretending for a few minutes to be a resident of Chelm, purposely misunderstanding what is said to them. This could be a perfect opportunity to explore with your children their own ability to empathize, by pondering how to be considerate of friends and acquaintances who sometimes have difficulty understanding or who react to others in unusual ways.