

# Tales of Chelm

A Teacher's Guide  
by Mark Binder  
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## What is Chelm?

Chelm is a fictional village filled with "wise men and women" who are considered by most reliable sources to be complete dunderheads. Stories of Chelm have been written by authors like Sholem Alechem and I.B. Singer. My stories of Chelm are slightly different. Rather than working with stock characters, I have populated my village of Chelm with real people who evolve over time. Of course most of the time, they're still not the swiftest on the uptake. Many Chelm stories are little more than jokes. I like to think that my stories are a little more complex. The villagers don't think that they're fools, even if their neighbors might disagree.

## How the heck do you pronounce "Chelm?"

First make a sound like you're clearing your throat. Then add the "elm" - Chhhelm.

## Where did Chelm come from?

One story has it that an angel was flying over a mountain with a sack filled with souls. The bag got caught on a tree, and ripped open. All the foolish souls were in the bottom, and tumbled out, landing in the village of Chelm.

In reality, there is/was a village called Chelm in Poland. It had a small Jewish community. It also had the misfortune of being the location of the Chelmno concentration camp.

It is likely that the "Chelm" story is a Jewish variation on the Polish joke – though again, the villagers in my Chelm are quite certain that they would rather live nowhere else on earth.

## Where did the villagers of Chelm go?

In my version, all of them escaped to Chelmsford, Massachusetts, where they live to this day, quite well thank you, having invented vinyl siding.

## How does one come to "write" a Chelm story?

Anyone can write a Chelm story, given sufficient inspiration.

I began writing them while working as the editor of the Rhode Island Jewish Herald. One day a writer forgot to submit a story and we had a "hole" in the newspaper. I sat down at the typewriter and... That was my first Chelm story.

Since then, I have written more than 50 holiday, life-event, or festival-related Chelm

stories, and an entire novel of Chelm called *The Brothers Schlemiel*.

Brothers Schlemiel tells the story of Abraham and Adam, identical twins born in Chelm and confused from birth. It was originally published in 100 weekly installments in the *Houston Jewish Herald Voice*, and a portion is available currently as the audio book, *The Brothers Schlemiel from Birth to Bar Mitzvah*.

### **Discussion Questions**

Are the villagers of Chelm really fools? Why or why not?

What is different about the way that they lived and the way we live?

How do they celebrate their holidays? How is it different from today?

Are we any different as people than the villagers?

What kinds of stories could you make up and set in the village of Chelm?

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Mark Binder's work is available for purchase at [www.lightpublications.com](http://www.lightpublications.com)